CAGE OF FREEDOM

Tamil Identity and the Ethnic Fetish in Malaysia

Andrew C. Willford

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To Vasantha

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Abbreviations

ABIM	Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia)
AMCJA	All Malayan Council of Joint Action
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BN	Barisan Nasional (National Front)
CIAM	Central Indian Association of Malaya
DAP	Democratic Action Party
DMK	Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
FELDA	Federal Land Development Authority
GNP	gross national product
IIL	Indian Independence League
IMP	Independence of Malaya Party
INA	Indian National Army
IPF	Indian Progressive Front
ISA	Internal Security Act
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MCP	Malayan Communist Party
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
MPAJA	Malayan Peoples Anti-Japanese Army
NEP	New Economic Policy
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NLFCS	National Land Finance Cooperative Society
NUPW	National Union of Plantation Workers
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Party)
PMFTU	Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions
PRM	Parti Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Party)
PSM	Parti Socialist Malaysia (Malaysian Socialist Party)

RKM	Ramakrishna Mission
RTM	Radio Television Malaysia
TFA	Temple of Fine Arts
UMNO	United Malays National Organization

Acknowledgments

This journey began with a miscue. I traveled to Malaysia to begin a Fulbright IIe Fellowship in the summer of 1992. After finding an academic adviser at the University of Malaya and completing the Fulbright orientation program, I thought I was about to embark on a productive year of dissertation research. But it was not to be. I was informed that my project, being on a "religious revival," was "sensitive." Much to my disappointment, my research visa was not approved. Though I appealed, my dissertation research was redirected to India, at least temporarily.

After six months of fieldwork and language training with a private tutor in Bangalore, I returned to the United States and decided to pursue more training in Tamil at the University of California at Berkeley. After spending over a year there, and seriously contemplating writing a dissertation combining my work in Bangalore with some modest fieldwork I had begun in the Bay Area on Hindu temples and ashrams and more generally among South Asian immigrants, I finally heard in the spring of 1994 that my appeal for a research visa in Malaysia was being reconsidered. With renewed hope, I applied for funding, and on being awarded a small grant embarked on what I thought would be six months of fieldwork in Malaysia. While there, I found out that another grant had been awarded, thus allowing me to conduct fieldwork for about eighteen months. When the funding was exhausted, I took a job at a private college in Kuala Lumpur, supporting myself for another year-plus of fieldwork, allowing me thirty months of uninterrupted work. Short follow-up trips in 1997 and 2001 supplemented this. What had started off as frustrated bad fortune had in the end been a serendipitous journey that not only made me more determined to work in Malaysia but also enriched that experience through the comparative lens of Bangalore, travels in Tamil Nadu, and work in the

Bay Area. As it turned out, I was now better prepared to embark on a study of Tamil and Hindu revivalism in Malaysia.

The dissertation, naturally, ended up focusing on Malaysia. But there was a lengthy comparative section on the politics of Hindu and Tamil identity in Bangalore. For this book, I present a somewhat streamlined ethnography drawn from the Malaysian material.

Throughout this long and winding road, I had the unflagging support of my doctoral committee at the University of California at San Diego. Suzanne Brenner and Freddy Bailey were outstanding and dedicated teachers, not to mention good friends. Without their tireless and meticulous guidance, I would have endlessly stumbled. The rest of my committee, Christena Turner, Richard Madsen, and Tanya Luhrmann, were also extremely helpful and encouraging. Michael Meeker, too, always knew just what to say to get me thinking productively and in new directions. I also learned much from Ted Schwartz, Mel Spiro, John Borneman, Joel Robbins, Jim Holston, and Bob Levy. My colleagues Joe Masco and Joao Vargas were a source of friendship and inspiration at crucial but different stages in graduate school.

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Finally, my father majored in anthropology back in the 1950s at the University of California. His love of culture and history and his general intellectual curiosity have had a lot to do with my career trajectory. Both my mother and my father have made enormous sacrifices for my education

and career. Their undying support, love, and patience can never be appreciated enough. My sister's encouragement (and "care packages") over the years has been more sustaining than she probably realizes. My brother-in-law, Steve, and my two nephews, Cole and Erik, provided many happy and necessary distractions. Last, Vasantha, my love, best friend, and partner in life, has made this her (several) journey(ies), as well. Though I certainly do not give her enough credit, whatever value there is to this work derives its sustenance from her. She also read and commented at every stage of the dissertation, and now the book-writing process, and has endured the many sacrifices of time and energy with patience, a sense of humor, and a much needed sense of perspective. Our children, Anisha and Rabindra, have been our joy and tears and a real life.

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"Possession and Displacement in Kuala Lumpur's Ethnic Landscape," *International Social Science Journal* 55 (2003, 175).

"'Weapons of the Meek': Ecstatic Ritualism and Strategic Ecumenism among Tamil-Hindus in Malaysia," *Identities* 9(2) (2002).

All of the photographs are mine except where indicated.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Gods, gods, there are so many there's no place left for a foot . . .
—*Basavanna*, trans. A. K. Ramanujan

This book is about Tamil and Hindu revivalism in Malaysia. During the last thirty years Malaysia has witnessed a dramatic Islamic resurgence that has altered the political, religious, and ethnic landscape of this nation. In turn, and related to this phenomenon, non-Malay and non-Muslim minorities have also experienced religious revivalism. The Tamil Hindu community[1] has been no exception. I examine the vicissitudes of religion and ethnicity as they simultaneously assert and signify Tamil Hindu identity within and against an Islamizing state and assess the political usages of ethnic and cultural identities, particularly as understood and felt by particular Tamil subjects. Religious aspirations and practice provide a particularly important window into the sometimes powerful assertions of autonomy and transcendence from the contingencies of an often unsatisfactory social order. Within the dissonant field of ethnic politics, with its reified representations of cultural difference in Malaysia, as we shall see, religiosity assumes a greater significance to Tamil Hindus.

I argue that ever-increasing assertions of religious and ethnic consciousness among working-class Tamils through ritual, acts of spirit possession, and pilgrimage, while symbolically negating state and elite ideologies of Malay Islamic modernism within the realm of expressive culture, oftentimes appear to serve the interests of elite and bourgeois-dominated bureaucratic structures that are organized locally and nationally around narratives of ethnic affiliation. That is, ethnicity and religion (the two largely being conflated in Malaysia) are used to legitimize a polit-

ical system committed to rapid, but decidedly uneven, economic growth, while simultaneously asserting cultural authenticity at the core of the nationalist ideology. While this ethnographic study will affirm, in part, such an instrumentalist view, I also argue that the story is not quite this simple or straightforward.

Middle-class Tamils, unlike their working-class counterparts, resist and challenge the management and ascription of ethnic and cultural identity in modern Malaysia through the utilization of what I call "strategic ecumenism." From a position of greater economic strength, these "Indian" Tamils imagine a greater "India" that blurs ethnic boundaries, partially exposing the transferential quality, following Freud and Jacques Lacan, behind ethnic assertions of difference within nationalist discourses. As Lacan states, "the subject depends upon the signifier and that the signifier is first of all in the field of the Other" (1981:205). In order to apprehend one's self as a knowing subject, one must symbolize oneself to oneself. This involves the identification with the mirrored or metonymic (that which signifies oneself) representation of the self that is itself a representation of the Other's desire for recognition. In this sense, self-recognition is inherently doubling, or alienating, in that one identifies oneself through the mediation of the Other and thus through a process of transference. In the negation of the Other, the source of self-recognition, or in the subject's quest for autonomy from its inherently doubled state, the countertransference is produced. This dialectical motion, though itself not pathological, and indeed necessary for self-consciousness to exist, as Georg Hegel (1977) has most famously argued, can become, under certain material and discursive conditions, fraught with heightened ambivalence. Postcolonial demarcations of ethnic boundaries, and with them hierarchical assertions of an ethnosymbolic hierarchy, I argue, can produce uncanny doubles.

In the ethnographic case discussed here, the marking of difference reveals and symptomizes, in the case of elite Tamils, an ambivalence arising from their subordinate cultural and political status in postcolonial Malaysia. The elites and middle class, while distancing themselves from the racialized discourses attached to working-class Malaysian Tamils, also try to "uplift" these same Tamil subjects through social programs and service-minded religious organizations. An explicitly ecumenical and transcendental Hinduism attempts to surmount the ideology of Malay Islamic

modernism yet finds its transnational referent in "India" and the local and intimate Other, the stigmatized identity of the working-class Malaysian Hindu vis-à-vis the Malay Muslim. On the one hand, I explain how this dialectical tension contributes to the Tamil community remaining divided and politically weak. A legacy of internal social divisions and mistrust between the middle- and working-class Indians is exacerbated by the objectifying and temporal logic of Islamic modernism, as it organizes a Malay nationalist teleology, or historiographic desire of national becoming (Chakrabarty 2000), around the figure of the "backward" Indian and Hindu. On the other hand, the very authenticity assertions of Malaysian nationalism are shown to be produced within a negative and dissonant field in which attempts to freeze ethnic identities through aspirations to ethnic and religious authenticity partially reveal identity's porous and contingent nature, a disentangling and disavowal of more complex interethnic genealogies (Mandal 2004; Milner 2003; Kahn 2003). This partial revelation and recognition, in turn, is the source of the ethnic signifier's fetishistic power. Questioning the purported impasse of instrumentalism and primordialism in studies of nationalism, I argue for the utility of a phenomenological and psychoanalytic reading of the nation's sometimes compulsive power to possess subjects within the silencing and imaginary cloak of ethnic and religious identity (Siegel 1997, 2000; Žižek 1989,1993; Hansen 2001).

ETHNIC CERTAINTY

As Appadurai (1999) has recently argued, the impetus toward fixing "pure" ethnic types comes from modern contingencies and flux exacerbating the instability of identities, an uncertainty demanding "certainty."[2] This experience of displacement, however, does not suggest a preexistent doxic integration of identity now being eroded in urban modernity, which, in turn, is answered through discourses of ethnic purity. Rather, I would suggest that the political ideology of the "authentic" nation (and ethnic group) can act as a symptom masking the conditions of its source.

The potential uncanniness of ethnic identification can, perhaps, be explicated through both Sigmund Freud's and Martin Heidegger's conception of the uncanny (*unheimlich*). In Freud, the emphasis on the sublimation of biological drives by many scholars has often overdetermined the

etiological interpretation of various symbolic figures, be they uncanny or otherwise. The singularity, in other words, of the wish fulfillment has not been questioned enough. Rather, it is the figure of the "doubled" or split subject that offers a necessary analytic tool in interpreting Freud and, specifically, his usefulness in reading culture and subjectivity in ways that are not taken at face value. The idea of the uncanny double, as described by both Freud and Heidegger independent of one another, offers a perspective on the uncertainties that surround the assertions of ethnicity purity and the triggers which produce fixated-upon or fetishistic identifications that attempt to compulsively silence their doubled, transferential, and contingent nature. Through this theoretical reckoning with the uncanny, we are given the psychological muscle to understand Arjun Appadurai's observations regarding exacerbated uncertainty and the assertion of ethnic certainty.

Within the transferential relationships between individuals and groups, we might ask whether the disavowal or surmounting of the Other can produce uncanny doublings, which, in turn, fuel overidentification with the ego ideal, or, in Heidegger's words, "ensnare" the subject. It is for this reason that mimicry, in the context of colonial mastery, is most menacing, as colonial subjects who mimic their masters partially reveal the arbitrary foundations of social hierarchy (Bhabha 1994:85–92; Spyer 2000:58; Siegel 1997; Cannell 2005; Pemberton 1994). Also, in the context of the transferential relations between disentangled ethnic groupings in the postcolonial context, secret familiarity between politically ascribed and fantasized markers of difference can prove monstrous and uncanny, fueling fetishistic fantasies of ethnic purity (Appadurai 1999). Within each context, such disentanglings will be different, as relations between individuals and groups have varied historically. In the unique case of Malaysia, the historical "accident" that fifteen hundred years or more of ongoing contact between what is now Malaysia and India (Coedès 1968; Sandhu 1969) affects relations between contemporary groups marked as "Malay" and "Indian" is a special concern in this book. That is, the disavowal of the "Indian" and the "Hindu" in contemporary Malay ethnic and religious imaginaries must be seen in light of the intimate historical interface and permeability that defined this region for over one millennium.

My usage of Heidegger's and Freud's notion of the uncanny double in

this study centers on the silencing of the contingent and transferential dimensions of identity. This, I argue, becomes exacerbated when ethnicity becomes inscribed into the political order, as it is in Malaysia. As suggested, this can take a narrative shape in which the Other is figured as a surmounted or "backward" past. Disentangled memories and experiences, when coerced into categorical ethnic terms, produce concomitant displacements and disavowals of the Other, which, in turn, figure and externalize the uncanny double existing within. Colonial forms of power transferred recognition to one group over another. The relentless and failed attempts to legitimize such power, difference, and objectified hierarchy in the postcolonial state can produce the "shock of the uncanny," as Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests (2000:252) in his reading of Karl Marx and Heidegger. In the Malaysian national imaginary of becoming, the past, I suggest, is figured onto certain ethnic signifiers, which in turn prove uncanny in their inevitable returns.

The Marxian fetish, too, requires a silencing through value that arises in the partial recognition (and misrecognition) of value's contingent source. In this sense, the Hegelian dialectical logic informs both the psychoanalytic and Marxian critique of the symbolic. I will argue that in the case of Malaysia's ethnosymbolic national imaginary its ideological power is produced out of its impossibility to constitute its subjects completely (Žižek 1993; Siegel 1997). Through repetition and compulsive iteration, an absence is masked and partially mastered, as in the constitution of the subject in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. True belief, involving the constant reiteration of identity, is one possible symptom of an ascribed identity's fragile hold. At the same time, the function of a master ideology, such as a national ideology, is, ironically, to partially master the alienation and uncertainty that is produced by the Other, which might, in turn, be produced by the master ideology itself. In this circular reasoning, mastering the wound of an alienating ideology might involve, paradoxically, fixating on the very source of the wound in an attempt to silence the anxiety produced by this "Real" (its contingent origins), to extend Lacan's term to address the nation. The phantasmic force of identity assertions betrays a guilty—and, as Hegel famously argued, a profoundly "unhappy" (1977:119–38)—conscience because the self-certain subject cannot sustain its transcendental or spiritual aspirations while such desires are contin-

gent on its corporeal existence. The dialectical antagonism produced by the superego (the more we obey, the more we feel guilt for not obeying, or, better yet, believing completely) produces in nationalism a sometimes negative constitution of the "purity" that marks identity. Indeed, the Real, in Lacanian terminology, represents that fundamental and *umheimlich* paradox of being, that our imaginary sense of self—that which we are attached to in order to exist as conscious and self-reflexive beings—masks an unknowable and nondiscursive, or undifferentiated, reality.[3] Put differently, this means that one's conscious understanding of oneself originates, or is contingent on, an Other, achieved (in repetition) through the mirrored layers of meaning that one attaches to oneself through transferential relations. That is, the apparent ontological unity of the Self, like the nation, lies in its contradictions and contingency.

I wish to qualify some of my claims at the outset. While little attention has been given to the transferential, compulsive, and unstable boundaries of ethnic affiliation within Malaysian studies, and particularly from an "Indian" or Tamil perspective, my contribution is still quite perpectival. The traces of other multiple past and present relations are not analyzed, though they are important. In particular, the question of the "Chinese" is not attended to adequately, and this, I admit, is a glaring omission. Both in terms of Chinese-Malay and Chinese-Indian dialectics, and particularly the ways in which non-Malays and non-Muslims occupy a particular political and economic bloc vis-à-vis their Muslim counterparts (Ackerman and Lee 1988), is not well addressed in this study. Moreover, the ethnographic representations of Malayness that emerge in the ethnography, in most instances, come from the perspective of distinct Tamil "Indian" subjects and is therefore not to be understood as my analytic model of Malay subjectivities. For nuanced analyses of the vicissitudes of Malay identities in Malaysia, I direct the reader to recent work by Milner (2002), Peletz (2002), Hooker and Othman (2003), Williamson (2002), Thompson (2003), and Stivens (1998). Theoretically, my emphasis on the transferential and compulsive dimensions of identity assertions omits much that could be said about the productive and socially constitutive dimensions of ritual practice (e.g., Sangren 2000; George 1996; Kapferer 1997). Those interested in Tamil Hinduism, too, will no doubt find less normative theological analysis and more analysis of religiosity as an optic into ethnic imaginaries than might be to their liking.

Now let me turn briefly to the questions that inspired me to look at the Malaysian Indian (Tamil) community for my dissertation research. My initial questions were inspired by the political economy of urban space. I was struck by the contrast within Kuala Lumpur between the vibrant economic growth witnessed in the city center and the apparent poverty faced by Malaysian Indians living in working-class slums and, at that time, shantytowns that lined the riverbanks of the city. Not only were Malaysian Indians overlooked ethnographically,[4] but the literature that was available on this community suggested that Indians formed one of the most neglected sections of Malaysian society. In the midst of economic and political marginalization, however, were stirrings of religious revivalism among Hindus manifested in dramatic rituals of self-mortification and in the growth of urban-based neo-Hindu organizations such as the Ramakrishna Mission, Divine Life Society, Sai Baba, and the Malaysian Hindu Sangam (Lee and Rajoo 1987). My interest piqued, I wanted to understand this phenomenon and the extent to which religious "revivals" were connected to ethnic and nationalist politics in Malaysia. Moreover, as transnational theory was a new rage in sociocultural anthropology during the mid-1990s (e.g., the work of Appadurai; Hannerz; Gupta and Ferguson), I initially wanted to investigate the extent to which Hindu revivalism in Malaysia was fueled by the flow of ideas and commodities through networks that transcended the nation-state.

Malaysia was one of the fastest-growing economies in Asia in the mid-1990s, had experienced fairly peaceful interethnic relations, and yet had witnessed increased religious consciousness, particularly visible among Malay Muslims but also among the minority Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians (Ackerman and Lee 1988; Muzaffar 1984). In addition, as Malaysia's political system was and continues to be defined on explicitly ethnic grounds, religious identity and the ascription of ethnicity are closely intertwined and highly politicized.

Identity in Malaysia is somewhat ambivalent or doubled for Indians (Tamils). Malaysian Indians often feel displaced in Malaysia—a country in which they have little political or economic power and in which they suffer from a stigma attached to their ethnicity. The double produced by this

stigma, in the class and temporal politics of Malay Islamic modernity, is focal to my analysis. But at the same time, though identified as "Indians" (an identity they themselves cultivate and assert) "India" is not a place or an imagined community with which the majority of Malaysian Tamils identify without ambivalence. Malaysian Tamils are a community at the symbolic margins of the emerging Malaysian nation-state, but at the same time, most Tamils are not—contrary to my earlier transnational theoretical inclinations—actively constructing a diasporic Indian-Tamil identity with linkages to India. Rather, a diasporic subjectivity born of both material and psychological displacement is produced within a historically specific topography—and one that, as we will see, possesses those who produce it. The extent to which a transnational Indian identity is salient to Malaysian Tamils is mediated by class. That is, those with the means to travel, utilize communications technology, and participate in organizations having transnational links are a small minority within the predominantly working-class Malaysian Indian community. On the other hand, working-class Tamils do consume films, music, and other media materials from India, and, as we will discover, they have been influenced by global economic forces and politics for over a century. As global consumers and producers, the specter of cultural authenticity, too, haunts members of the transnational elite, who are, in turn, driven to distinguish themselves from their less advantaged, and less "authentic," sources of social recognition, be they working-class Tamils or Malays. That is, the authenticity they increasingly seek is born out of the transferential formation of political identities in Malaysia, not the transparent flow of "culture" across national borders.

In addition to paying attention to class differences, I suggest that an understanding of modern subjectivities must be grounded in a historically situated examination of political economy. It makes little sense to speak of a transnational religious or ethnic consciousness as an articulation of "cultural difference" within an increasingly interconnected world—contrary to the sometimes hyperbolic statements made by some leading theorists (e.g., Sahlins 1993; Appadurai 1996; Robertson 1997)—without examining the class position and economic, political, and cultural interests of those articulating particular ideologies. To do so, in my opinion, privileges elite articulations of cultural identity while also mystifying the agency and compulsive alienation of those producing and resisting it. That is, arguing that religious ideologies answer to a "crisis of meaning" or intellectual

strain brought on by rapid modernization and the hyper-rationalization of the public sphere (Geertz 1973), or in the structuralist logic of Sahlins (1993, 1998), the schismogenic production of cultural difference resulting from cultural contact focuses our analytic gaze away from specific agents, their class position, and the power of cultural discourses in the service of political and economic agendas (Turner 2003; Bailey 1991; Ong 1999). Moreover, intellectual or cultural strain theories based on culturalist premises of the subject fail to capture the dialectical tensions, compulsive pleasures, and guilt of transgressive desires. The fetishistic, and often violent, submission unto the partially recognized arbitrary symbolic cannot be examined and critiqued when we grant ontological weight to any cultural logic without exposing its ideological face and what it attempts to silence. On this phenomenological and psychoanalytic premise, moreover, certain versions of Marxian analysis, with their structural determinations of value devoid of spectrality and uncertainty (e.g., Bourdieu 1977) and instrumentalism, with the rational self-maximizing actor (e.g., Scott 1985), fail to pay sufficient attention to the phantasms that necessarily lurk within assertions of value and identity.

I am not suggesting, however, that studying the current global condition in particular sites does not require greater attention to the accelerated flows of cultural expressions—particularly when commodified—across boundaries of space and time. The expansion of capitalism has, as many have noted (Giddens, Harvey, Appadurai, and Robertson among them), produced increased articulations of cultural difference or, as Sahlins put it, a "Culture of cultures" (1993), or, in Hannerz's conception, greater "diversity within interconnectedness" (1996). Yet we must remain critical readers of a kind of cultural analysis devoid of insights produced by the critical reading strategies of philosophers, psychoanalysts, and literary critics. On the other hand, and oftentimes in tension with the textual reading strategies just alluded to, contemporary ethnographic practice necessitates that in the analysis of heightened cultural sentiments the colonial encounter and the processes in which political economy and culture were dialectically implicated are attended to. While certainly an original Marxian premise[5] worth retaining, the Comaroffs have eloquently reminded us of the inseparability of culture from material production, for "they were indissoluble aspects of the same reality, *whose fragmentation into discrete spheres hides their ontological unity*" (1997:19, emphasis added).

Recognizing the historical specificity of any social and cultural formation does not, as the Comaroffs point out, allow us to forget the dialectical, and indeed dialogical, nature of cultural, social, and economic relations. Therefore, social analysts should not take at face value the articulation of cultural difference by so-called ethnic groups by privileging the mostly elite productions of cultural identity. These ideologies, be they ethnic or religious, may also serve the interests, be they political and/or economic, of a certain status group or class of individuals within an ascripted ethnic category. I use the word *fetishize*, following both Marx and Freud, because in my analysis assertions of cultural identity, particularly those by elite groups having the means to articulate and disseminate ideologies, often mask the class positions and interests of (as well as to) their producers. In this sense, the fixing of identity, and the production of value associated with it, and its convertability into capital, and hence its social power, are simultaneously a source of anxiety, as witnessed most famously in Hegel's insecure "master" vis-à-vis the source of his recognition, his slave. Indeed, I argue that the compulsive talk of ethnic and religious purity belies the uncanny and contingent nature of the most taken for granted of values: that the source of identity and power must be negated to preserve the status quo and to sustain an inevitably delusional form of mastery. While Marx observed this spectral aspect of ideology in *The Grundrisse*,[6] the obsessional and compulsive quality of identity fixation is obviously better theorized in the Freudian tradition. The Hegelian antecedent, however, makes this dialogue between the Marxist and psychoanalytic dialectical methods recognizable. I wish to argue, however, for the necessity of inclusion into the "ontological unity" of the Comaroffs, the psychodynamic and phenomenological dimensions. This inclusion, in turn, allows us a method of destructuring, in Heidegger's sense, the "ontic"[7] condition of displacement, which necessitates an alienated "ontological unity," a silencing of the true ontological, or total contingency, of Being.[8] In that sense, even the Marxian critique, when taken as an objective law of all dimensions of social life and value falls into the transcendental trap suggested by its very method of immanent critique (Benhabib 1986). The spectrality of contingency requires that we, as cultural analysts, seek to augment our critique of class-based inequities and the cultural determinations produced through them with a dialectical conception of the subject.

Yet, at least in the humanistic spirit of Marx, we abandon political econ-

omy at our own risk. Marxist critique is more than useful in grappling with the realpolitik of social life within modern industrialist and postindustrialist society and especially with the palpable inequities produced within them. Even resistance to dominant state or elite discourses, obviously enough, is often appropriated to serve the interests of more powerful others (Hebdige 1979). Indeed, this study often supports Immanuel Wallerstein's totalizing assertion that "the powerful of the world seek to commodify and thereby denature the practices of cultural resistance" (1997:101).

Wallerstein's point, albeit one that elides cultural and historical particularity with single-minded purpose, also directs our attention to the continued relevance of the nation-state as the arbiter of privileges and sanctions—particularly as ethnic and religious ideologies are used to give a moral face to the amoral (or immoral) operations of global capitalism.

One would, indeed, be very naive to deny that categorical emphasis of ethnic divisions are utilized to legitimate economic policies that clearly favor certain groups and individuals at the expense of others. Moreover, resisting state-sponsored ethnic ideologies, particularly when propagandized through state-controlled media, requires a degree of capital and political autonomy that most minority groups and individuals lack. Therefore, this study joins those that caution against a view of the transnational or global that privileges elite articulations of cultural difference to the exclusion of other "local," and often submerged, experiences (e.g., Gupta and Ferguson 1997a; Tsing 1993; Spyer 2000; George 1996).

At the same time, anthropological fieldwork cannot rescue or record the pristine subaltern voice, as Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak reminds us (1999). Spivak's point, and her reiteration of a Marxian position, is that, while cultural representation of the "authentic" voice is impossible in any pure sense, the project of representation, more broadly, has necessarily powerful political implications. Replacing one historiography with another, or one cultural stereotype with another, can mean all the difference in terms of political representation. Moreover, I would maintain that in the process of a subaltern critique of dominant discourses a defetishization or disclosure of its contingency is possible, thus bringing to partial consciousness that which is repressed or silenced. Deconstruction, too, far from being apolitical, has political implications (Morris 1999, 2000; Siegel 1997, 2000) along roads opened first by Immanuel Kant's critique of

pure reason (Žižek 1993), Hegel's critique of natural rights (Benhabib 1984), Marx's critique of value and commodity fetishism, and Freud's reading of symptoms in their cultural milieu.

The book is structured as follows. Following this introduction, chapter 2 offers a brief historical summary of Malaysia's political economy with regard to the position of Tamils within it. It looks historically at the class- and status-based divisions within the Tamil community that have resulted in the distinct bifurcation of Hindu revivalism in Malaysia and have contributed to the continued economic hardships faced by the Tamil poor. Not only were racial discourses utilized to justify Tamil immigration to Malaya, but racial divisions, promoted through colonial labor practices and ethnic stereotypes, proved to be an effective way to keep down labor costs while also inhibiting class-based mobilization against an exploitative economic and political structure. Historical divisions between different classes of Tamils were widened by the colonial division of labor and the racial discourses that justified them. I analyze the sources of antagonism and factionalism within the Tamil community, suggesting that these divisions have contributed to their weak political position; this, in turn, has contributed to a vicious cycle of poverty among laboring classes. Moreover, as working-class Tamils languish over time, they are directly or indirectly blamed, despised, or feared for their "backwardness."

Chapter 3 juxtaposes the physical signs and symbolic presence of Islamic modernism, as manifested in public landmarks and nationalist discourses, with an ethnographic account of Tamil Hindu religious ritualism. The festival of Thaipusam is increasing every year in popularity. Thaipusam has become a national pilgrimage for Malaysian Tamils. The Batu Caves, near Kuala Lumpur, draw over one million devotees (over half of Malaysia's Indian population) for Thaipusam festivities annually. I describe how devotees establish an individual relationship with a deity through remarkable states of trance and spirit possession, while also asserting their solidarity as Hindus. The lure of the "miraculous," I suggest, is fueled by the socially and economically marginalized status of working-class Tamils and by the patronage of the festival by politicians and religious organizations. In contrast, middle-class and elite Tamils shy away from these festivals, finding them primitive, unorthodox, and embarrassing. I argue that the element of social protest articulated through these collective rituals also serves to signify Indians as backward, especially

when situated against the ideology and landscape of Islamic modernism. In spite of this appropriation of Thaipusam, some uncertain and uncanny remainder exists within the public's fascination with this festival, revealing forms of recognition and denial, among both elite Hindus and Malays.

In chapter 4, I describe how Tamils negotiate the stigma that increasingly marks their culture within the urban enclave through affirmations of difference and spiritual worth, producing mixed results, both psychologically and sociopolitically. In this chapter, I examine the procession and celebration of the Hindu festival Adi Puram. This festival, while not as important as Thaipusam in the public's imagination, nevertheless is significant in that it possesses and empowers devotees, demarcates ethnic space within the urban topography, and reproduces intraethnic and gendered hierarchies within the Tamil enclave, which in turn produces a greater fixation on a desire to surmount and transcend the sociopolitical through the spiritual.

Chapter 5 focuses on middle-class and elite Hindus in Malaysia, who, owing to their class and status positions during and after the colonial period, have distanced themselves socially and culturally from the religion and culture associated with the working-class Tamils, particularly as they are increasingly represented within the national media. I show how these postcolonial elites perceive a loss of status in postindependence Malaysia—particularly as a result of the Malay Islamic nationalism propagated by the state—yet are increasingly wary of the stigma attached to the religion and lifestyles of working-class Tamils. An ambivalence of cultural identity is shown to attract many "subordinate elites" to neo-Hindu movements. I explore how these movements offer ideologies perceived as rational and ecumenical by elite Hindus, as well as offering a "preferable" model of national assimilation and ethnic harmony. The transcendental and ecumenical themes that they produce, in turn, reveal both an ambivalence attached to the "Indian" ethnic label in Malaysia, with its working-class connotations, and a desire for transcendence from the ethnosymbolic ordering of Malaysian nationalism.

Chapter 6 continues the analysis of divisions internal to the Tamil community in Malaysia; here, however, I examine the reproduction of divisions among contemporary Indians. In describing how symbolic capital is cultivated by elites through the arts and religion, I demonstrate that underlying the capacity to obtain high-status cultural attributes are economic factors

that determine their accessibility. Moreover, I examine how prevalent negative stereotypes attached to working-class Tamils are reproduced within and/or attributed to the space of the Indian ethnic enclave. Conversely, middle-class Indians go to some lengths to distance themselves culturally and spatially from these sites of marginality. I argue that while apparently widening social divisions between middle-class and working-class Tamil Hindus, an ambiguity over orthodoxy and "purity" within devotional religious practice—indeed, an engine of hierarchical affirmation—also affords avenues for lower-status devotees to challenge the spiritual supremacy of higher-status Hindus. I conclude with a case study of a working-class Tamil spirit medium, suggesting that she challenges those who would dismiss her as marginal, unorthodox, or heretical. While appropriating orthodox Hindu ideologies in order to assert her own spiritual and moral worth, she also appears to be trapped within the same transcendental fantasy that occludes recognition of the cultural and material structures that impact upon her and other poor Indians in Malaysia.

Chapter 7 concludes with an assessment of the potential for collective mobilization around diasporic sentiments of Tamil identity. The central question is this chapter is whether the increasingly intrusive imagining and institutionalization of Malay Islamic nationalism is producing signs of a collective Indian response. I suggest that while the increase in collective ritualism among the Tamil working class is related to social, political, and economic marginalization in Malaysia, there is also an implicit rejection in it of higher-status Hindu organizations that seek to "reform" the religion and culture of working-class Hindus. I offer a "qualified" instrumentalist critique of "primordialist" and "culturalist" explanations for religious and ethnic revivalism. In conclusion, the question of ethnic fetishism is addressed again in broader strokes in an attempt to suggest possible theoretical implications that transcend the particularity of the Malaysian Tamil experience. The problem I wish to address is that of heightened diasporic and nationalist consciousness, the fixation on cultural authenticity, and their relationship to macropolitical transformations.

CHAPTER TWO

MARGINAL EXISTENCE AND SOCIAL DISTANCE

"Worthless Dregs in a Prosperous Society"

> I contend that the Malays are the original or indigenous people of Malaya and the only people who can claim Malaya as their one and only country. . . . Settlers willing to conform to the characteristics of the definitive citizen will in fact become definitive citizens and will exercise the same rights and privileges. But these rights and privileges do not include changing the characteristics of the definitive race.
> —Mahathir Mohamad, *The Malay Dilemma*

This chapter examines the social distance that divides working-class and middle-class Tamils in Malaysia. I will argue that these intra-Indian divisions have been both exacerbated by and, in turn, exacerbate the fetishizing of ethnic difference in Malaysia. The first half of the chapter offers a historical analysis of Tamil social conditions in Malaysia throughout the twentieth century.[1] Following this, contemporary challenges and social conditions are considered; however, I argue that there is a risk of reading the present as the historicized natural outcome of a specific series of events that, in turn, are structured by the universal history of capital. An analytic explanation of this caution is inspired by Marx and by Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2000) phenomenological, and specifically Heideggerian, dialogue with him—a point I take up early in this chapter. Later, I will return to the idea of the "uncanny," attempting to find, in the historiographic desire to objectify the past, productive ground for theorizing eth-

nic fetishism at the interface of Marxian, phenomenological, and psychoanalytic understandings of the subject.

THE "DOCILE" TAMIL: RACIAL DISCOURSE AND COLONIAL LABOR

When considering the present marginalization of Tamils in Malaysia, one might begin by examining the historical factors that precipitated their migration. Of the estimated 63.6 percent of working-class Indians in Malaysia today, 43.6 percent, according to one set of figures, are living in poverty (Rajakrishnan 1987). The ancestors of these Tamils, many of the Paraiyar *jati* (caste),[2] were originally recruited because of their impoverished status in Indian society, and in Malaysia their poverty has persisted (Rajakrishnan 1987).

So-called untouchables in nineteenth-century Tamil Nadu were by most accounts an oppressed people. Forced to live separately from "clean castes," and often sold into slavery, they have been described as a "cringing servile group of lepers" (Sandhu, quoted in Rajakrishnan 1987:19). Aside from the cultural disdain experienced by untouchables, they were also the victims of inhumane economic hardships. Many were forced to survive eating carrion and other carcasses, even animals that had died of diseases (Rajakrishnan 1987). They were forced to wear ragged clothing, limited to a coarse cloth around the waist. They were described by one nineteenth-century British ethnographer as the "most abject, hopeless and unpromising specimens of humanity" (E. Thurston, quoted in Rajakrishnan 1987:35).

The importation of Tamils to Malaysia served as a counterpoint to the more "militant" and better organized Chinese community. The cultural stereotype of "docility" served to justify their selection for the tedious and repetitive work required in the burgeoning rubber industry (Jain 1970). Rajakrishnan, using government documents, clarifies the colonial administration's position.

> [T]he lower caste Madrasi was considered "almost the ideal laboring material for the furtherance of capitalist endeavours in Malaya." They were invariably described as satisfactory for light, simple, repetitive work; malleable, worked well under supervision and *easily manageable;* not ambitious like the Chinese or other Indians from other parts of

> India, had *no self reliance* or the capacity of the Chinese . . . had neither the skill or enterprise to rise above the level of manual labour; and accustomed to British rule, well behaved, *docile* and adjusted to low standards of living and as such willing to accept low fixed wages thus enabling employers to keep wages depressed. Thus the British planters came to firmly believe that the low caste Madrasi "must always be the mainstay of planters." (Rajakrishnan 1987:37–38)[3]

Many analysts have shown how racial discourses were manipulated by the colonial administrators and their collaborators (INSAN 1989; Ramasamy 1994; Stenson 1980). For example, Malays were often characterized as "lazy" and unwilling to engage in hard or tedious labor. Similarly, the Chinese were seen as hardworking, but also "cunning" and harder to manage. The image of the "docile" Tamil, however, served to justify the recruitment policies and the nature of plantation life. Stereotypes perpetuated a cultural division of labor premised on and ultimately also generating essentialized and codified markers of ethnic difference (Hirschman 1986).

The laboring-class Tamils arrived in Malaya in a wretched state. Caste oppression, coupled with economic hardship, motivated many to seek brighter fortunes in Malaya. But the new opportunities did not eradicate their downtrodden status because of dehumanizing conditions on the plantations. While plantations were extremely profitable at the turn of the century, with annual dividends as high as 300 percent (INSAN 1989:28), the Tamils earned very low wages. They were forced to live in crowded and "filthy labor lines," and tuberculosis, malaria, and other diseases were common among the workers. The mortality rate among laborers was an incredible 84.8 per 1,000 in 1908 due to the poor health conditions on the plantations. In comparison, Indian laborers in Fiji and Mauritius had rates of 16.4 and 37.6, respectively (Selvakumaran 1994:56).

In addition to the Adi dravida (untouchable) laborers, other South Indians and Ceylonese[4] Tamils of "higher caste" were recruited as foreman and managers to oversee and recruit workers. Labor recruits were promised a "caste-free" utopia of wealth and leisure. Some bonded laborers were sold to the recruiters as a way to liquidate unwanted or unneeded labor.[5] The administration, in order to fill the growing labor needs in the rubber industry, also paid for the passage of the immigrants (INSAN 1989; Rajakrishnan 1987; Jomo 1993).[6]

Once on the plantations, many of the same recruiters were also hired as Kanganis (foremen). Also, Kranis (conductors) were hired mainly from the Vellalar community of Jaffna, Ceylon.[7] They, knowing Tamil, served as middlemen between English management and the laborers. Housing on the estates reflected the caste status of the workers. The Kanganis and Kranis, as "clean castes," were housed separately, had their own dining facilities, and prayed in separate shrines. They were entrusted with overseeing many aspects of production, including the division of labor and discipline. Kranis and Kanganis were often harsh and cruel to the laborers, utilizing corporal punishment as an effective means of enforcing discipline. Floggings were common, sometimes resulting in serious injury or even death.

Caste distinctions, as mentioned, were enforced. Kanganis were known to punish workers who failed to dismount from their bicycles in the presence of higher-caste staff, and Tamil "coolies" were not to wear shoes and were forced to wear their hair in "the traditional style" for an untouchable. Amusements were also provided on each estate by the management. Prostitutes from India were sometimes recruited to serve the estate laborers (Arasaratnam 1979);[8] temples for village deities were constructed; festivals were organized, partly with management funds; and toddy shops were encouraged as places to relax with family and friends after the long day's labor. Toddy consumption became a major source of escape for many estate Tamil males, as alcoholism and the wasting of meager wages further impoverished laborer families. Some have suggested that toddy-drinking facilities were encouraged by the management (INSAN 1989; Rajakrishnan 1987; Arasaratnam 1979; Stenson 1980; Supernor 1983) as a means of ensuring servility.

In the sphere of religion, traditional practices were encouraged. Shrines, temples, and festivals were organized. Caste distinctions were reproduced through the social organization of the festivals. The estates became "mini-Indias" in which the codification and manipulation of rights and privileges for different groups was negotiated (Mearns 1995; Jain 1970). Reformed Hinduism, which at the time was gaining currency in India with the blossoming of Indian nationalism, was not encouraged on the estates. Rather, orthodox practices and "folk traditions" were observed by estate workers, depending on caste status. Also, as many of the Kanganis and Kranis expected to return to India or Ceylon, they wished to preserve their clean-caste status, thus prompting them to observe laws of



Fig. 1. Rubber plantation workers, circa 1900
(Courtesy of Arkib Negara Malaysia, National Archives of Malaysia.)

purity and pollution meticulously. This, as manifested through the spatial distribution of housing, authority, and ritual practices, re-created hierarchies and thwarted the emergence of common identities between Tamil-speaking immigrants.

Education was another area where status distinctions were (and continue to be) reproduced in the estate society. Tamil schools were set up on the estates for the laborers. English education, on the other hand, was often provided for the Kangany and Krani families. Within the socioeconomic structure of colonial Malaya, Tamil education served to reproduce a laboring class for the plantations. Tamil had little utility, in an economic sense, outside the closed social system of the estates. Invariably, these schools were poorly subsidized and run by teachers who were not well qualified. Dropout rates were high, and very few students from estate schools pursued higher education. Some have argued that Tamil schools had a "hidden curriculum"—the reproduction of a underclass (Colletta 1975; Jeyakumar 1993).[9]

In sum, the discourse of the "docile Tamil" reflected and produced a



Fig. 2. Tamil schoolchildren in front of their school on a plantation

social structure in which Indians were antagonistic toward each other, thus contributing to their marginalization in the colonial state. In Muzaffar's words: "It was the Tamil laborers, compelled by circumstances to cringe and crawl before the others, who became the objects of contempt and ridicule . . . [and] few other groups in the country had experienced such a total annihilation of human integrity and social dignity" (1993:215). Following Muzaffar's insight, I suggest that the fantasy, too, of the docile Tamil, while having an instrumental purpose and effect in the plantation economy, became a sadistic "annihilation" (negation) of the Other out of the specter that their "vegetative existence" conjured—the very Real of capitalist exploitation itself. Discourses do not merely produce subjects la "History one," in Chakrabarty's (2000) words, but are attempted ideological silencings of the incomplete appropriation of "alien will." Thus the phantasms they generate produce compulsive denials (History two).

In the march of what Chakrabarty describes as "History one," that is, the history of capital's expanding logic, attempts to surmount the appropriation of "alien will" are never wholly successful. The value that is the product of abstract labor, as Marx argues, is always haunted by its resistance, which is "life" or "living labor" itself. Chakrabarty, following Marx, calls this "History two." Abstract value, like the false mastery of Hegel's master, is shadowed by its phantom, the specter of its contingency. In this sense, Hegel's voice within Marx in *The Grundrisse* is unmistakable: "With the recognition (*Erkennung*) of the products as its own . . . the slave's awareness that he cannot be the property of another, with his consciousness of himself as a person, the existence of slavery becomes a merely artificial, vegetative existence" (Marx, qtd. in Marx and Engels 1978:254). The historicizing impulse attempts, from the master's (History one) perspective, then, to excise the past, which is its contingent source, through the role of "anachronism"—putting the past in the past. This leaves, however, its perpetual specter of "not yet," as Chakrabarty suggests, which plagues both postcolonial and neoliberal critiques of "failed modernities." In this sense, to locate the source of ethnic value, or consciousness itself, by tracing *only* the march of History one as an objectifying ("vulgar") Marxist, and perhaps Foucauldian, historiography would, strangely aligns critique, from Chakrabarty's perspective, with the neoliberal fantasy of capital's triumphant becoming. More in the dialectical spirit of Marx (and Hegel), I am suggesting that the sometimes traumatic experience of colonialism and capitalism, as in the case of Tamil laborers in Malaysia, in the neocolonial nation-state did not produce a discourse which, in turn, produced the postcolonial subject within regimes of Truth, but rather, that the dialectical forces of recognition and misrecognition produced symptoms and displacements which became alienated and abstracted "truths" (or spirit) in which the subject identified. That is, I am arguing against historicism in favor of dialectism (Copjec 1994). This, as Hegel's alienated spirit of the slave demonstrates is, too, an "unhappy" and contingent truth—the dialectical oscillation never overcome. The negation of the Other marked as the displaced figures of crises (or "backward" obstructions) to History one, in other words, like the anachronistic fantasy of surmounted pasts, can never be put to rest or removed entirely from psychic circulation. They are the quilting points of ideology, the "lie" in which a truth can continue to go unrecognized (Lacan 1977:172). As Chakrabarty

notes, following Heidegger, all orientations to the past are futural (ensnared in the world). Heidegger argues:

> Da-sein always is as and "what" is already was. Whether explicitly or not, it *is* its past. It is its own past not only in such a way that its past, as it were, pushes itself along "behind" it, and that it possesses what is past as a property that is still objectively present and at times has an effect on it. Da-sein "is" its past in the manner of *its* being which, roughly expressed, on each occasion "occurs" out of its future. . . . Da-sein grows into a customary interpretation of itself and grows up in that interpretation. (1996:17)

In a sense, Heidegger can be read as a historicist here, in that the subject or being (Da-sein) "possesses what is past," which "pushes itself along 'behind' it." But Being is not a historical property in this sense alone. Rather, the "customary interpretation" of Being, or the growing sense of a "tradition" that is produced "out of its future" is itself a product of its futural temporal movement. In this sense, pastness and tradition are futural in nature. By the same logic, all futures are already "having been," in that aspirations of "will be," like "not yet," are, as the logic of dialectic dictates, alienated abstractions of contingencies within the now. That is, the ensnared nature of Being (Da-sein) subjects human consciousness to the ontic, or historicized ("customary") understanding of its self. There is nothing pathological in this in and of itself. Rather, Chakrabarty warns of the *fetish effects* of nationalist imaginaries of becoming, or the objectifying fantasies that cluster around disavowed pasts, and their displacements in moments of crisis: "A problem arises when the demand is made that the objectifying relationship to the past be our only relationship, for then any return to other relationships seem like a 'nightmare of the dead,' as Marx put it. For those who give themselves over completely to objectifying models of thought, the past retains a power to haunt and *deliver the shock of the uncanny*" (2000:252). Therefore, in reading the political economy of ethnic value in Malaysia's history, we must attend to the instability, not the inevitability, of its phantasmic power to subjectify. In this sense, we can read the production of the ethnic subject as a symptom that silences the partial recognition of its contingent source. As Marx argues, the slave's recognition of its "*vegetative existence*," as also recognized by the master, produces the transcendental negation of labor that is capital's source, which drives the fantasy of autonomy and universality, as well as the

specter of contingency lurking behind as the "guilty conscience" and compulsive apologetics of the bourgeoisie. As Marx once again suggests in *The Grundrisse*, "capital therefore *appears* as the predominant subject and owner of *alien labour*, and its relation is itself as complete a contradiction as is that of wage labour" (Marx, qtd. in Marx and Engels 1978:261, emphasis added). My argument, however, is not that History two, or that the slave's partial recognition leads to the freedom of the spirit or a retrievable subaltern agency, but that, as Hegel has argued, the freedom of the spirit that is born out of the suffering of hierarchy remains subject to a corporeal cage—submission unto the ethnic body or a cage of freedom. With this theoretical perspective in mind, I now return to the appearance of History one's constitution of a Tamil political and cultural subject in twentieth-century Malaysia.

By 1940, the socioeconomic situation had deteriorated further on the estates. Workers were paid the same wage rate as they had been in 1928, and in the early years of the Second World War, the estates were pressed to maximize production in order to help in the war effort. The outbreak of war also was detrimental to the economic well-being of Tamil laborers. Japanese occupation meant different things to the three main communities remaining in Malaya. The Chinese suffered outright persecution, as thousands were simply executed or enslaved (Bayly and Harper 2005). Indians and Malays to some extent were courted by the Japanese through their "support" of Indian nationalism and Islamic causes.

Between 1942 and 1943, about eighty thousand Indian males either volunteered or were coerced into joining Japanese organized labor gangs, the most infamous being the "death" railroad from Thailand to Burma. Only half of these workers survived the ordeal. It seems that Tamils were tricked by the Japanese, who lured them to "Thai nadu" ("motherland" in Tamil). Many left for Thailand under the illusion that they were going to India (Sandhu 1969:184). Those two hundred thousand workers who remained on the estates endured more hardship.

The Japanese occupation also brought about a certain degree of unification between Indians in Malaya for the first time. The Indian National Army (INA) and Indian Independence League (IIL) were organized under Japanese supervision. With promises of a free India, many were attracted to these movements. In 1942, the IIL was formed, and received support from the elite Indians who had close ties with the Indian

freedom fighters. The INA was formed in 1943, and after the arrival of the charismatic Subhas Chandra Bose gained many members. Under Bose's leadership, estate Indians were elevated in status and sense of purpose. Together with urban, middle-class Indians, the laboring classes worked together for what they believed to be a noble cause. At the same time, many joined simply to escape Japanese persecution. Indians "were suddenly elevated from being the pariahs of British Malaya to a most favoured community status under the Japanese" (Stenson 1980:92).

But the INA was not a democratic institution by any means. Privileged positions were monopolized by the professional Indians in the towns and cities. The poor laborers, while suddenly elevated to the role of "freedom fighters," were made use of by the Japanese and, some would say, by Bose and the INA. The Tamils, especially on the estates, were "squeezed dry" by the INA. Still, enthusiasm ran high until the INA suffered a humiliating defeat after its first campaign at Imphal on the India-Burma border. After this, interest waned, suspicion of the Japanese motives increased, and news of Allied successes began to trickle through to the Indian community in Malaya.

While the episode may have aroused some semblance of Indian unity for the first time, it also exacerbated dissension between Tamil laborers and professional-class Indians who assumed leadership positions in the INA.[10] The coercive way in which it gained volunteers was also resented by the economically desperate laborers. While the privileged positions of middle-class Indians in the IIL and INA were protected by the Japanese, the laborers were often tricked or forced to work on Japanese projects such as the Thai-Burma railway. Therefore, INA and IIL officers became increasingly associated with Japanese interests in the eyes of the laborers.

After the war, some who had resisted the Japanese and the INA were happy to see the return of the British. During this period there was considerable mistrust and accusation leveled against those who had colluded with fascists, and, as mentioned, this reflected communal fragmentation within the Indian community. But, as the occupation experience had radicalized Tamil laborers, they now seemed ready for union mobilization. But in order to restore estate profitability, low wages were reimposed by management.

Jawaharlal Nehru, the Indian nationalist leader, visited Malaya in 1946 and spoke of the need for Indians there to fight for independence in their

adopted homeland. At the same time, he secured the release of all INA prisoners of war from the British. A former high-ranking officer, John Thivy, was inspired by Nehru to inaugurate the Malaysian Indian Congress party (MIC), which was modeled after, and remaining affiliated with, the Indian National Congress (Ampalavar 1981). In its early days the MIC, following Nehru, was associated with socialist causes.

After the war, for a brief period, and mostly under Indian leadership, radical union activity and a series of crippling strikes erupted throughout the peninsula. These, however, were violently suppressed by estate managers working in collusion with colonial officers. The political Left was effectively destroyed after a brief postwar period of activity. Economic marginalization was to continue on the estates, as it became clear that "the purpose of unions, especially in the plantation and tin-mining industries, was to ensure that the interests of capitalism would be protected and perpetuated even after British colonial rule gave way to an independent government" (Muzaffar 1993:219). Indian estate laborers were not allowed to change employment, thus searching for higher wages was futile. As they were regrouped into centralized labor lines, the "restrictive paternalism of pre-war times" was restored to the delight of estate managers (Stenson 1980:168).

ETHNIC POLITICS AND UNIONS

By the time of the Emergency period (1948–60), in which the Communist Party and its allies were forced underground and violently eradicated, class-based union consciousness had been largely neutralized. Before turning to the contemporary situation, it is worth noting how "docile" unions were encouraged and how a communal-based political system emerged in Malaya. This highlights how the contemporary Indian community, and particularly the Tamil laborers, finds itself at the periphery of political processes in Malaysia.

Many have noted how the ethnic composition of Malaya was manipulated in order to prevent the emergence of class-based solidarities (e.g., Jomo 1986; Hua 1983; Stenson 1980). By design, labor was ethnically organized, and as such, unions were organized around ethnicities. In the plantation labor sector, the radical stirrings heard prior to and after the war were replaced by more accommodating unions. The National Union of

Plantation Workers (NUPW) emerged as the leading union allowed to represent Indian labor interests. Formed in 1954 by the staunch anticommunist P. P. Narayanan, the union has achieved modest reforms in wages and working conditions. Widely perceived as promanagement, this union has become a huge bureaucratic structure with a highly centralized leadership that benefits urban elites more than Tamil laborers. Of course, the economic benefits produced by the plantation industry were enjoyed by the elites from all three ethnic groups, in addition to the great profits that fell directly into the hands of foreign capitalists.

After independence in 1957, two developments further hurt the already marginal Tamil laboring classes. First, the subdivision of estates left many homeless and jobless and thus created a massive squatter problem in the urban areas. Second, the imposition of stricter citizenship laws after ethnic riots in 1969 forced thousands of Indian laborers to repatriate to India. These events were worsened by the communal status of the MIC and by the meekness of unions in national politics.

The MIC, as mentioned earlier, was founded under John Thivy, an ardent Indian nationalist. Soon thereafter, however, it was active in the struggle for Malayan independence, being the first major political party in Malaysia to demand it. Early in its history the MIC associated itself with Indian *and* pan-Malayan nationalism, Then, in 1953, the MIC changed its direction in response to larger political trends in the nationalist movement. Proposals regarding citizenship and special rights were under negotiation with the British. The United Malays National Organization (UMNO) was growing in popularity, and its counterpart, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), was equally dedicated to communal politics. The MIC, in turn, joined the UMNO-MCA Alliance toward the end of 1953. Abandoning its goals of forging a noncommunal political system, the MIC realized that political representation would only be ensured through the Alliance. But the Alliance did not need MIC support to rule, given the small size of the Indian community. On the other hand, the MIC saw this as its only viable option. The communal identity of the party actually helped it win some support. An active local Tamil press under the MIC's influence has played and continues to play a large role in the production of Tamil consciousness and communal identity. The party has capitalized on this sentiment throughout its history.

Dravidianism, though earlier linked to left-wing union activities, was

left after the Emergency as the only "form of Tamil politics that was acceptable to the government" (Stenson 1980:176). But the MIC is hardly an ardent Tamil nationalist party, as it survives only through accommodation to UMNO interests. Thinly disguised bourgeois interests have often masqueraded under the banner of ethnicity. While the MIC has been able to inject Tamil support from laborers, the working-class identity of the party has prompted many of the top Indian intellectuals to abandon it in favor of the noncommunal Democratic Action Party (DAP). Factionalism within the party had an enervating effect on the Indian community, which, because of its minority status, was already compromised. The MIC, many believed, represented the interests of the Indian petit bourgeois, the class that had gained much through cordial relations with UMNO.

While the MIC may have been the "submissive junior partner" (Muzaffar 1993), it was in a difficult position to help the most marginalized parts of the Indian community due to the structure of Malaysia's economy in the first phase of independence. Malaysia's economy remained centered on the production of raw materials for Western markets after independence. Tin and rubber were still the main export products, and both remained largely under European management at first. In the case of the rubber estates, Malaysia became the world's largest producer of rubber, but to the Indian tapper this had little meaning. Wages were kept low in order to maintain foreign interest in the market; and while some improvements in conditions were seen in the wealthier estates, poverty remained a serious problem (Muzaffar 1993).

The "neocolonial" economy led to a great imbalance in postindependence development up until 1969. Agriculture, and predominantly rubber, remained the mainstay of the economy. While educated elites in urban areas, including Indians, benefited from the expanding economy and industrialization of the cities, the rural populations, particularly Malays, squatters, and plantation laborers, suffered. The first ten years of the Alliance proved to be a boom period for middle-class Indians. The Indian community was further polarized between the well-to-do urban elites and the exploited and maligned estate Tamils. Alliance politics was inherently middle-class biased, with Indian interests coming last. The laboring Tamils were fast becoming what the activist K. A. Neelakandha Aiyer of the Central Indian Association of Malaya (CIAM) had predicted back in 1938.

> They will form a floating population in the towns occupying lowly positions. . . . This is the general fate of an indigent wage-earning class—a landless proletariat. . . . The stragglers who remain behind in Malaya become the tragic orphans—of whom India has well-nigh forgotten and Malaya looks down upon with contempt—as *worthless dregs in a prosperous society*. (Quoted in Stenson 1980:207)

This state of affairs was worsened by the subdivision of many estates. When local capital expanded during the early independence years, some Malaysian tycoons began to buy plantations from European owners. But these same businessmen were unable to maintain estates of the same size as those of the larger European firms; rather, there developed a speculative real estate market wherein estates were bought and sold, usually subdivided in the process. This led to a decline in living standards for the laborers. In terms of the national economy, however, the situation did not present a crisis, as rubber production actually increased due to technical advances in production and higher yielding hybrid trees. Tamil labor was also displaced by Malays and later by Indonesians as government pressure on private companies to hire Malays grew. By 1971, only 79,800 Tamil laborers remained on the estates, a decline of 46.2 percent from 1950 (Stenson 1980:204). Also Indian representation in the labor force fell from 62 percent in 1940 to 40 percent in 1971. Unemployment among Indians became the worst of the three communities, and those who migrated to urban areas faced obstacles because of their exclusively Tamil educations.

The laborers were dealt another blow when citizenship laws were tightened after the race riots of 1969. About sixty thousand Indian estate workers were affected. Though most (80 percent according to the NUPW) were eligible for citizenship, they had failed to apply for a variety of reasons: remoteness of the estate, illiteracy, lost birth and marriage certificates, or failure to understand the importance of citizenship (Stenson 1980). About sixty thousand Indians returned to India as a result. Those "illegals" that remained were forced to do odd jobs in urban areas or to take on noncontract work in estates at very poor wages.

That the MIC and NUPW were able to do very little about the subdivision of estates and repatriation of Indians who were eligible for citizenship raised the level of exasperation within the Indian community. Some were bitter that their representatives were unwilling to press the government or properly advise the laborers. Others felt that the impotence of the Indian

community—economically and politically—was inevitable given the communal nature of the Alliance and the increasingly assertive Malay ethnic politics.

In sum, Malaysian Indians were weakened and divided by historical and cultural factors. Colonial racial discourses, in the service of a plantation economy, coupled with the different socioeconomic backgrounds of the Tamil communities, produced antagonisms and factionalisms that greatly marginalized the laboring Tamils. The MIC and NUPW have proven to be too weak to represent laborer interests. Rather, their compliance within the communal political system has served the interests of maintaining profitability for expanding bourgeois capital. Moreover, the MIC, though carrying the banner of Tamil language and culture, that is, playing the communal card, has produced few tangible social or economic gains for the laboring classes. Furthermore, the "Tamil" identity of the MIC has alienated professionals and non-Tamil Indians. This leads us to the events of the last twenty-five years and ultimately, I think, to a better understanding of Hindu revivalism. At the very least, it puts the phenomenon of religious revival and diasporic displacement into a political and economic context, which, in turn, brings psychoanalysis and phenomenological reading into dialogue with Marxist theory. The traumatic Real of globalization, even in this early phase under colonial movements of labor, correlates directly to the fixation on ethnic identity, which acts as *both* mask and symptom. That is, the arbitrary orderings of ethnic value, the nation, and state hierarchies as determined by capitalism arouse anxieties that are silenced by reinscribing the very categories that are partially recognized as contingent.

By the mid-1990s, the Indian community in Malaysia found itself owning only 1 percent of the share equity in Malaysia. This was the same percentage it held in 1970. While the classification of national equity is broken down into two categories—*bumiputras* (Malays) and non-*bumiputra*—the Indians' share of the nation's wealth does not reflect their percentage of the population. Non-*bumiputras* (Indians and Chinese) as a category have fared well, owning over 46 percent of share capital; however, this gives a false picture, as the Chinese have performed much better in the Malaysian economy than the Indians.[11]

Estate poverty, exacerbated by industrialization, subdivisions, and foreign labor, has generated a squatter problem and an urban underclass; this



Fig. 3. Retired plantation workers, husband and wife

has perpetuated social problems that have tended to hurt Tamil women the most. One of the most common stereotypes I heard about estate Tamils concerned their "backwardness" and how women bore the brunt of the brutality of estate life. Tamil males are often described as alcoholic wife beaters with low self-esteem who take their frustrations out on their families. Stories of spousal and child abuse are often seen in the English and Tamil newspapers. Tamil papers sometimes feature fictional short stories about the injustices faced by Tamil women, trapped in violent marriages yet caught in a patriarchal culture that is unsympathetic to their plight. The image of the working-class, abusive Tamil male is upheld in media forums as part of an inwardly directed criticism of the Indian community. This contributes to a growing national discourse about "Indians" as the community to be "feared" and despised. Whether true or not, I was told on

numerous occasions that the national media have created a "monster" out of the Tamils by highlighting crimes committed by Indians, especially when it involves violence—particularly violence associated with "gangsterism." I have been told by many Tamil activists that the police routinely profile young Indian males and that there is a disproportionate number of fatal shootings suffered by Tamils at the hands of an overzealous and implicitly racist police force, which itself will allege that the victims were involved in organized crime.[12] The growing concern about Indian gangsterism and domestic violence is also perpetuated by reformist (many being Indian) organizations. Tamil Muslim television shows[13] and Tamil Christian missionaries give prominent attention to the backwardness of Tamil culture, especially the Hindu practices that are supposed to signify or contribute to it. The alleged overreporting of Indian crimes and the perhaps well-intentioned inwardly directed critique (i.e., "the subculture of poverty": alcohol and wife abusing, dishonest, uncooperative, apathetic, etc.) strengthen a dominant discourse, while at the same time distancing the would-be reformer from the "embarrassment" of association.

> Many middle-class Indians often feel impatient and angry with the Indian poor who are caught in this subculture of poverty. Many feel indignant that these people are always whining, begging and quarrelling, instead of taking steps to improve themselves. *Some even feel ashamed of them and blame them for bringing disrepute to the Indian community*, and for "making Indians the laughing stock of this country." (INSAN 1989:26–27, emphasis added)

This sentiment was indeed demonstrated to me many times by middle-class Indians. Some saw a parallel between poor Tamils and the African American community and would argue that steps must be taken to prevent Indians from "falling to that level."[14] On the other hand, some felt that the inwardly directed criticism was just another form of "blaming the victim," which also reified notions of Indian backwardness, in contrast with purported Malay-Islamic progressiveness as propagated by the state. Persisting and perhaps worsening estate poverty and a perception of squatter gangsterism have ensured that the poor Tamil is an object of fear and ridicule. The "docile" Tamil has become transformed into the "despised" Tamil, and present discourse often addresses the growing "Indian problem." Elite Indians, I have been told by some activists, tend to speak of a subculture of poverty from a social distance, not knowing firsthand how

the Indian poor actually live. That is, they are accused of tacitly reinforcing the racializing discourse that is directed at the working class "Indian."

THE NEW ECONOMIC POLICY

While I am focusing on the Tamil community, it should be noted that Malay discontent was also simmering throughout the 1960s among the rural poor. Ethnic tensions erupted, or some would say were instigated, on May 13, 1969, after the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a Chinese-dominated party campaigning on a platform that challenged the communal Alliance, scored victories in Kuala Lumpur and Penang. Victory celebrations in these cities led to fighting between working-class Malays and Chinese, leaving many hundreds dead. It was rumored that "young turks" in UMNO critical of Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman's conservative style had instigated the riots in an effort to discredit him. A state of emergency was declared, and Tunku's deputy, Abdul Hussein Razak succeeded to the position of prime minister and president of UMNO. In 1971, Razak instituted the New Economic Policy (NEP) and formed the Department of National Unity in order to deter further ethnic strife. To this end, the Rukenegara (national articles of faith) were proclaimed in the hopes of assuaging both Malays and Chinese. The Rukenegara looked to appease minorities (Chinese and Indians) with its call for a "liberal," "democratic," and "progressive" nation. But for the most part, the articles of faith further enshrined the special position of Malays with regard to "loyalty to the Supreme Ruler" (the king, elected from among the sultans on a rotating basis) and "belief in God" (the state support for Islam). In addition, a number of "reforms" were instituted to prevent the Malay masses from being "insulted" again by non-Malay "extremists" (i.e., the DAP).

> In the post-1969 period, the hegemonic position of the new, more Malay-oriented leadership in the Barisan Nasional[15] was enhanced through amendments to the Constitution. It was, for example, prohibited, even in parliament, to question "ethnically sensitive" issues, which included any reference to Malay special rights, non-Malay citizenship, the status of the national language, Islam, and the constitutional provisions pertaining to the Sultans. (Gomez and Jomo 1997:22)

The riots, though instigated for political reasons, were also the result of persistent poverty among Malays. The NEP was aimed at redressing eco-

nomic imbalances—albeit strictly along ethnic lines. A quota system was designed for the public sector and universities, requiring four Malays to be selected for every non-Malay. The NEP also set a target of achieving 30 percent share capital for the Malay community by the year 1990. To this end, a percentage of corporate shares was allocated to *bumiputras* who could demonstrate their entrepreneurial skills. A strategy of rapid industrialization requiring an influx of foreign companies was planned as the growth engine and job base for the nation. In addition to economic measures, the Malay language was promoted and made the sole language of instruction at the national university and the sole language of the government and judiciary. Citizenship laws were tightened, and many work permits were not renewed. As a direct result of stricter laws and illiteracy in the Malay language, sixty-thousand estate laborers were repatriated to India—most having resided in Malaysia for decades but ill informed of their legal rights under the new legislation.

In order to maintain economic growth rates and industrialize the country, multinational corporations were lured with the promise of weak unions, low wages, and disciplined workers. To this end, "free trade zones" were established around the nation's capital. Foreign firms were given a considerable amount of autonomy (Hua 1983; Ong 1987). This policy paid dividends throughout the 1970s–90s: American, British, and Japanese investment in Malaysia grew tremendously, sparking high growth rates in the gross national product (GNP).

Malay peasants were encouraged to take up employment in factories in the free trade zones. Malays were also given incentives to settle in cities and to join the industrial labor force. At the same time, inequality persisted in urban areas between the Malay bourgeoisie and the working class. Rapid urbanization also produced a sense of alienation among members of the working class; they were exposed not only to other ethnic groups but also to the "Westernized" lifestyles of the elites of all ethnic groups (Muzaffar 1987). Alienation and disdain for the perceived "corruption" of traditional Malay values fueled an Islamic resurgence during the 1970s and 1980s. The continued dependence of Malaysia on a Western economic and cultural presence inspired an Islamic critique in the opposition Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), which gained momentum among workers and university students and professors.

PAS and Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM, the Muslim Youth

Movement of Malaysia) gained support among Malays, with the former appealing to peasants and the latter to college students and intellectuals. UMNO, perceiving a threat to its political hegemony, developed its own Islamization agenda, while simultaneously attempting to discredit PAS and ABIM. Courses on Islam were instituted in universities and public schools. An International Islamic University was set up in 1983, attracting scholars and theologians from a number of Islamic countries. An Islamic Center (Pusat Islam) was also inaugurated to promote and oversee the "proper" dissemination of Islam in the country. Islamic banking and insurance schemes were organized with government funding and support. A media campaign promoting "Islamic values" was also launched, featuring radio and television discussions by various experts.

The government strategy is to insist that capitalist development plans be congruent with Islam, despite the claims of PAS, ABIM, and other critics. Leaders of UMNO criticized Islamic movements and parties hostile to industrialization and capitalist development as "deviationist" or "obscurantist." In the government propaganda, images of science and material power and prosperity were infused with Islamic meaning and symbolism. Hoping to shore up its Islamic credentials, the government has also strengthened Islamic (Shariah) laws for Malays and has encouraged women, in particular, to adopt traditional "modest" clothing (*baju kurung*) and cover their hair with scarves, in accordance with Arabic custom. Critics of the government were incarcerated under the Internal Security Act, which allows for the imprisonment without trial of individuals and groups deemed a threat to national security. It was said that Islamic "extremists" were sympathetic to foreign terrorists and/or would provoke non-Malays' fears and aggression.

The government in the 1980s and 1990s, under the then Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, continued to patronize Islam while also tightening its authoritarian grip on the opposition, the media, and the judiciary (Crouch 1996). Unprecedented economic growth and further liberalization and privatization of the economy has created a new class of wealthy Malay entrepreneurs.

> Thus the NEP's 30 per cent Malay wealth ownership target (often invoked as an ethnic cudgel to advance particular Malay business interests), has enabled influential Malay politicians and businessmen with

> close links to UMNO leaders to amass wealth for themselves. NEP privileges—claimed in the name of the mass of ordinary Bumiputeras—have mainly been appropriated by the better connected in the Bumiputera community (Gomez and Jomo 1997:53)

Critics have argued that the government's economic policies have done little to help alleviate poverty among poor Malays. PAS has continued to characterize UMNO as a procapitalist party of elites that has strayed from Islamic principles of social justice and equality. It has also been accused of promoting "Western-style" consumerism and greed. Mahathir has consistently advocated competitive capitalism and privatization as the best way to create wealth within the Malay community. A prosperous society, not an egalitarian society, he argues, is demanded by Islam. Gomez and Jomo (1997) quote Mahathir: "The best way to keep the shares between the Bumiputera hands is to hand them over to *the Bumiputera most capable* of retaining them, which means the well-to-do" (*Far Eastern Economic Review* 13/4/79).

A new class of Malay businessmen has prospered under the NEP and the government's policy of helping those who have already proven themselves as successful entrepreneurs. While the government does not extend similar privileges to Chinese or Indian entrepreneurs, it does not inhibit the private sector. Thus the Chinese bourgeoisie has maintained its economic control over the economy in terms of share assets. Many years of over 8 percent GNP growth have helped legitimize the government's economic policies. A recession during the later 1980s, however, heightened criticism of the government by both PAS and DAP. Many of the most vociferous critics of the government were arrested and detained under the Internal Security Act.

The NEP concluded in 1990, only to be replaced with the National Development Policy, which essentially continued its objectives with slight modifications (Gomez and Jomo 1997:173). But in 1991, the government unveiled a strategic challenge to the nation through the prime minister's Vision 2020—a plan to make Malaysia a "fully developed country" by the year 2020. This feat is to be accomplished by accelerating industrialization, economic growth, and modernization.

On the other side of the coin, Vision 2020 has very strong moral underpinnings, calling for greater national unity and a "society with citizens

imbued with spiritual values." To some extent, the moral side had already been stated in the Rukenegara, but explicit mention is made in Vision 2020 of the need to maintain religious diversity and interethnic harmony. In conjunction with the Vision, the prime minister also began to speak of a future "bangsa Malaysia"—that is, a future national identity that transcends the boundaries of the various ethnic groups. Non-Malays seemed to applaud such pronouncements from the prime minister. But on the other hand, the propagation of Vision 2020 through the media seemed to have a pronounced emphasis on a progressive and decidedly modernist Islam as the spiritual anchor of the rapidly modernizing nation. Intensifying the concerns of non-Malays, moreover, a prohibition was placed on non-Muslim religious programming on the television and radio. This turn to a spiritual anchor, I will argue, belies deeper insecurities faced by the "Bumiputra most capable." While I am suggesting here a strategic deployment of religion in the constitution of a Malay national culture, I will argue that identity politics has produced fixated forms of identification that exceed rational or strategic implementation.

THE NEW ECONOMIC POLICY AND THE INDIAN MIDDLE CLASS

While the lower-class Indians appear to have been most oppressed, middle-class Indians have had increased anxieties about the security of their socioeconomic position since the implementation of the New Economic Policy in 1971. The NEP was designed to eradicate poverty, particularly among Malays. But along with the NEP came many cultural and linguistic policies that reflected the growing presence of a Malay bourgeoisie. Among the Indian elites, the changing policies were greatly felt. Among the Indian poor, in contrast, the language and cultural policies were not that deeply felt, as most were not proficient in English. Rather, they were and continued to be Tamil educated.

The Indian middle class has been affected by the pro-*bumiputra* policies enacted by the NEP in two key areas. First, the quota system enacted to promote the hiring of Malays in all levels of the state bureaucracy has led to an erosion of elite Indian influence in the public sector. National health, engineering, surveying, banking, and so on have largely been taken over by *bumiputras*. The promotion of Malays over similarly qualified Indians and

Chinese has led to a gradual erosion of executive representation in the public and private spheres. In the private sector, government contracts were rewarded to *bumiputra* businesses. Also, in education, a quota system ensured that many talented and eligible Indians and Chinese were not granted admission, while some mediocre Malay students were.

One consequence of the NEP has been a "brain drain" of many of the most talented Indians to Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This has occurred because parents often send their children to universities outside of Malaysia due to the quota policies.[16] While studying, or after finishing their degrees, many are able to find lucrative employment in the host country. I was often told that some of the Indian community's best minds had "given up hope" of finding suitable employment in Malaysia, with its *bumiputra*-first policies. Many educated Indians feel condescension for the NEP, and for Malays in general, as a result of the *bumiputra* policies.

Middle-class Indians have succeeded through the private sphere in spite of the NEP policies. The NEP did not interfere all that much with private capital. Under the NEP, the non-Malays as a whole have actually increased their equity ownership of Malaysian capital, although this mostly represents Chinese success in the private sector (Brown 1994:248). But the NEP has not really addressed the problem of Malay poverty, focusing rather on the creation of a Malay middle class. A Malay-dominated state bourgeoisie emerged throughout the 1970s and 1980s, but inequality continued, if not worsened, under the NEP (Brown 1994; Jomo 1986; Scott 1985). While the ideology was expressed in pro-Malay terms, the Chinese and Indian bourgeoisie flourished where conflict was expected. Thus the old alliance between elites within the colonial infrastructure was transformed under the NEP into an instrument of a new dominant "bureaucratic capitalist" class (Brown 1994). Wealthy Indians and Chinese were still free to pursue capitalist enterprises. On the other hand, poverty among Malays (and poor Tamils and Chinese) has persisted, fueling the growth of opposition parties, such as PAS (Scott 1985; Muzaffar 1989; Brown 1994). UMNO has, in turn, "had to strengthen the countervailing myth of Malay ethnic unity and Malay cultural superiority" (Brown 1994).

Championing the "Malay cause" camouflages class interests as ethnic ones. The MCA and MIC are the beneficiaries of the ethnic "divide and rule" strategy. Just as the British were able to curtail radical class consciousness through their patronage of elite ethnic-based parties, UMNO's

championing of the Malays provides justification for MCA and MIC representation in the government. Noncommunal parties have actually declined in influence during the tenure of the NEP (Brown 1994).[17] Still, as urbanization, education, and job quotas produce a growing Malay bourgeoisie, competition arises between the emergent and more entrenched middle classes.

As Malays were entering the university and urban work force in greater numbers as a direct consequence of the NEP, they were competing directly against non-Malays, who were often better in English. As was mentioned earlier, alienation[18] was commonly experienced by the upwardly (or not so upwardly) mobile young Malays. In an effort to instill pride as well as a competitive edge over non-Malays, the language of government, the judiciary, and education was switched to Malay. This single policy change transformed the competitive field. Thereafter, promotions were not simply given to Malays at will; rather, the non-Malays could not function in Malay well enough to get promoted. Certainly, the NEP has made it harder for non-Malays of the middle class to maintain their elite status in contemporary Malaysia. At the same time, many middle-class Indians I spoke with were managing to educate their children while holding well-paying jobs. Furthermore, unemployment rates among educated classes were greatly reduced as the Malaysian economy steadily grew during the 1990s.[19]

Muzaffar (1984) argues that the *bumiputra*/non-*bumiputra* dichotomy was reinforced through the rhetoric of Islam, in the interests of the *bumiputra* middle and upper classes, knowing full well that non-Muslims would take offense at the Islamization program. Muzaffar isolated two spheres of marginalization that will affect Indians. They are worth citing, as they clearly represent the views of many middle-class Hindu Indians.

> With the increase in radio and television programmes devoted to Islam, the introduction of Islamic phraseology in greetings, the observation of Islamic rules in social intercourse, the adherence to Islamic norm in the mixing of the sexes, the rapid spread of what is regarded as Islamic attire among women and, to some extent, men, and the strict enforcement of halal food signs in public eating-places, one can expect an Islamic milieu of sorts reflected in Muslim rituals and symbols to emerge before long. Since this cultural milieu is bound to dominate national life, given the sacred significance of everything presented in the name of Islam . . . it will be a reality that they will not be able to par-

ticipate in. . . . *It is this alienation that will make non-Muslims feel that they are completely marginal to the dominant cultural ethos.*

In politics, the effect could be even more serious . . . [for] in a society whose world view is conditioned and coloured by ethnic dichotomies, it is quite likely that an Islamic polity would be seen as an opportunity to establish exclusive Muslim political power. *At the psychological level, this may even be equated with exclusive Malay or bumiputra political power.* (1993:232–33, emphasis added)

Indeed, it was Islam's growing presence and Malay cultural dominance that was resented by middle-class Indians. At the same time, we see in the previous account the idea of the "introduction" of Islamization being authored from above, something that might also be alienating to many Malays. An Indian professor at a university offered this observation of the Malay Islamization of academic life.

Nowadays an academic function at the university will always be catered to Malay tastes and cultural practices. So even an important function, where a lot of Indian leaders attend, the main course very often will be beef, and no substitute meal is arranged for Hindus. *I am embarrassed* to only be able to drink water at these dinner banquets. But the Malays find it amusing. Cultural sensitivity is on the decline. . . . Since the 1969 riots, there is more segregation in schools[20] and in the organization of ethnic enclaves. . . . Nowadays Malays hesitate to visit Indian homes for "open house" on Deepavali, because they are afraid to eat non-*halal* food.[21] What could be non-*halal* about Indian vegetarian dishes? *Malays do not want to socialize that much with non-Muslims anymore.* Before, it wasn't like this.

In terms of education, the language policy has affected the quality of books we select for teaching. Only a small fraction of important books have been translated into Malay. So the standard of education is also declining in the university.

This feeling of hurt experienced by Hindu Indians as Malays distance themselves from non-Islamic culture leads many to reassert their ethnic identity through increased involvement in religious and cultural associations. Some Indians, who themselves are doing well as professionals, volunteer on behalf of the victimized Tamil community. Organizations have been formed, such as the Education Welfare Research Foundation, staffed by successful Indian professionals who see their volunteerism as one way to mitigate against the discrimination faced by Tamils in all social spheres.

One Indian professional who is involved with a large Indian-based charitable organization expressed his disgust at the economic and social claims made by the present political leadership, as well as his fears for the future of the Tamils.

> The Tamils cleared the land and made Malaysia rich—It cannot help but be rich. The Malays and Dr. Mahathir [the prime minister] have nothing to claim credit for . . . they are the inheritors of a land that produced a lot of wealth through its agro-industries. The *jet-set super-rich Malays emerge in contrast to the dirt-poor urban slum Tamil.* These Tamils see the T.V. and the conspicuous consumption all around them, they want their share of the national wealth. These same fellows will become tomorrow's troublemakers if their needs are not looked at. They will become the "*negroes of Malaysia*" and urban crime will skyrocket—it is already happening in places like Klang. Then, when the recession hits, what will happen to Malaysia? Her moral fiber is lost to base capitalism and greed. Mahathir just appeals to the basest values in people. Though lip-service is paid to values and ethics, his society has abandoned humane growth for unrestrained capitalism and development. Thus, he has made a small fortune for his own family. . . . Mahathir is a tradesman, Tunku and Sambanthan were statesmen. . . . *The Malays under him have hijacked the whole country* and there has been a breach of trust. The Tunku (Tunku Abdul Rahman) understood that all Malaysians were to share power, though Malay needs needed to be addressed first. This was understood tacitly by the other races. But, the current crop of leaders since '69 has taken over the whole government, education, transportation, banking, etc. . . . Now, they do not want to see to the needs of the lowly Tamils who initially made it possible for the country to develop in the first place. The Malays are emerging as a *rich and yet lazy race that reaps the benefits of others' labor* and does not pay heed now to them. When recession hits, what will happen? They may be too soft to hold onto what they have gained. Malaysia runs like the mouse-deer, communalism could destroy the country, whereas India is like the elephant and can absorb all sorts of problems and keep moving slowly along. . . .
>
> The problem is magnified by the Indians themselves and their poor political leadership with their greed and complacency. So many rich Indians are content to enjoy the good life and also forget about the Tamils in the estates. Out of ignorance or perhaps trying to forget their responsibilities *they will blame the estate Tamils as being backward, crude, and addicted to drink, and inherently rowdy.* This is due to ignorance. . . . Though the distrust is still there, professional and academic Indian leaders decided the MIC was failing to do anything meaningful for the

Tamils, hence they formed private organizations to address the problems.

A number of issues can be observed within this statement. First of all, the contrast is drawn between the "super-rich" Malay and the "dirt-poor Tamil." The claim is that these same Tamils have been exploited by the Malay bourgeoisie and have received none of the credit they deserve for expanding Malaysia's economy. Educated Indians with the financial means must "address the problems" facing the Indian poor. Professional Indians stand as "protectors" of the Tamils, patronizing them through a variety of charitable projects. The past leaders were "statesmen," in spite of their association with elite interests. But, the present UMNO leadership has betrayed the spirit of the power-sharing agreement formulated by the likes of Tunku and Sambanthan. This sense of betrayal, or "highjacking," however, is felt more keenly by the educated Indian elites than by the laboring Tamils, as I have argued throughout this chapter. The laborer-class Tamils have never been part of the power-sharing structure. Here we see an example of the patronizing voice of the Indian elite, although an undoubtedly sincere one.[22] The lowly Tamil must be uplifted lest he succumb to urban crime and become like the "negroes." The patronizing attitude extends to the Malays, who remain a "lazy race," reiterating colonialist stereotypes. Furthermore, as capitalism eats at the "moral fiber" of the nation, the spiritually and morally advanced ones (presumably elite Indians) must make their wisdom known. That Indians—the "professional and academic" ones, that is—can see who "reaps the benefits of others' labor" is, perhaps, also symptomatic of a displacement of guilt over their own class privilege vis-à-vis the Tamil laborer. Yet, in the same breath, we see too that "rich Indians are content to enjoy the good life." Demonstrating profound ambivalence, this individual emphasizes the cause of this malaise as being "due to" and "out of *ignorance*." The idea of ignorance is emphasized in order to point toward the "academic" and "professional" Indians, who can surmount their ignorance, despite the ignorance in the government, the lazy yet rich Malays, and the "failing" of the MIC. Indeed, the present MIC and its petit bourgeois leadership, he suggests, are self-interested and shortsighted, offering "*poor political leadership with their greed and complacency*."

Samy Vellu (the MIC leader) delivers the goods to UMNO. But, if necessary, he [the prime minister] could squash him at a moment's notice.

> Hence, Samy never criticizes him on any issue. He is a *crude and dirty politician with a dimwit for a wife* who projects larger than life images of himself to the uneducated and partially educated, yet *profoundly ignorant* Indians in the country.

This echoes the views of many educated Indians, who feel the present party leadership is unrefined, crude, and "profoundly ignorant." I was told that the MIC is a "party of thugs" or a "party of *samsu* dealers."[23] Such views were common among the English-educated urban elites. Even if the present stereotype is unfair to the MIC, this perception of the party indicates a deep division within the already politically weak Indian community; and, as we have seen, the communal politics of the MIC, whether it be under the patronage of earlier elite leadership or the championing of Tamil language and religion under the present petit bourgeois leadership, has done little to overcome the economic marginality and political impotence of the Tamil laborers. Moreover, an ambivalence of identity and a sense of guilt over the laborers' plight is demonstrated through the concern shown by volunteer organizations that chastise their own. For as they "forget their responsibilities they will blame the Tamils in the estates." But the "ignorance" of certain elite Indians who "blame" the estate Tamils for their woes is apparently contradicted by the assessment of the "profoundly ignorant" mass of "Indians in the country."

While the stereotypes may or may not escape their consciousness (or unconsciousness), some struggle to address injustice, giving their energies to a variety of causes on behalf of the poor Tamils. But as my informant notes, the "ignorance" and "distrust" are still ever present. Moreover, there is a tendency to locate the plight of the Tamils against the tide of *bumiputraism* and the policies of the NEP. Certainly, NEP politics did little to uplift the Tamil laborers in Malaysia, and "disgust" with the present policies, born out of a loss of status, is commonly heard by the English-educated Indians. Caring for the poor through the format of social welfare organizations, however, can serve one's own status-enhancing ends.[24] Again, this may or may not be the conscious intent. Elitism seems to be largely unintentional. Rather, we might view such attitudes as masks of status and power. But, turning to a psychoanalytic reading, we cannot read this mask instrumentally as conscious ideological production. Rather, in the negation of "ignorance" and "greed" we see a fantasy of moral transcendence and certitude that belies the ambivalent source of its compul-

sion. The fantasy, in other words, surmounts the figure of the "backward" Indian while providing an alternative and ascendant "Indian" status over and above that of the Malays. Here we can see that capitalist development in Malaysia has not produced the ethnic category without resistance; but at the same time, the resistance and ambivalence generated by class privilege produce the uncanny of the fixation on the fetish of ethnic types. Malays and backward Indians metonymize sources of elite recognition. Moreover, the figure of the working-class Indian becomes a site of ambivalent displacement by elites and perhaps by Malays and Chinese as well.

THE IMPOTENCE OF THE MIC

The MIC deserves a much more detailed treatment than space allows. Being the sole Indian representative in the government, the party has presented data suggesting that the Indian community, taken as a whole, lags behind the Chinese and Malays economically in several key areas. Unemployment, for example, is an area where Indians have fared worse. But, as mentioned before, the MIC has never been able to gain much sympathy from UMNO, particularly in the post-NEP years. Pressures on UMNO, from Tun Razak's (the second prime minister's) time onward (1970), to appease grassroots Malay sentiment have meant that programs addressing rural poverty have been aimed at Malays, where the highest percentage of poverty was found. Given their political weakness, many believe the MIC is unable to do more than request assistance.

In the eyes of some Tamils, the MIC has squandered the opportunities granted to them. In one highly publicized case, the MIC was allocated a large percentage of shares in Telekoms, the leading telecommunications company. The sum of 120 million ringgit was raised from the Indian community through the sale of shares. With the money collected, Maika Holdings was formed as an investment company. But rather than reaping dividends, as promised to the poor Tamils, the money was mismanaged. Many working-class Indians who had resorted to bank loans to buy shares in the MIC-led project defaulted and were left in worse shape than before. The performance of Maika was so poor, given the overall corporate growth of the period, that it led many to suspect improprieties. Samy Vellu himself was investigated under suspicion of siphoning off shares for personal gain, but he was exonerated in the official inquiry. Some suggested that a

"whitewash" had taken place, allowing Samy Vellu to become rich at the expense of the poor Tamils.[25] Others were more guarded but asked questions such as the one posed by P. Ramasamy: "Who Really Benefited from Maika?" (*The Sun Megazine* 7/9/95).

Others found the whole investment enterprise to be misguided from the onset. D. Jeyakumar (1993) suggests that share purchasing ultimately helps those who have the resources to invest, noting that

> 87 percent of Indian families have breadwinners who are either manual labourers or unemployed. It is extremely unlikely that they will be able to put aside enough to invest in shares. At most, they may be able to invest M$100 (ringgit) to M$200, representing a token participation in a scheme. . . . The major portion . . . are owned by the wealthy Indians—businessmen, professionals, and executives in the private sector—who make up less than 3 per cent of the Indian population in Malaysia. This will almost certainly continue to hold true in the future as well.

The result of Maika's failure was greater cynicism and mistrust of the MIC. Some threw their support behind the newly formed Indian Progressive Front (IPF) under the leadership of M. G. Pandithan. Pandithan, himself an Adi dravida (of *tolunde jati*, or "low caste"), gathered support from the estate and squatter sector after the Maika fiasco. At first, the party joined the opposition (DAP), but later it attempted to reenter Barisan Nasional. In 1994, the IPF held a large rally at Stadium Negara in Kuala Lumpur, drawing over thirty thousand supporters. They pledged their support for the prime minister and asked to be accepted into the ruling coalition. But the MIC was influential enough to prevent this from occurring. Samy Vellu, utilizing the press, claimed that another party would further weaken an already small minority. Cynics also expressed regret to me that Pandithan was playing the "caste card," by directly appealing for Adi dravida support against the Kallar-led MIC.[26] Kallars, it should be recalled, were sometimes harsh to untouchables in colonial India. Therefore, in invoking Kallar identity one also invokes mistrust. On the other side, Pandithan claims he himself was a victim of caste politics while he was climbing the MIC ladder. Caste factions were evidently often used in elections to gain support (Rajoo 1982, 1984a). Just as Tamil communalism marginalizes non-Tamil Indian politicians and professionals from the MIC, caste divisions seem to further weaken the party from within and in the eyes of the Indian population. The recent, and apparently significant, growth of

the IPF suggests further fragmentation, as well as growing distrust of the MIC.[27]

The MIC, critics suggest, lacks the strength and unity to effect major changes on behalf of the Indian community. The educated elites largely shy away from what they perceive to be brash MIC politics,[28] preferring to work privately in the corporate sector and perhaps in volunteer organizations designed to help the Indian poor. I still met some who professed their faith in the "dynamism" of Samy Vellu. They felt that the long time leader of the MIC was doing his best given the limited political maneuverability of the Indian community. The MIC did prepare a manuscript entitled "The Second Round—Vision 2020 and Malaysian Indians." The study, with its ideas credited to Samy Vellu, provides a blueprint for the future of the Indian community, calling for a think tank, further investment options, an educational trust fund, and so on. Whether skeptical or not, some Indians would certainly like to see some of the ideas in this party charter reach fruition.[29] In the matter of preserving Tamil education, however, the MIC has already had some measure of success.

TAMIL EDUCATION: LEARNING TO LABOR?

We saw earlier how Tamil schools were a key institution within the estate industry. Some studies suggest that the educational system maintains a laboring class of individuals by limiting their exposure to the English and Malay languages. This "hidden curriculum," as Colletta called it, not only served the interests of the colonial and postcolonial estate owners but was also appropriated by the MIC, which portrayed itself as the guardian of Tamil culture and identity in the country.

In 1995 there were 542 Tamil schools in Malaysia, with over 70 percent located in rural areas. But, as estates were rapidly converted into industrial areas, the number of Tamil schools was expected to shrink to about 350 by the year 2000 (*The Sun Megazine* 7/16/95). Marimuthu (1984) found that the poor performance of estate schools was influenced by the general poverty (malnutrition, lack of study space, poor health and living conditions, etc.) of life on the estates. Many schools lack electricity, toilets, libraries, and other basic facilities. Shahul Hamid Mydin Shah, the secretary-general of the National Union of Tamil School Teachers, says that funding is the main problem.

> Our major grievance is the lack of funds. Ninety percent of the schools do not even have telephones. There is a shortage of 1500 qualified teachers. Almost 100 schools have been without headmasters for the past three years.

He points out that estate schools have received only partial funding due to the technicality that most Tamil schools are located on private estates.

> Due to this technical problem, our children are deprived of good education. The government should amend the National Land Code and the Land Acquisition Act so that the schools can benefit. (*The Sun Megazine* 7/16/95)

Articles are seen in the local press, and more recently on the Internet, addressing the problems of the Tamil schools. Some Indians openly state that they should be closed or converted into national Malay-medium schools. An Indian social scientist told me that the schools simply serve the needs of the MIC, providing teaching jobs for "lower-tier" members of the party, as well as serving to indoctrinate "party ideologies" into the young. But, she maintained, the future needs of the students are overlooked, as their educations are not sufficient to meet the challenge of escaping estate poverty. Another person told me that the MIC uses the Tamil schools as

> the last bastion of Tamil identity and language and [they] must hence be cultivated as purely Tamil in curriculum. This is a ticket to poverty as a Tamil education, while desirable, is very useless in Malaysia. The schools need to nationalize their curriculum and integrate with national standards, requiring Malay and Tamil instruction, and maybe English as well. The support of the MIC for Tamil schools was self-interested as those "*backward institutions*" were the bread and butter support for the party. Any push to change and bring them into the national educational scene would be seen as betrayal and sellout to the Tamils. Also, parents would be pressurized to support their children's education more if they were to be nationalized. The slipshod standards would be replaced and a whole way of life would change.

Samy Vellu proclaims: "We love the Tamil language because it has cultural, religious and sentimental values to us" (*The Sun* 7/16/95). He says the MIC will always champion Tamil education and that no one should question the resolve of the Tamil people to preserve their cultural identity. In spite of the reservations of many, the party continues to defend the schools

regardless of their performance. The resilience of Tamil education, like that of religious practices, though surprising given their lack of cultural capital in modern Malaysia, is also party sponsored and promoted in the generally pro-MIC Tamil media.[30] As the Malay language issue was pressed by the UMNO, those in favor of maintaining Tamil schools had the added ammunition that preserving their language and identity was the first line of resistance against a loss of cultural identity. Critics, however, see this MIC political tactic as equally hegemonic for the working- and lower-class Tamils, trapping them within working-class futures. Many Tamil activists who are critical of the MIC still support Tamil primary education. They worry about the "low self-esteem" that Indian children will have if their first exposure to education comes in Malay-medium schools. I have been told, too, that Malay teachers are increasingly insensitive to Tamil, and especially Hindu, students. Whether true or not, the perception exists that working-class Tamil children will be stigmatized if placed into Malay schools. The educated elite Indians, the activists also suggest, can afford private English-medium schools for their kids, whereas the working class will be at the mercy of the Malay schools, with their purported Malay-Islamic, nationalist, educational agenda.

The MIC recognizes that the Tamil schools will not survive if they do not improve. Party leaders have begun to cooperate with other organizations dedicated to improving the schools. The Sri Murugan Center is perhaps the most influential of these. The center, with its headquarters near Kuala Lumpur, provides mainly academic assistance to Tamil students. Volunteers drawn from the university or professional ranks travel to various Tamil schools tutoring and giving motivational talks. The Sri Murugan Center has sponsored educational *yatras* (pilgrimages) at the Batu Caves, the most sacred Murugan shrine in the nation and the site of the Thaipusam celebrations discussed in chapter 1. These events promoted the value of education, clothing it in Hindu Tamil terms, hoping to reach out to the Tamil working-class communities. Samy Vellu has supported and attended these events and has spoke of the need for Indians to embrace education as the way for the community to progress.[31] It was reported that one hundred thousand Indians attended the event in 1995 alone.

While Tamils in Malaysia are attached to their mother tongue, as witnessed by the continued presence of Tamil schools, there are fears that Tamil is diminishing in use. Tamil newspapers, I am told, have reduced

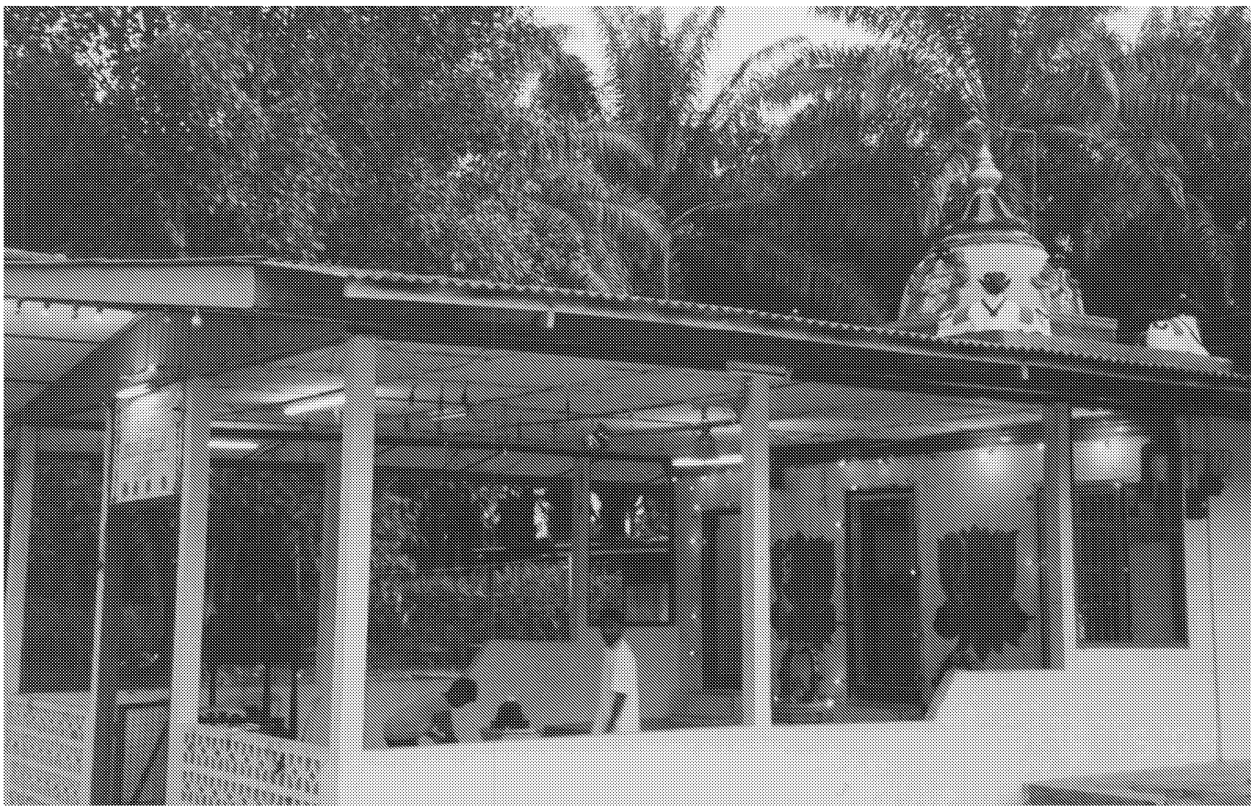


Fig. 4. Estate (plantation) temple

sales in urban areas, as many parents have opted to send their children to Malay- or English-medium schools. As a result, a new generation of urban Indians has emerged, whose members understand colloquial Tamil but cannot read or write the language. One Tamil colleague at a private college observed:

> Tamil language and culture will *die a slow death*. All the educated Indians that I know send their children to English and Malay schools because they want their children to get a good education. Even Tamil professors send their children to English or Malay schools. Can you imagine the stupidity, they talk about the beauty of Tamil language and how it should be promoted, but they themselves contribute to its death.

I found that Tamils generally understood and converse in the language. Many English educated, however, felt awkward speaking in Tamil, associating it with estate culture or simply lacking confidence, not having studied it in school. Some of the professional Tamils are concerned about the loss of the language and have worked to revive Tamil through a variety of

mediums. One Tamil language activist wrote and freely distributed software programs designed to teach Tamil. The same individual, working together with Tamil teachers, traveled to various schools and taught computer literacy to Tamil students. He also donated computers to schools without the means to purchase them. This individual felt that Tamil education could revive through the efforts of concerned individuals. To this end, he formed a society of professionals who are promoting Tamil language, literature, and computers throughout the peninsula. But he admits that it may be a losing battle. While nobody wants to see the Tamil language die, some see little economic justification for its continued existence in primary education. The MIC has the political will and power to preserve it, but the question remains as to whether, in its present format, it serves the interests of the majority of Tamils.

This chapter concludes with appraisals of current trends by two Tamil educators in Malaysia, both of whom underscored to me the general malaise felt by educated Indians looking ahead at tomorrow. The first comes from a now retired Tamil schoolteacher.

> It is very difficult for Tamils now as *the whole national culture has been planned by Malay think tanks.* Tamil schools are decrepit, often not even having a decent toilet. Social problems among Indians are influenced by Malay school education and lack of spiritual values in government schools. The "bohsia"[32] problem is spreading from Malays to Indians.
>
> Tamil school teachers are often very poor in training and have no knowledge of literate Tamil. *Very dark times are ahead for Malaysian Indians.* The Barisan National does nothing for Indian culture. The national culture is carefully planned and altogether Malay. Even history books are re-written, for instance, the founder of Kuala Lumpur is now said to be a Malay, whereas earlier history recorded that a Chinese man founded the city. On T.V., the Muslim shows still argue that non-Muslim views are inferior and untrue—even the basic commandments or ethics are not true unless they are stated through Islam. After Samy Vellu, there is no one capable to lead the Indian community. But, *Malays will pay the price karmicly* [sic]*—what goes around comes around. Tamil revival may bloom from a spiritual revival.*

These views came from a Tamil teacher still in his thirties.

> The so-called ten percent which represents the Indian population, is now actually closer to seven percent, due to out-migration, conversions to Islam and Malay culture through marriage, and the 1.2 million

Indonesians who now come close to outnumbering the Tamils. *National culture equals Malay culture* in spite of the recent political rhetoric.[33] Indians are adopting Malay language, food, and clothes. Women prefer to wear the Malay baju now over the saree. Soon the distinctiveness of Tamil identity will be gone. The government will let Tamils dwindle in number, and by 2020, their numbers will only be around 5 percent, and politically insignificant. The educated Tamils get out or refuse to speak out because they want their paychecks . . . however, due to the strict quota policy, many University of Malaya Indian grads do not find work in appropriate fields. *Indian cultural forms like music and food are being claimed by the Malays as their own.*

Tamil revival is low-caste village culture. In Sungai Petani, in Kedah, the Thaipusam is full of extreme self-torture. The aim is to show off by the size of the *Vel* or how many hooks one can bear. *Decently conducted religion is hard to find.*

In both statements we see the pessimism that is felt by educated Tamils regarding the recent state-sponsored cultural policies. The "Malay think tank" (read inauthentic or derivative) national culture is represented as hostile to Indian culture, and yet it appropriates it in order to claim it "as its own." Here, again, we see a desire for recognition, born out of a loss of status, and the perceived negation of Malays of their more authentic selves (read Indic or Hindu) in favor of the "planned" national identity that is devoid of "spiritual values." The preservation of Tamil identity, and even its "revival," are of paramount concern in their views, as well as in those of many others I met. Still, there is a pervasive sentiment that "decent" Tamil culture is lost in a sea of government-supported "Western materialism" and the exhibitionism of "*low-caste*" Tamil ritualism. A degree of social distance is still detectable within the concerned voices over the loss of Tamil identity, language, and culture. This distance, as we have seen throughout the chapter, has hindered attempts to construct an inclusive Tamil identity. Yet it is precisely within this ambivalence, and the fissures it generates, that the fetish of ethnicity is "petrified" at "the signifying chain where the memory-screen is immobilized," as Lacan says (1977:167). The figures of the Malay, the low-caste Tamil, and the transcendental or spiritual surmounting of the Other, function in the elite Indian imaginary to provide points of identification negating memory and individual experience. It is in the negation or resistance to the ethnic signifier, or in the transgressive desire for recognition (revealing its contingency through the Other), and

the silencing of the contingent and corporeal (History two's resistance to History one, in Chakrabarty's sense) that we begin to fathom the phenomenological force behind what I have called social distancing. This distancing is really a symptom, once again, of the ethnic fetish. To appreciate that force allows us to recognize the millenarian sentiment, indicative of the ethnic fantasy that "*Malays will pay the price karmicly.*" While "dark times" may lay ahead, "Tamil revival may bloom from *spiritual* revival." In an almost Augustinian dialectical form, the spirit is reborn through death.

I argued earlier that what Chakrabarty calls History two remains profoundly alienated through a fantasy of transcendence through anterior futures (i.e., the "traditional" figured as spirituality), projecting a site of authenticity that silences a contingent material reality. In a Freudian sense, the "dark times" and the "slow death" of Tamil are simultaneously feared and desired. While the fantasy of annihilation is terrifying, and thus is displaced on to the working-class Tamils and Malays who will face karmic retribution for their transgressions, it is also exhilarating, as it affords a glimpse upon the Real and an undifferentiated surmounting of self-consciousness with all its intolerable ambivalent contradictions, as Freud argues through his concept of Thanatos, the so-called death drive. Elite Indians, grappling with the stigma attached to their identity as "Indians," simultaneously distance themselves from this signification, and what it metonymizes socially, and attempt to recuperate another kind of "Indianness"—one that negates the ethnosymbolic ordering of Malaysia through a teleology of surmounted "ignorance." Yet transgressive desires and guilts persist, are displaced, and resurface in uncanny fantasies of death and decline. Thanatos, like Hegel's "unhappy consciousness," is a fantasy of spiritual transcendence driven by the repeated transgressions of corporeal existence. In that sense, "*decently conducted religion*" is haunted by the specters of the alien Other within. The spectral voices grow louder as social distancing increases. In that sense, all masters, through their fantasies of recognition, fear the "vegetative existence," as Marx suggests, of their social subordinates.

In sum, this chapter has explored how the colonial racial discourses were precursors to and influences on the social and economic divisions within Malaysian Indian communities. Throughout the colonial period, under Japanese occupation, during the communist Emergency, and into the formation of independent Malaysia, the polarization of Adi dravida

(low caste) and so-called higher castes weakened the political position of Indians as a whole, as it economically hurt laboring estate-dwelling, and later squatter-dwelling, Tamils. The political structure of the Alliance and later Barisan National, with its communal formula for power sharing, further weakened labor unions and class-based associations. Though the MIC champions Tamil language and culture within Barisan National, the party seems unable to uplift the majority of Tamil laborers, who remain trapped in cycles of poverty. Moreover, as working-class Tamils languish over time, they are directly or indirectly blamed, despised, or feared for their "backward culture." The divisions help explain the class-based differences seen in religious revival, as they are born out of different experiences and expectations generated within these communities over a long period of time.

CHAPTER THREE

THE RITUAL EXPRESSION OF TAMIL IDENTITY IN MALAYSIA

A Festival of Power and Penance

Is it to aid those intent on penance
That the rest refrain from it?

Through penance, if one wishes
Foes can be routed, friends advanced

Men do penance on earth
That they may get their heart's desire

Even death is no bar to those
Strengthened by penance

—Thiruvallavar, *The Kural*

THE ISLAMIZATION OF KUALA LUMPUR

Kuala Lumpur is a city undergoing not a facelift but rather a complete transformation from what was once a series of mainly Chinese and Indian shop houses into the centerpiece and primary symbolic manifestation of Malaysia's Vision 2020. This transformation is, on the one hand, aesthetic—an iconography of capitalist free enterprise and the collective wisdom of the New Economic Policy and its successor, the Economic Development Policy. Moreover, the grandeur of the architectural eruption in the capital signifies, following, perhaps, an older cultural notion of power, charisma, and spiritual authenticity in Southeast Asia as radiating from the galactic polity's center outward, the moral and religious legitimacy of Malaysia's charismatic leader.[1] This can also read as a text on the deeper structural changes in Malaysian society and, more particularly, the politi-

cal ideology of its leadership. The grand shopping malls and gigantic skyscrapers speak of a consumerism that celebrates the utopia of economic success. This, however, is tempered by the power and morality of Islam, as represented in the city's mosques and the Islamic motifs in its newest "hypermodern" skyscrapers and towers. One might speculate that a transcendent spirituality—Islam—and an immanent spiritual potency—the idea of the sacred center—work ideologically to partially silence the economic, and thus dangerously inauthentic, socially contingent sources of power. In that sense, the compulsive building of the Islamic skyline acts as fantasy, dependent on yet negating the specters of the underlying social appropriations of labor, value, and identity that produce its symptoms. The identity phantasms suggested here drive the analysis of Malaysian Tamil identity that follows.

The Dayabumi building is one of Kuala Lumpur's greatest wonders—a gleaming marblelike building with intricate Mughal-inspired carvings along its immense walls. A short distance away, one encounters the Maybank, a skyscraper in the shape of a Malay *kris* (a blade that is emblematic of Malay tradition). Nearby is the newly completed Kuala Lumpur Tower, one of the greatest sources of pride for the city. This immense structure is said to be the third-tallest freestanding tower in the world. It has been given a decidedly Islamic look by artisans from Iran, who added motifs—soaring arches and patterns reminiscent of more West Asian architecture. During the inauguration of this building, the then prime minister, Mahathir Mohammad, was quoted in the newspapers as saying that it was "the most beautiful tower in the world." The live, prime-time TV coverage of that event and the fireworks spectacle followed by patriotic songs and dances were clearly aimed at fostering pride in the new structure. Even the Petronas Twin Towers, the tallest building in the world, bears a nationalist message. It has been announced publicly that the project is to be a great source of pride for Muslims, as the design is purportedly inspired by Islamic architectural principles and motifs. Visually, the towers have a minaretlike quality to them, although I have also heard it suggested that the building looks like a cathedral. These structures, as well as many others towering over the skyline,[2] carry meaning for the people of Kuala Lumpur. The transformation of the city is not simply technically modern, but rather, it is a symbolic text of the new Malaysian, and particularly the

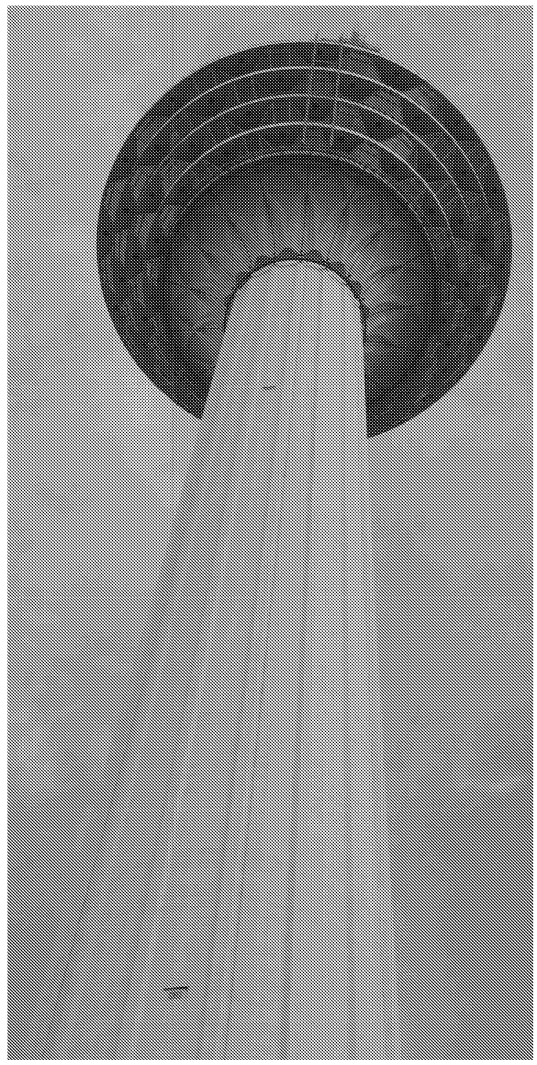


Fig. 5. The Kuala Lumpur Tower. The Islamic motifs on its underside were designed by Persian artisans.

Malay, identity: modern, prosperous, and yet retaining Islam as a pillar in the modernist imaginings of the nation.

The government faces the dilemma of resolving the contradictory agendas and impulses of capitalism, consumerism, multinational corporatism, and Islamic values. The psychological, cultural, and spatial displacement experienced by Malays incurred through rapid modernization, urbanization, and industrialization has contributed to the Islamic resurgence (Muzaffar 1987; Ackerman and Lee 1988) and the attempt by the government to answer that challenge through legislative means and state spon-

sorship of Islam. The government-run Pusat Islam (Islamic Center) and the broader Islamization agenda, while attacking certain Malay cultural practices deemed non-Islamic but, rather, "Hindu" (e.g., the worship of prayer stones associated with saints and mystics, shamanism, mysticism,[3] and magic), have appropriated, as much as they can, the Islamic movement's criticisms of Western values and liberal democracy (Ong 1999). The UMNO-led government's efforts to consolidate a national identity have combined the ostensible semiotics of modernity with the motifs of Islam.

The symbolics of Malay Muslim identity are thus made manifest in the monuments, which in their very nature combine images of progress, modernity, power, and Islam.[4] The Kuala Lumpur skyline, in addition to many other prominent buildings and new mosques, can be seen, following Clifford Geertz's (1973) definition of *ideology*, as a model "of" and "for" a prosperous, progressive, and yet morally constituted society. Yet, whereas, the Geertzian concept of ideology is derivative of his hermeneutic analysis of meaning grounded in conceptions of evolution and continuity within a particular system (i.e., the ever-spinning "web"), I am suggesting a more "hyperreal" (Baudrillard 1984) fantasy of the modern and "traditional."

The ideological and material condensation, or consolidation, of the religious and ethnic elements of Malay identity within the economic development program of rapid industrialization and urbanization produces political necessities. With the active recruitment of multinational corporations—the key players in the technical advancement and GNP growth of the nation—it is especially important to legitimize economic policies through nationalist ideology. In spite of the government's efforts to make Malaysia the free trade zone of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) grid, the government is also careful to warn the nation repeatedly of the dangers of neocolonialism through unregulated economic globalization and the Western domination of international agencies.[5] Indeed, Malaysia's prime minister blamed the Asian financial crisis of 1997–98 on "rogue" international finance speculators, singling out, in particular, George Soros, who was publicly identified as a Jew, and on insensitive neocolonial bailout policies dictated by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

In turn, as the country is economically successful, non-Malays,[6] who

are given freedom of religion, are, it is hoped, content with "benevolent" Malay political dominance. But, it is this dominance itself that provides structural parameters for ethnic identity, expressive culture, and the shape of the "national identity"—or Bangsa Malaysia—as it evolves toward Vision 2020. While Vision 2020 is economically oriented, it also has cultural and social aspirations. A top priority is the stated goal of developing a national culture centered on the Malay Islamic nationalist core with tolerance, accommodation, and political representation for non-Malays. But the fusing of modernity and development with Islam in the imagined nation, and the absolute restrictions on TV coverage of non-Muslim ethnic and religious affairs,[7] have created social and cultural conditions that preclude the dissemination of rival imaginings. If alternative visions of the nation are given recognition at all, it is under the paternalistic patronage of a benevolent Islam-supporting state. The leaders of UMNO proclaim the tolerance of Islam and contrast it with the "extremist" or "deviationist" teachings of various Islamist critics of the government.[8] The reification of Malayness, as an emergent nationalist ideology, also, through what alternatives it masks and silences, produces a compulsion to mark the boundaries of ethnic difference, perhaps as displaced alterities, onto an ethnic Other. The power of the ethnic fetish, that is, its strange and compulsive fascination, owes its ideological strength to the partial recognition of its socially contingent origins and, of course, through the repeated transgression of its porous boundaries of self-recognition.

This chapter now turns to Hindu expressions of identity within the modernizing Muslim milieu just described. Among Tamils, because of their economic and political weakness, coupled with the Islamization rhetoric and its temporal distancing from the pre-Islamic "Hindu" Malay past, the experience of ethnic identity is heightened. That is, in a political system defined through reified ethnic categories, cultural and religious expressions of identity have become the sole avenue for the assertion of group aspirations, which, in turn, serve as veiled negations of the symbolic ordering of power.

Among Indians, over 80 percent of whom are Tamils, a cultural revival is perceived to be occurring in response to the discourse of Islamization. This Tamil, and predominantly Hindu, revival is centered primarily in the Kuala Lumpur vicinity.[9] In some sense, this is a response to the shifting patterns of life in the city. In addition to the Malay Islamization of the city,

brought about by the migration of thousands of Malays to the city, coupled with the literal construction of an Islamic-modernist city out of the old, the breaking up of oil-palm and rubber estates in the rural sector sent thousands of unemployed Indian laborers into the urban areas, where they mostly joined the ranks of the laboring classes—that is, as bus and lorry drivers, conductors, garbage collectors, and factory workers. Only a small percentage of former estate laborers have ventured into business and even fewer have been able to penetrate the professional fields. This gradual migration of a fairly dispossessed labor force created a huge squatter problem in urban and suburban Kuala Lumpur. These squatter settlements, in which the Indians constituted a large percentage of the population, became towns and villages in their own right—with the sporadic and haphazard growth of even squatter temples (unregistered places of worship). During festivals and celebrations, the squatter *kampungs* (villages) became the focus of Hindu devotion and ritual (Rajoo 1975, 1982). In time, some of these temples grew more elaborate and came to have a more permanent structure (Lee and Rajoo 1987). Some of these shrines have eventually become registered temples; however, the great majority, according to a study undertaken by the Malaysian Indian Congress, are not registered and hence are vulnerable to be slated for destruction.[10] But the face of urban Hinduism in Kuala Lumpur has changed, as these temples brought "village," or what anthropologists used to call "little-tradition," practices from the estates to the urban areas.

Living in close proximity with the other "races," and especially within the symbolic shadow of the political, economic, and material power of the emerging urban Malay middle class, has contributed to some stirring of revivalism. This, in addition to the urbanization of former "estate" or plantation Tamils, and the concomitant urban compartmentalization of lifestyles, has contributed to the condensation of symbols in what one might call "vicarious ritualizations" (Singer 1972) in the form of elaborate festivals and rituals. While these rituals are productive of the collective cultural identity of the community, they also have personal significance for those caught up in the uncertain maelstrom of change—most poignantly experienced by the working-class Indians, as they lack political and socioeconomic muscle (Muzaffar 1993).

I also argue that these expressions are incorporated into a national political rhetoric that reinscribes ethnicity (Brown 1994; Muzaffar 1993).

That is, the form of ritualism exhibited may signify the "Indian" in the eyes of all Malaysians. This is part of a discourse of modernity in which the nation is imagined in ethnic terms. The narrative, as all do, has structural parameters. Thus, the Islamic motif (modernity, science, "masculine" skyscrapers, rationality, and power) is contrasted with the "organic," ancient, emotional, disorganized, irrational, body-piercing, Hindu ritualism, with its sometimes Dionysian expressions of possession, "divine" madness, and self-mortification. But it is a pronounced revival of certain rituals and festivals that has captured the imagination of most working-class Tamils in Malaysia. In spite of the rhetorical derision, which is not lost on most Tamil Hindus, these ritual assertions of Tamil identity are occurring in response to the increasing cultural, economic, and political marginalization of this community.

THAIPUSAM

Though ritual practices assume many forms and shadings, I concentrate first on two of the most popular festivals among the working-class Tamils in and around Kuala Lumpur: Thaipusam in the rest of this chapter and Adi Puram in the following one.

Thaipusam in Malaysia has been described in detail elsewhere (Babb 1974; Lee 1989; Collins 1997); however, for present purposes, a general description of its features is helpful. This festival falls in the month of Thai (January–February) and is a celebration honoring Lord Murugan, an ancient Tamil deity that later became associated with Siva's son.[11] Thaipusam invokes a series of myths about Lord Murugan, each highlighting a different aspect of the deity. In both Malaysia and India, folk beliefs have mixed with more orthodox Hindu philosophies and cosmologies, contributing to the enormous popularity of Murugan among Saivite Tamils.[12] The festival commemorates the day that Murugan was given the Vel, the Lord's invincible lance, from his mother, Parvati (Shiva's consort). With this instrument Murugan was able to defeat the *asura* (demon) Taraka, who had been oppressing the gods. The Vel represents Sakti—God's active power in the world.[13]

Iconographically, Murugan is depicted as a youthful and physically beautiful deity holding the Vel as a staff. His consorts, Devanei (also known as Devasena) and Valli, are usually standing on both sides.[14] The

god is seen riding a peacock. This symbolizes many aspects of the Lord's divinity. Clothey suggests that the peacock became a symbol of totality.

> It is out of the ocean that the sun, identified with the red Murukan, arises. The peacock, like the ocean, suggests the primordial chaos and malevolence which Murukan overcomes and makes the instrument of his own purpose. By now also the peacock has come to be associated with all parts of the cosmos—with the colorful, fertile earth; the heavens and the sun; and the ocean. It has become, therefore, a symbol of totality, as Murukan himself represents totality. . . . Murukan's sitting astride the peacock connotes the belief that the god reigns even over totality. (1978:183)

Murugan symbolizes the immanence of God in the world. Another name ascribed to him, Tantapani,[15] connotes the multivalent nature of the deity. The *tantam* refers to a staff or walking stick. This represents Murugan as an ascetic; however, it also suggests military prowess, as the word can also mean "army" or "punishment." On the one hand, Murugan can subdue an enemy with an "army," and on the other hand, his staff (the ignorance-piercing Vel) subdues the passions that lead to delusion (Clothey 1983:64).

The celebration of this festival in Malaysia is noted for the extravagant forms of penance that are displayed. The most popular practice involves the carrying of a *kavadi* (wooden pole), a practice also linked to a popular myth. David Shulman narrates the story.

> Agastya was given two hills, Sivagiri and Saktigiri, as sites of worship, with permission to take them south. One day he met the demon Itumpan, who had survived the slaughter by Murukan of the hosts of Cur (alluded to above). Since all the other demons had reached heaven by virtue of having been killed by Murukan, Itumpan spent his time performing their *sraddha* rites. Seeing he was of good nature, Agastya sent him to bring the hills.
>
> When Itumpan arrived at the hills, a *kavati* appeared, and the eight serpents which support the world took the form of ropes so he could tie the hills to the support. In this way he lifted the mountains and carried them southwards until he reached Avinankuti (Palani). Suddenly he felt faint; he put the hills down and rested, but when he tried to lift them again he could not move them.
>
> Puzzled and sorrowful, he climbed one of the hills, and there he noticed a child under a *kura* tree. "Go away," he said to the child, and added that he was a murderous demon. "This is my home," said the

child; "pick it up, if you can!" "You may be small in size, but you tell big lies," cried Itumpan as he leaped at the boy. But the child was Murukan, playing his games; he killed Itumpan at a stroke. When Itumpan's wife Itumpi heard of her husband's death, she prayed to Murukan, who revived him. Agastya came to worship Murukan at that spot, and he ordered the demon to serve Murukan there for his salvation. (1980:48)

Itumpan became Murugan's faithful devotee and requested that whoever offers vows to the Lord will receive his blessings. Lawrence Babb explains the significance of the myth for the festival devotees.

> Two related ideas lie at the crux of the tale. The first is the portrayal of Idumban carrying a *kavadi*, a burden. The second is the idea of Idumban, once he has been subdued, as the exemplar of devotion to Lord Murugan. Just as Idumban once carried a *kavadi*, so too, on Thaipusam, the devotees of Murugan carry *kavadis* on his behalf, though instead of hills these *kavadis* support pots of milk (or sometimes sugar). And just as Idumban was given miraculous powers, so too the devotees who carry *kavadis* receive from Lord Murugan the power to perform certain remarkable feats. (1978:280)

Over time, the festival, along with the offering of *kavadis*, was popularized in Tamil Nadu. The traditional *kavadi* is a wooden pole and arch with small milk pots attached on each end. It is carried over the shoulders to the hill shrine as an offering to Murugan, symbolically reenacting Itumban's act. The *kavadi* is decorated with peacock feathers and will have a picture or statue of Murugan on it. In Malaysia the *kavadis* are mostly made of metal and include hooks, which pierce the flesh on the back and chest of the devotee. Some are very large and heavy, placing a tremendous physical strain on the devotee. It is believed that the austerity of the vow undertaken must be commensurate with the request made from the Lord. For example, a devotee may offer to perform a strenuous *kavadi* for many years if his crisis is resolved. From the mythic model, the Saiva Siddhanta[16] philosophy is expounded, as Murugan symbolizes absolute power, creativity, eternal youth, and mastery of the senses. At the same time, the devotee is empowered through devotion (*bhakti*), as Murugan manifests himself directly to his devotees. By carrying the *kavadi* in fulfillment of a vow, the pilgrim comes to feel the power of the deity directly. Both the intense love of Valli for her Lord and the penitent devotion offered by Itumpan suggest that God's grace (*arul*) comes to the earnest devotee, regardless of caste or



Fig. 6. The steps to the Batu Caves shrine crowded with pilgrims during Thaipusam

Brahminical convention. As Clothey (1983) and Ryerson (1988) suggest, Murugan worship thus became a salient symbol in the Tamil non-Brahmin movement led by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in the twentieth century.

This festival, though originally centered in Palani, South India, has assumed great importance in Malaysia, particularly in the Batu Caves temple complex. In terms of attendance, this festival is one of the most significant public events in Malaysia, and it is certainly the most ostensible expression of collective Indian identity. I was told that Indians go to this festival—if for no other reason than to identify with the Indian community. One man told me when I asked if he would be going: "Of course, I am

an Indian." The 1995 and 1996 Thaipusam festivals reportedly drew around 1 million people each, the overwhelming majority being Tamils (*New Straits Times* 1/18/95, 2/6/96). This compares with crowds of 800,000 in 1987 (Lee 1989) and around 200,000 in the mid-1960s (Arasaratnam 1966).[17] No other event among any Malaysian ethnic group comes close in size and intensity. Besides the massive turnout in Batu Caves, both Penang and Ipoh reported crowds of 400,000 in their respective festivities. That means that close to 2 million Indians participate in or observe the festival. This represents almost all of the 2.2 million Indians living in Malaysia.[18]

In Kuala Lumpur, the festival begins with a procession from the Mariamman temple downtown. The image of Murugan is carried in a palanquin to the Batu Caves temple about twelve kilometers away. This *urvalam* (procession) of the Lord's *ratham* (chariot) is accompanied by thousands through the busy streets of the business district of the capital city.[19] As such, this is the most visible ritual event in which non-Indians are exposed to Hindu culture. Extensive media coverage brings this home to a larger audience. The procession makes its way to several temples in Sentul, a Tamil-majority area, before approaching the caves. All along the way, devotees break thousands of coconuts before the deity. This accrues merit to those performing the offering.

The *urvalam* of the *ratham* is spiritually significant, as it is a chance for a sovereign God to "view" and be "viewed" (*darsan*) in his or her domain. In a sense, the procession claims, albeit spiritually, the city is the deity's realm. Perhaps, to the Tamil Hindus, this is a marking of spiritual space, or a localization of sacred space, thus marking Malaysia in the sacred topography. During the 1995 celebration, the procession drew around fifty thousand, who accompanied the god as it wound its way to Batu Caves (or Batu Malai in Tamil, meaning "the stone mountain") later in the day (*New Straits Times* 1/11/95). At the caves there is small *mandapam* (hall) below the steps to the main shrine. Here the deity and his consorts are installed and a *pandaram* (non-Brahmin ritual priest) performs *puja* (worship) and distributes *prasadam* (consecrated food) by midday. At this point, the sacred Vel of Murugan is removed from the much adorned Murugan image and carried to the main shrine, above the steep climb, deep in the cave.

The afternoon witnesses a gradual assembling of merchants, fortune-tellers, religious organizations with literature booths, and food stalls. The festival atmosphere is punctuated by the sights, sounds, and smells of



Fig. 7. Idumban pierced by Murugan's Vel at the entrance to the Batu Caves shrine

things "Indian." Cassette stalls do a brisk business selling *bhajans* (devotional songs), *devaram* (sacred verse) chants, and of course, film songs. By nightfall, the whole road approaching the caves is packed with people in both directions for about two kilometers. Various vegetarian snack stalls line the roads, which are demarcated as sacred spaces for the duration of the festival. Music and chanting blast from loudspeakers, creating a cacophony of sounds. All the while, devotees, mostly dressed in yellow, begin to mount the 272 steps to the cave shrine. The festive atmosphere

also attracts the nondevotee Indians, as well as foreign tourists and a few Chinese and Malays. The reputation of the festival, the desire to see acts of self-torture, and a chance for Indians to be with lots of other Indians, draw the crowds in. Many Indians simply show up because they feel they must support the "Indian festival."[20] I was told that the sheer numbers and grandeur of the celebration, and the apparent superhuman feats being performed, are sources of pride for members of the Indian community. More than a few Indians told me how the festival had meaning for them even though they were not participating in the actual ritual activities. To borrow Milton Singer's language when describing *bhakti* rituals observed in Madras (1972), it serves as a "vicarious ritualization" for the attending masses. I was told by Tamil observers that the intense devotion demonstrated by the *kavadi* bearers touched a part of "their being," but they found it hard to "put it into words."

The phenomenon also draws its share of critics and detractors from the Indian community, who come in order to gain firsthand knowledge of popular religious sentiments as they are played out among the majority of Tamils in Malaysia. Also, many Indians from the upper classes, particularly Ceylonese Tamils, avoid the festival and feel that it is a slightly denigrating occasion for the Indian community. They are offended by the nonorthodox practices and penances, including trances and spirit possession. Many complained to me that the festival only reinforces negative stereotypes of the Indian community and Hinduism in general.[21] I know many Chettiars,[22] for example, for whom Murugan is their Ishta Devata (personal god). They would attend and participate in the festival but refused to engage in "demeaning" acts of self-torture.

By evening, thousands of devotees arrived at the Gombak River for a ritual bath and *puja* before embarking with *kavadi* to the cave temple. All devotees had previously prepared themselves for the ritual by following a vegetarian diet, performing prayers, and for some engaging in a period of celibacy. Most bathed beside the river using plastic buckets to pour water over their heads from a tank of clean water; while a few devout preferred to bathe traditionally in the murky river.

After bathing, the devotees made their way to a small wayside shrine decorated with banana trees, where they prayed while a *pandaram* performed *pujas* to Lord Murugan. The atmosphere was charged with hysterical intensity aroused by lively drum music of bongos and *tavils*, a long and

resonant drum that is beaten with a stick.[23] Loudspeakers also broadcast devotional songs and chants of sacred *mantirams* (mantras), and the bright festival lights, incense, and yellow fabrics adorning devotees created a kaleidoscope of sound, color, and smells.

Volunteers from the various Hindu youth councils around Malaysia helped the devotees properly prepare their milk pots (*pal kudam*) or milk *kavadi*, while other priests or *pandarams* helped prepare the *mayil kavadis* (shaped like a peacock, Murugan's *vahana*, or sacred vehicle). Clad in wet yellow clothes people began to fall into trance as the continuous chanting of "Vel Vel", and "Vel Vel vetri Vel!" (Victorious lance!) [24] and a thick cloud of *samrhani* (camphor smoke) enveloped the grassy riverbank slope. The ground was covered with banana leaves laid open with the essential items for the *puja:* fruits, *kunkumum* (a red powder used on the foreheads of devotees, signifying the "third eye" of wisdom), margosa leaves, jasmine flowers, and milk for the *pal kudams* (milk pots).

A large number of devotees, both male and female, fell into trance and danced around, enacting either Murugan or aspects of Kali. Some had tiny "Vel" skewers inserted through their tongues and cheeks. More ambitious devotees hooked fruits (limes mostly) and leaves, or even tiny milk pots, to their chests and backs in acts of penance or fulfillment of vows. I watched one woman have a Vel inserted into her tongue by a young *pusari.* She held her tongue out and surrendered it and rolled her head back in a deep trance while people whom I presumed were supporting family members intensified their chant around her of "Vel Vel." I also saw more intense forms of self-mutilation (or self-mastery) performed by those whom I was told were the poorest and "lowest" (*tollunde jati*), those living mainly in squatter areas or on estates. Wearing red sashes and turbans, young men pulled ropes with large hooks attached to the skin of their backs. Another would follow, pulling on the ropes in such a manner that the hooks stretched the skin. Observers watched with expressions of fascinated unease. But there was no blood. Rather, these youths were possessed by the virile demigod Muniandy, also known as Munneswaran. They performed their feats with gusto, seemingly enjoying the large crowd of spectators amazed at their power. One long-haired penitent who had slashed his tongue waggled it at spectators. The blood and saliva was mixed with ochre powder to enhance the visual effect.

Two men enacted a cosmic courtship between Muniandy and

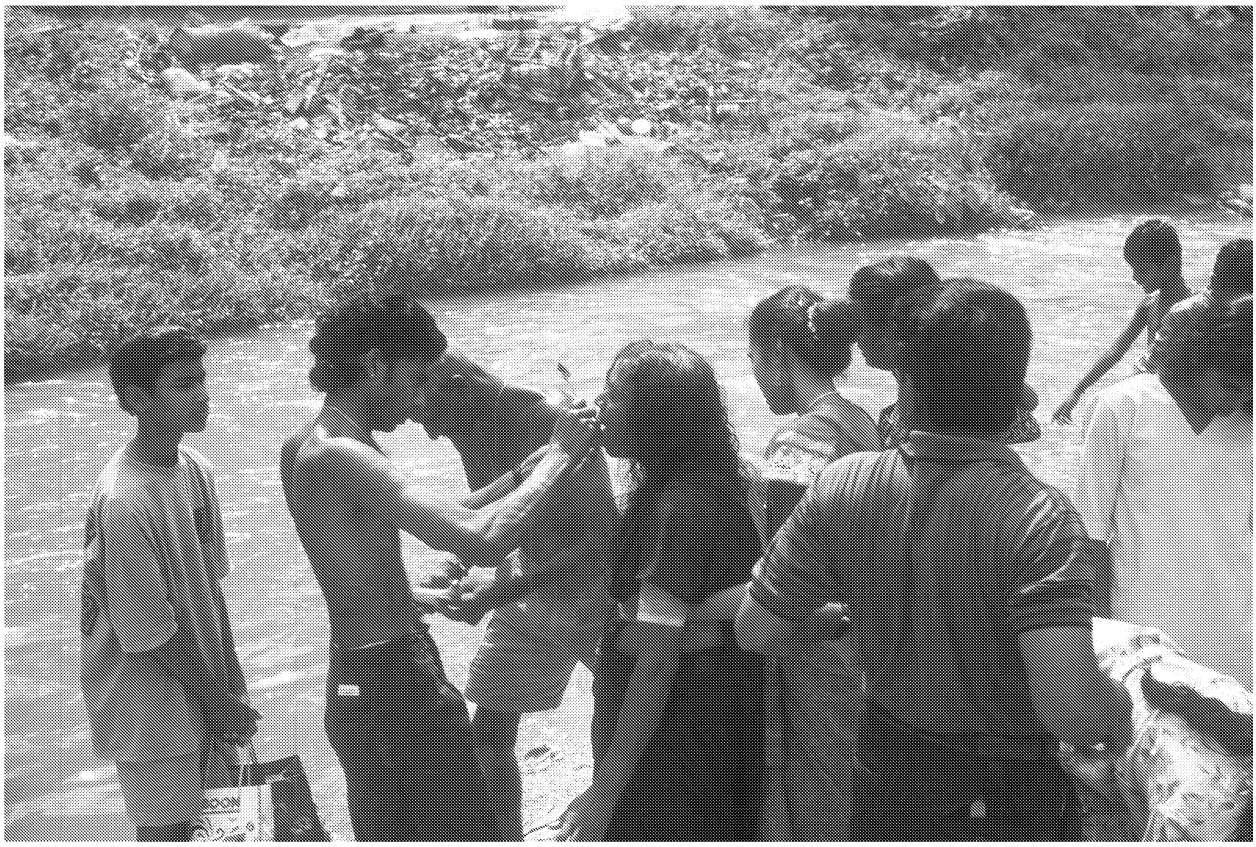


Fig. 8. A devotee having a Vel inserted into her tongue after falling into trance during Thaipusam

Kaliamman, a village goddess and consort of Muniandy. The Muniandy-possessed devotee carried a large papier-mâché club and *parang* (blade), in addition to the red and black turban, sash, and skirt that signified the guardian deity. Kaliamman was iconographically represented through a detailed costume that included, among other things: eight orange arms, each holding one of the goddesses' weapons; a handheld trident; a red, jewel-studded headdress representing flames; long and flowing black hair; bulging metallic eyes (with a small hole out of which the devotee could see); and a dangling red tongue. The face of this devotee was also painted red. The artful costumes garnered much attention as the two performed a dance. Perhaps inspired by this "couple," two other youths, apparently in deep trance, suddenly began to lick each other's tongues, to the shock of those assembled. Once again, one seemed to enact the role of "goddess" while the other assumed the male role.

While the trance supposedly guards the truly prepared devotees (the

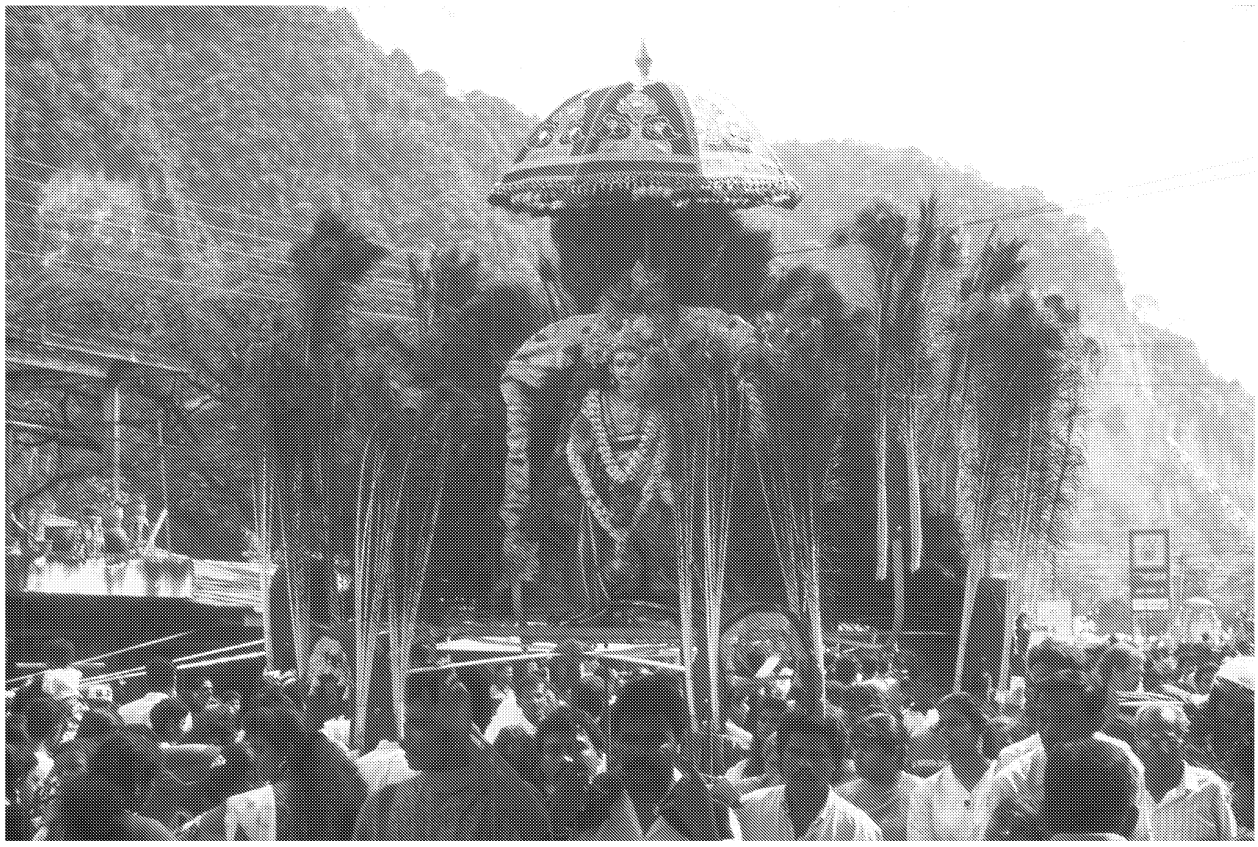


Fig. 9. A devotee carrying a *mayil* (peacock) *kavadi* with the image of Murugan prior to bathing and entering trance

ones who observed some ritual cleansing—usually through prayers, fasting, vegetarianism, and celibacy), I could clearly see shuddering and wincing among some of the devotees at the exact moments when the flesh was penetrated with the metal objects. One very young boy was trying desperately to enter trance while his peers looked on. Another devotee watched while also smoking a cigar—himself in a deep trance, being possessed by the rather virile, cigar-smoking, beer-drinking, red-sashed Muniandy.[25] He tried to induce trance in the boy by holding his forehead tightly and leaning with his arms on the boy's shoulders. Repeating the procedure, he periodically stopped and checked the boy's eyes and facial expressions to see if the trance was deep enough to apply hooked fruits and mini–milk pots. Many times he stopped and checked. At one point, he tried to dismiss the boy by motioning him to move away. At that point, the boy fell to his knees and wept with folded hands before the man (or the possessing deity



Fig. 10. An entranced devotee dancing with the *kavadi*

within him). He implored the man to allow him to complete his vow. After this, the possessed one once again tried to induce trance in the boy. After about five minutes, he saw the boy's muscles quivering. At once he began to attach the sharp objects to the boy's back and *Vel* to his tongue after purifying each metal hook or spear with *vibhuti* (sacred ash).

All the while, small groups of devotees were sent in waves to weave



Fig. 11. A devotee with a Vel

through the enormous crowds toward the cave temple. Barefoot over the muddy ground (volunteers had picked up most of the rocks on the path before the festival) *mayil kavadis* make their way toward the caves, surrounded by family and friends. Groups of up to ten carrying *pal kudam* (milk pot offerings) were led by volunteers. The chant "Vel Vel" was continuous and in rhythmic unison. Every fifty feet or so, the groups would come to a stop in order to reform the weaving line. A couple of female *kavadi* carriers[26] rocked their heads lightly as if slipping in and out of trance. Family members and the festival volunteers would be there to catch a falling milk pot should anybody rock his or her head too swiftly or carelessly.

Arriving at the foot of the 272-step stairway, the devotees are diverted to the left staircase for the ascent, while the friends are sent up the middle path, except for one closest relative, who is to support the devotee carrying the milk. The steep climb is difficult under normal circumstances, even



Fig. 12. A devotee carrying mini-milk pots while ropes are pulled from hooks embedded on his back

without a gallon of milk balanced on the head or shoulder. However, the push of the crowd's momentum, coupled with the rhythmic chant, creates a feverish devotional mood. With relative ease, the *kavadi* carriers quickly ascend to the sanctum. At the summit, they pass under an archway reminiscent of a South Indian temple *gopuram* (towering gateway). On the archway are the sculpted regal figures of the youthful Lord Murugan upon his peacock, surrounded by Valli and Devanei, his consorts.

Entering the sanctum, filled with smells of burning camphor and incense, the sight of thousands of devotees greets those now descending within. *Pal kudam* carriers continuously perform *abhisheckham* (the pouring of milk over the image) and receive *arati* (the waving of the camphor flame) before Murugan. The dense crowd and the smoke and heat of camphor fill the enormous cave to what would normally be unbearable levels; but the ecstasy that the devotees feel after completing their vows creates a relatively amiable atmosphere. After performing the *abhisheckham*, the devo-



Fig. 13. A devotee dressed as Kaliamman

tees remove whatever they have burdened themselves with (milk pots or *kavadis*—including the hooks, spears, or other body adornments). The lifting of the physical burden is accompanied with an apparent and easily observable lifting of some emotional or spiritual burden, which, presumably, had prompted the vow in the first place. The satisfaction of completing the difficult penance or vow leaves the devotees quiet, reflective, and meditative but decidedly happy. They feel the blessings of the Lord. Literally thousands of devotees sit and rest awhile in a euphoric mood before slowly walking back down the steps.

As one enters the foot of the caves, on the left is an unobtrusive shrine of a man split in two by a spear (Vel). This symbolizes the myth of Itumpan, the unwitting challenger of the Lord. This is an important mythological marker in that it indicates an isomorphic relationship between Batu *malai* (mountain) and Palani *malai*, in Tamil Nadu, where the Thaipusam drama is mythologically centered. Most devotees pass it by, unaware of its significance. The image also symbolizes the inevitable



Fig. 14. Devotees possessed by Muniandy and Kaliamman

piercing of human ignorance by the Lord's Vel. Another reminder is found on the right side of the cave. There, a detailed model of the Palani temple complex reminds devotees of the holiest of Murugan shrines. Again, as Shulman (1980) points out, the pilgrimage spot must be a localized phenomenon in which the temple or shrine assumes an axis mundi between divinity and humanity. The place is associated with miracles; it is the location of the Lord's most immanent presence. And yet, it is the place where the symbolic order of Malaysia's ethnic hierarchy is briefly transcended. But, paradoxically, a Malaysian Indian is reminded of a distant and perhaps unknown motherland.[27] In this transcendental spiritual negation of everyday material and discursive reality, a submission to the identity of "Indian" (with all its indexing too of the motherland, "India") recapitulates, as it were, the impossibility of a transcendent subjectivity. In other words, when the man answered my query with the words "of course, I am an Indian" and thus must attend Thaipusam, he was simultaneously negating the everyday and submitting to the culturally "authentic." The

"ensnared" being, in Heidegger's terms, demands ethnic certainty as a function of its ontic displacement, while negating its corporeal value in contemporary Malaysian nationalist ideology. And in another sense, the socially contingent production of the transcendent, in terms of the power produced and enacted in ritual by the devotees, is alienated in the sense that the transcendent must silence its contingent origins.[28] To be reminded of its social origin, the sublimated becomes manifest, not sublime, a desired yet partially recognized impossibility. I return to this paradox shortly, but first the conclusion of the ritual and its miraculous effect is described.

The intoxicating effect reaches a climax in the sanctum, where the heat, incense, and ringing of bells, as well as the gentle push and pull of the devotees, all clad in yellow, create a powerful synesthesia of sight, smell, sound, and heat. The exhaustion, to both devotee and ethnographer, adds to an almost numbing sensory overload. Many faces clearly indicate ecstatic trance after the successful completion of the vow. However, for safety reasons, the *kavadi* bearers are quickly brought back to normal consciousness. Their *kavadis* are immediately removed and the milk pots are quickly poured over the god. Usually, a small amount of milk is left for the devotee. Some drink it as *prasadam*, the sanctified gift of food from God. A few devotees continue to fall in and out of trance, but a *pandaram* (ritual priest) is there with *vibhuti* (holy ash) to revive any losing consciousness or bodily control.[29] The immense crowds within the cave and on the steps (estimated to be about one hundred thousand at a time) make control absolutely essential. Any hysteria could result in tragedy.

After completing the vow, most devotees pray silently to Lord Murugan and then proceed to the Sakti shrine, which is set at a slightly higher elevation in the main shrine. After silent prayers, receiving *arati*, *panir* (holy water), *kunkumum* (ochre powder), and *vibhuti*, most devotees rest and absorb the sanctity of the event. The atmosphere, even amid the massive crowds, is one of surrender and tranquility. Exhaustion falls over the *kavadi* bearers as their normal awareness returns to them. Mostly, the devotees move off to the side of the ongoing stream of pilgrims and find places to sit and rest. Before descending the steps, the devotees may make a small donation to a row of beggars assembled on one side of the cave.

Both on the evening before and on Thaipusam day, the crowds continuously flow in and out of the shrine. All along the procession to the shrine,

thousands of onlookers, mostly Indians, with a smattering of Chinese and tourists, gaze at the more colorful and painful-looking *kavadis.* The pageantry of human spirit triumphant over flesh attracts much interest. The *kavadis,* with their cagelike palanquins hooked to the flesh, support a peacock (*mayil*) in which Lord Murugan's image is carried. While most are rented for the occasion, some are constructed out of wood, papier-mâché, and other materials. Some of the custom-designed *kavadis* are so large and colorful that they attract much attention. One man told me that it is like a "parade with one float trying to outdo another." Clearly, many devotees personalize their vows by designing their *kavadis.* The circular shape, which balances over the devotee's head, is easily spun around as the devotees enact a feverish traditional circular-step *kavadi* dance. The *kavadi* bearers also, following Indian classical dance tradition, wear small percussive bells around their ankles. There are also some who dance to a more modern tune, to the film melodies that have become accepted as devotional songs. In fact, the most popular songs originate in Tamil films.[30] Loudspeakers play these songs all along the way. To some extent, the *kavadi* dance itself has evolved to include steps and gyrations from the popular films.[31] This dismays the Hindu leaders, who emphasize the solemnity of the occasion and deplore its "discoization." On the other hand, religious films (*Sami Padam*), loosely based on classical epics, are often respected as legitimate expressions of devotional religiosity.

I witnessed a small boy dancing *kavadi* and carrying the traditional semicircular wooden arch. His age attracted great attention and a few looks of consternation among the onlookers. But family and friends chanted enthusiastically around him, urging him on in a devotional frenzy. The child, certainly under ten years of age, responded by abandoning himself deep into the heart of the rhythmic pulse. Another *kavadi,* perhaps an uncle or brother, performed a duet with the small boy for the large crowd of curious onlookers.

Many of those watching use video and instant cameras to record the event. Family members film their relations carrying *kavadi;* tourists and locals use video cameras to capture the drama. The tourists are awestruck by the size and weight of the *kavadis,* the relative ease with which an entranced devotee spins it around, and the painful-looking skewers and hooks. The devotees seem oblivious to the pain. Even locals—especially Tamils—marvel. Many told me that this "proves" that the *arul* (grace) of

Lord Murugan has entered the devotees and thus inspires them to witness the power and truth in their Hindu religion. I was also told of various "miracles" occurring in the caves during the festival. Most Tamils sincerely believe that something extraordinary happens. Very commonly, people testify to the efficacy of their vows. Stories of spontaneous healing of ailments, such as diabetes or arthritis and even heart disease, are often heard. I was told that some Malays have discovered the "power" of the caves and secretly offer their penance.[32] Another devotee told me a story, which he claimed had been documented by the *New Straits Times* (the national newspaper) but never published. He claimed that when a photographer for the paper snapped a photo of a statue of Murugan within the cave, after developing, the arm-position of the deity changed, and the face of the god was seen to "be smiling." The photographer returned to the cave to check the photo against the statue, only to find that the photo was indeed different. When I asked if the photo could have been altered in some elaborate hoax, he claimed that the negative contained the same image. Furthermore, he said that the newspaper was not allowed to publish the photo. Similar "legends" seem to be growing about the pilgrimage site, adding to its mystique.[33] In this apparent interpretation through the countertransference of Malay desire, as read and negated by Tamils, the devotees fantasize about the recognition, indeed the fear, that Malays experience as wayward Hindus who refuse to see their true selves as derivative of Hindu sources. Tamil-Hindu alterity within the nationalist ideology is, as wish fulfillment for devotees, a secret source of power and the transcendent source of both Malay and Tamil identity. The secret, however, must be kept or the symbolic order will be threatened. Therefore, Malays are not allowed to experience the "danger" of the caves, nor can the miraculous events be reported in the newspapers. The futurity of Islamic modernism, its utopian vision, therefore requires an anterior fetishized Other—at least as read by Tamils in the countertransference of Malay desire. As Lacan suggests, following the dialectical logic in Freud's conception of the "uncanny," or that which is fetishized, precisely as it is assumed to be "already surmounted," yet remains "secretly familiar" (Freud 1997:222–6), "this other is the Other that even my lie invokes as a guarantor of the truth in which it subsists" (Lacan 1977:172). That is, the displacement onto the Other, with its relentless fixation to "fix" the Other within the symbolic system—to metonymize (to condense the signified in a single signifier) his uncanny

presence—is, as Lacan argues, the "'perverse' fixation at the very suspension-point of the signifying chain where the memory-screen is immobilized and the fascinating image of *the fetish is petrified*" (167, emphasis added). I will suggest later that the exoticization of Hindu bodies in trance, as exemplified by the media coverage, is one such "perverse" and "petrified" ideological realization of the ethnic boundary. Moreover, this fetishized ethnic displacement is the "*guarantor* of the truth" of Islamic modernism. Or perhaps, while I am writing about and from the Tamil Hindu perspective and not from a Malay vantage point, it would be more correct to suggest, as I did earlier, that this is best understood as the negated mirror of Malay desire—as metonymically produced in the Tamil fantasy of spiritual transcendence.

A college student from the local university spoke to me of his experiences carrying *kavadi*. He was an economics major, who at that time was writing his senior honors thesis. When I asked him why he carried *kavadi*, being a devout Hindu with ties to the Hindu Youth organization on campus, he said that he was bound to repeat the vow six times as he had promised to the Lord if he was granted entry into the university. The point is that an Indian youth who is not wealthy enough to go abroad for college education has only a slim chance of getting into a university, given the ethnic quota system practiced in Malaysia. Therefore, he needed divine intervention to gain admission.[34]

Describing his experience of *kavadi*, he insisted that he did not feel any pain, but, unlike many others he knew, he retained his normal consciousness. He claimed to have felt a strange presence entering his body through his feet and up to his chest. "I became numb from the chest down. Some other presence had taken over my body," he said. "But, I could still talk to others, and I knew exactly what I was doing the whole time." The strange numbing effect lasted for a few days after the festival had completed. He described the experience as if it were a physiological phenomenon rather than a spiritual one. But he went on to describe how the same possession of his lower half has occurred from time to time since taking the *kavadi*. He has sought advice from different priests on how to stop its recurrence. This partial possession, in which the body senses the spirit as an alien "other presence," separate and not sovereign over this man's subjectivity, in turn, might reveal an ambivalent reaction to the somewhat paradoxical process whereby submitting to, and being possessed by, an alien substance, brings

one into the depths of authentic selfhood.[35] The individual's bodily symptom and the self-perception of having retained his normal consciousness perhaps reveal an ambivalence attached to the ethnic body, particularly in the way that Tamil religiosity on display at Thaipusam is so very "bodily"—as a festival of self-mortification that fascinates as it suggests that the slave's body, in this case as figured by the servant Itumban through its torture—reveals the true and transcendent spirit. As a floating signifier that has added significance in the Malaysian context, the ironic presentation of the abject yet most sublime devotee is assertive, as in Scott's famous discussion of the "hidden transcript" of resistance in slave song (1990), as Tamils, though not given much esteem or recognition in the nationalist vision, are an important source of contemporary Malaysia's economic prosperity. Just as Hegel's "unhappy consciousness" is haunted by the specter of the body and its inevitable transgression of the spirit, so, too, the possessed devotee's transcendent experience is dependent on, and thus haunted by, a corporeality that, in turn, must be negated. Self-mortification is surely an extreme expression of bodily ambivalence. Moreover, given this individual's social position at the university, that he was in fact involved with Hindu student associations and expressed to me his misgivings about the "evil" forms of Hindu practice that persist among the uneducated Hindus, I wondered whether his bodily symptom indicated a profound ambivalence about the act of spirit possession as a legitimate expression of Hinduism. Just as his body and consciousness were split, so too was he, perhaps, ambivalent about submitting to the ethnic marker, par excellence, that signified Tamils in Malaysia. That, perhaps, was the mind/body oscillation that produced a compulsion to spiritual autonomy and bodily transcendence yet partially recognized the contingent social process that produced such experience (hence, the spirit being stuck, quite literally, in the body). Moreover, lest we forget, an instrumental aim motivated this vow to begin with, thus the reformist voice within may have been haunting him. Indeed, his biggest complaint uttered to me about the working-class Hindus in Malaysia was that they were "evil," precisely in their selfish and instrumental transactions with the gods.

In general, those who carry *kavadi* are fulfilling their vow to God for some answered prayers or in the hope that prayers will be answered. According to the secretary of the Sri Maha Mariamman Devasthanam (the management of both the downtown and Batu Caves temples), the increas-

ing crowds indicate that "religious awareness is increasing among the people and it is evident that many have had their wishes fulfilled" (*The Sun Megazine* 2/14/96). The leader of one of the Hindu reform organizations told me that the event was now "purely a transaction" whereby the God is "bribed for some favors." He disapproved of the *kavadi* ritual as it was currently being practiced in Malaysia. Other Hindu leaders were more tolerant. They said that it was not a form of bribery but rather a sincere devotional offering to God. Sivachariar A. P. Muthu Kumar Gurukkal (a leading proponent of temple rituals in Malaysia) explained that the carrying of the *kavadi* is a "spiritual act and should be done with utmost care and faith." The devotee must "eat vegetarian food, eat little, talk little or better still, observe silence, and think only holy thoughts. . . . Thaipusam is not a carnival.[36] It is a solemn occasion where man communes with God. So those aspects of the celebration which tend to de-emphasize the spiritual aspect need to be weeded out" (*New Straits Times* 1/16/95). Ironically, however, the "purity" sought by would-be reformers would silence the real psychosocial conditions that give rise to such desires. The "kernel" of that "Real," in Lacan's sense, remains necessarily misrecognized. Moreover, read in light of the Marxist critique of ideology, the ideology of purity belies a socially produced source of value, and, as Marx suggests in *The Grundrisse*, a "guilty conscience" (Marx cited in Marx and Engels 1978:252) of privilege that seeks to rationalize to itself, as much as to the subordinate party, the moral authenticity of its claim. Significantly, most of the reformist calls come from the higher-status Indians or from religious institutions that cater to them. Seen in a different light, the reformers are ambivalent about the perceived image of Hindu self-mortification and, though they share a theological commitment to Murugan devotions, find that their ambiguous closeness to the working-class expressions of identity is a source of anxiety—a recognized self within that which was thought to have been already "surmounted."

In spite of the critical exegesis of Thaipusam by theologians and reformers, most devotees have more instrumental ends in view. Some said that there was nothing wrong with requesting that the Lord answer one's prayers as long as nobody was harmed. All seemed to agree that the vow was very effective and powerful. Personal testimonies appeared in the major English and Tamil newspapers, explaining why certain individuals had taken and fulfilled their vows at the festival.[37]

The spiritual occasion, while celebrating mind over matter, is enveloped by an assortment of material things. There are Singer brand electronic appliance displays. Dozens of vegetarian stalls line the main arteries and smaller byways around the cave shrine. Only vegetarian food is available, as there is a concerted effort to "Agamize" (follow scripture) the festival in spite of its clear nonorthodox practices.[38] There was even a fancy local restaurant serving buffet lunches in an air-conditioned tent. There were fortune-tellers. The book and cassette industries were well represented. The sacredness of the shrine is attested by the many makeshift barbershops set up along the lanes. Devotees have their heads shaven as an offering to God. Very few places in India are considered sacred enough to merit this offering (the most famous being Tirupati, in Andhra Pradesh, South India). A recently shaven head in South India generally suggests that the individual has just visited Tirupati.

In Malaysia, there are few shrines that signify the sacred terrain of Hinduism in a transnational sense. Batu Caves, because of the size of this festival, is also one of the few shrines outside of South Asia that attracts the attention of pilgrims in India. Priests and workers come every year to help in the celebration, and it is said that some devotees actually come from India to participate in the festival. A leading Tamil magazine about Hinduism produced in India, *Jnanabumi,* featured a story on Batu Caves and Thaipusam in 1994. The sacred spots in Hinduism are rarely located outside of the subcontinent (at least from the South Asian/Indian perspective).[39]

Souvenirs such as caps, T-shirts, and bags of camphor with stylish "Thaipusam 95" emblazoned across them were sold. Many stalls sold dried nuts and *dal* (lentil) snacks imported from India. The snack is a kind of *prasadam* (ritually sanctified food) to be consumed for spiritual merit. Devotees literally consume a piece of the sacred motherland and are remade as authentic "Indians," paradoxically at the same moment that they inscribe the Lord's immanent presence on Malaysian soil, transforming it into a repository of the authentic sacred, on a par with similar sacred sites in India.

The local politics of the Indian community is also clearly manifest at the festival. The Sri Maha Mariamman Devasthanam is also in charge of the Batu Caves shrine. This influential institution is the principal organizer of the festival and sponsors the procession from downtown. It is patronized

by the MIC (Lee 1989) and its president, Samy Vellu, who have close links to the temple. This is the premiere Indian event and the one, in particular, that appeals to the working-class Indian Tamils in the country. They are the supporters of the MIC. The leader of the party addresses the crowd annually, praising Tamil Saivite culture and instructing the party members to "respect this festival." This, of course, is a significant recognition by the political leaders of the disdain sometimes directed at devotional Tamil religion by high-status members of their own community, and by non-Hindus more broadly, and specifically as lodged within the de-Indianization of Malay culture within nationalist discourses of Islamic modernity. With the large crowd listening, the party leader has, in recent years, announced financial assistance programs, scholarship funds, and other matters that are "good news" for Malaysian Indians.[40] In 1995, the festival occurred shortly after the World Tamil Studies Conference in Tanjavur, India. There, Jayalalitha, the controversial then chief minister of Tamil Nadu, had "allowed" her likeness to be plastered in giant cutouts across Tanjavur and other parts of Tamil Nadu, to the dismay of many Tamil intellectuals in India and abroad, who see this as a blatant political message to the poor and illiterate masses—that is, that she is omnipotent and omnipresent, like the goddess. She replied that she permits this, not to impress the poor, but to seem "accessible" to them. One month after Samy Vellu attended the Tanjavur conference as head of the Malaysian delegation, a giant cutout of the MIC leader appeared at Thaipusam, much to the disgust of some local Tamils, mostly his critics. They denounced this "copying" as an attempt by Samy Vellu to deify himself. He had not objected to the honor, he said, but neither had he requested it. Nevertheless, the two leading Tamil newspapers carried photos of a smiling Samy Vellu before the giant cutout likeness. Based on the controversy aroused by this gesture, one might view the towering cutout as a "dialectical image," in Walter Benjamin's sense. Like the photograph in his famous discussion (1968: 217–51), the giant political poster's appearance at the most sacred of days and places to Malaysian Tamils might offer a "new optic" into the production of Thaipusam through political patronage and mass-mediated symbols of the "Indian." While arousing disgust among some, it materializes the anxiety of inauthenticity that some participants might possess, however displaced onto the political icon. Critical consciousness, however, in the Benjaminian sense, does not reach the threshold of the spiritual, which

remains uncorrupted by the gaze of Samy Vellu. The Real trauma of ethnic signification, in Lacan's sense, remains foreclosed, as does the socially contingent nature behind the ritual production of the sacred.

On the third day, only a few *kavadis* mount the steps to the cave. The crowds disperse, and the proprietors of the hundreds of small stalls begin to pack up. Thousands of devotees who had been camping out or staying in packed dormitories make their way via chartered buses back to the Kuala Lumpur bus depots. The bus stands in town are full of Tamils headed back to the estates. The image of Lord Murugan is once again, though to much less fanfare, marched back to the temple in the city, and the Batu Caves, once the mountains of litter are removed, are again peaceful and serene.

The spectacle of Thaipusam is encouraged through the media attention it attracts. As was stated earlier, many personalized *kavadis* emphasize not only an individual-oriented vow and relationship with Murugan but also provide a possibility for brief fame. The most colorful, largest, or most masochistic of *kavadis* find their pictures in the newspapers. Postcards of *kavadi* bearers are sold in all the tourist shops. The Batu Caves have become a tourist destination due mainly to the reputation of the festival with its amazing displays of devotion. The image of "postcard Indians" is ubiquitous and essentializing. Brochures produced by the tourism department also describe and illustrate the "festival of self-mortification." Travel guides on Malaysia follow suit. In one controversial episode, a T-shirt vendor was criticized by a Tamil newspaper after producing shirts that caricatured a cartoon penitent having a large Vel pushed through his cheek and hooks attached to his back. Under the cartoon the caption read "CRAZY THAIPUSAM" (*Nanban* 1/19/1995). The shirt was intended for tourists mainly, so the vendor claimed, but Hindu sentiments were obviously hurt. While the shirt was offensive, it is equally true that many non-Indians (and even some Indians, as I have suggested) possess a similar attitude toward the festival. In this sense, the growing popularity of the festival and the implicit sponsorship given to it serve to signify the Tamil community within the Malaysian ethnic mosaic.

Tamils are indeed metonymized by Thaipusam, and, in turn, "Indians" signify a backward and superstitious Hinduized past in Malay history. In that sense, the ritual means that Tamils are emplotted within a temporal narrative of the nation. At the same time, Tamils recognize themselves, in a Durkheimian sense, through the collective representation of themselves

that they produce through the ritual. However, as filtered through the spectacle of the mass media, this recognition is no doubt ambiguous and alienated—a mirroring in which Malay desire is read and negated through the fantasy of another kind of Malay recognition: that their unease with Hindu spirits and the powers of possession, as displayed by Hindu devotees, is the remainder of their not completely repressed, though suppressed, true selves. In that sense, Thaipusam also represents an imagined inversion of the social hierarchies, just as its transcendental fantasy is fueled by these hierarchies and the inequities they have produced for the Tamil working class. Identity phantasms lurk behind the glass and steel of Kuala Lumpur's emergent skyline, with its future utopia of science, rationality, and Islam in perfect congruence, and in structural opposition to the ecstatic ritualism that marks the Hindu in the public imagination. Yet the city's socially contingent, and quite profane, source of material possibility (one dependent on Tamil labor, historically speaking), coupled with the displaced anxiety of cultural authenticity, an uncanny remainder aroused by Hindu rituals of possession, is indicated by the fascination that this festival increasingly retains within the public imagination. I elaborate on this theme in the coming chapter, this time focusing on neighborhood rituals that do not achieve media recognition, as does Thaipusam, yet are extremely important in the micropolitics of ethnic recognition. The apparently timeless message of Thaipusam has meanings and powers that cannot be fixed or contained by the symbolic order of Malaysian nationalism. Indeed, it carries messages from the subcontinent and of centuries of symbolic inversion in the practice of *bhakti*. The ritual carries more than just traces of its past into the Malaysian context. In the Malaysian context, however, the festival has assumed gigantic importance, both in its significance to Hindus and in fixing an image of the Indian in the public imagination. It is in that light, I have argued, that the ritual has contributed to the reinscription of ethnic boundaries between Indians and Malays.

CHAPTER FOUR

FETISH, SPACE, AND DISPLACEMENT IN KUALA LUMPUR

Tamils and the Ethnic Uncanny

I begin this chapter with an ethnographic vignette about Tamil Hindu understandings of spiritual power produced under the shadow of a big ideological Other, the state-driven Malay Islamic subject. Following this, I elaborate further on Malay Islamic modernism, as implemented by the deeply influential and long-reigning Mahathir Mohammad. Here I demonstrate that the nationalist imaginaries of development and progress in Mahathirist thought and policy produced a fixation on an "authentic" ethnic subject. This, in turn, was predicated, in part, on a disavowal of the past in the figure of the (Indian) "Hindu." I then examine the contemporary Tamil Hindu ritual of Adi Puram, the ethnographic heart of this chapter, arguing that its revival and intensity in Kuala Lumpur both counters *and* affirms the ethnosymbolic ordering of the nation-state.

THE LOCUS OF GOD'S POWER

Near the roadside, along the way to Bangi, a half hour away from Kuala Lumpur, exists an old Munneswaran (village "guardian" deity)[1] temple. It was formerly part of the Broom Estate, but that estate (plantation) is no longer in existence. The temple, however, remains. Indeed, it is a very popular temple among former estate workers, and its reputation as a "powerful" temple, I was told, was rapidly growing.

On the day that I visited in 2004, about three hundred people came in

shifts for the *puja* (worship) and feasting, which occurred at noon. Six goats were sacrificed at 6:00 a.m. The *pusari* (priest) performed the actual killing of the goats by decapitation.

The main shrine featured an image of Munneswaran. Beer and cigars, in addition to milk, were offered on the elevated shrine to Munneswaran. A trail of blood was seen around the shrine, on the same route that circumambulating devotees might follow.

The *pusari* told me that the Malaysian Hindu Sangam, an umbrella organization with links to the government, has advised him to substitute limes for goats but that they "resist." According to the reformists, animal sacrifice is not permitted in orthodox Hindu practice. The priest said, "*Mariamman* (the goddess) *is a vegetarian, but we must offer goats to the protector God. . . . This is our protector god.*"

When I asked another man attending the festival, and assisting the priest, if such feasts were common at this particular site, he said that "*the temple is famous because people think it is very powerful.* People come from all over Malaysia because *of its power.*" The Chinese owner of an adjacent factory owns the land and allows the temple to exist, at least for the time being. At one point in his story about the temple's history, he said that "the owner of the land tried to remove the temple," but two workers who were involved in the apparently aborted demolition "had died." So, he claimed, the owners decided to leave it alone, fearing the god's power. Now the devotees of this temple "have no problem" as the "land is private." But the government, he said, has plans to widen the road, so there could be future problems. But, "they won't succeed in moving or expanding the road, as *the temple is too powerful.* Next week there will be twenty goats sacrificed."

The *pusari* then interjected, "We have applied for proper facilities, water and electricity, but the town council will not approve." He implied that the exclusive Malay control of the town council is the root of their concerns. Because of the temple's popularity, however, more space is needed in order to accommodate the ever-growing crowds. The priest then motioned to the behavior of some of the youths attending: "Some youths don't pray properly or even remove their shoes." At this exact moment some youths were walking around the muddy shrine with their shoes on, careful not to step on the elevated shrine but walking on the bloodied trail. The sacred space during a festival was not being recognized by the youths. A moment of orthodox-inflected propriety was being invoked, while, just moments

prior, the priest himself had derided those orthodox reformers in the Hindu Sangam who did not understand the necessity of animal sacrifice. Though this temple was not registered (legally protected), the temple committee needs both Hindu Sangam and Malaysian Indian Congress patronage and recognition. But seeing as the Hindu Sangam "*won't agree*" with the cutting of goats, they were placed in a difficult position.

A local MIC representative, who had attended as a kind of "VIP," said to me: " I come now and then but *don't really enjoy the sacrifice and killing.* But I support the temple when invited to come. . . . [A] lot of people who used to live in the estate return to this temple." The MIC representative then turned to the issue of the local government, nationalist ethnic politics, and the predicaments faced by the Hindu Tamils: "*Muslims won't come.* But in those days, before Mahathir (the former and long-ruling prime minister), Malays came and feasted. Now because of Islam they don't agree with sacrifice of goats. . . . *Malays are growing narrow and fanatical because of the government's Islamization efforts.*" He pointed out that a Chinese man and a local Orang Asli (from an indigenous community) had come for the feasting on this day. "Haram (for Muslims) to come [*sic*]. Things are very difficult for a small minority when *everything is done for Malays. Islam has got into their heads now and they don't want to mix anymore. Town council and planners are also involved* . . . [and] *one township/town/ or municipality is allowed one temple.*" When I asked, "What about *suraus* and *masjids* (prayer rooms and mosques)?" he replied, "Oh, that is different, everywhere they will put a *surau* [*sic*]! *Tamils are saving their culture in places like this in spite of the government and Islamization efforts.*"

A sense of Tamils in Malaysia being caught between the rails is apparent in this vignette. The town councils, as wedded to the state project of Malay *bumiputra* rights, are insensitive to the memories of communities being erased and dispersed. The Hindu reformist organizations are also not sympathetic, having distanced themselves in embarrassment from working-class expressions of religious power. The Malay town council and Hindu (reformist) elite insensitivity are both hurtful but also negated in the power of the shrine. This is evident in the analysis offered by the *pusari* himself: "I learned from my guru in Subang [a nearby township]—the prayers and all. . . . My guru studied in India, but I did not. Guru has become a Saivite [Siva worshipper] and no longer believes in sacrifice [of animals]." However, he explained, "Munneswarn is a bachelor. He has no

wife. We used to chop goats at the Mariamman [a goddess] temple within the old estate, but it is no longer existing because *the Hindu Sangam put a stop to it* [the sacrifice of animals]. If we stop sacrifice at this temple and only serve rice and *puruppu* (dal), this temple *will not be powerful anymore.*"

There is also ambivalence in this resistance to the efforts to reform and uplift Hinduism in the eyes of the Other—the big Other, in the eyes of Tamil Hindus, that is, Malay Islamic modernism. Indeed, it is the frightening power of the god, his destructive and regenerative power in violence, that holds part of their fascination. The undomesticated, unmarried, virile force demands and demonstrates an awesome power, the power, that is, to reverse tractors, plows, and developers. There is a transgressive power, too, perhaps, in the ludic quality of inverted hierarchy, in which meat, violence, liquor, and tobacco are valorized offerings (Stallybrass and White 1986). On the other hand, the guru is correct when he appeals to principles of substitution and Saivism. The *pusari* held his guru in reverence: he studied in India, was pious, and so on. He almost implied that he is *not ready* to be like him, though he is an ideal to aspire to. In this sense, reformist and orthodox notions do hold some sway, even when ostensibly negated in the insistence on the sacrifice. The uncouth manners of some youths, too, in the need for proper reverential behavior, suggested an internalized propriety of Hindu ritual in the *pusari*'s mind.

Perhaps most important, Islamization, as wedded to ethnic politics, was the backdrop to the political dimension of this spiritual event. Islam, as part of a discourse in town planning, bestowing ethnic rights and privileges, serves to focalize this ritual, as supernatural power surmounts the political weakness of the Tamil Hindu community in Malaysia.

THE PAST IN THE FUTURE VISION

In the urban landscape of Kuala Lumpur, and also the newly completed administrative capital in its suburbs called Putrajaya,[2] modernity has been "localized" through Islamic and Malay motifs—a hyperreal of imagined cultural continuity (Baudrillard 1984; Peletz 2003; Sadar 2000; Cartier 2002). This aesthetic sensibility is certainly symbolic of the Malay-Islamic civilization envisioned by the former prime minister, Mahathir Mohammad. To be sure, his so-called edifice complex, as some critics charge, is more than vanity, as images of science, progress, and development

(including barrages of images of new buildings) are disseminated in newspapers and on the television sets of virtually all Malaysians. Indeed, these icons of modernity serve as magical fetishes of modernity's arrival and domestication. In this mass-media-produced simulacrum, what happens in Kuala Lumpur is experienced daily throughout the nation. Let us briefly consider how meanings of archaism and modernity were assembled out of colonial imaginaries yet took on new significance in the postcolonial state.

Clive Kessler, a scholar of Malay political culture, argues (1992) that the British in fact contributed to the "codification" of Malay culture in colonial Malaya as part of a policy of indirect rule (Hirschman 1986). The Malay courtly classes, and in particular the many sultans of smaller principalities, found their traditional claims of ascendancy buttressed by the colonial administration.

Kessler also suggests that nineteenth-century British India served as a useful model for the newly "traditionalized" Malay monarchy. The institution of the durbar (a royal display) and other royal assemblages were visual pageantries designed to enhance moral authority and authenticity to local rulers and also for the pseudo-aristocrat colonial officers seeking recognition from a "subject of a difference that is *almost the same,* but not quite" (Bhabha 1994:86, emphasis added; Pemberton 1994). This "iconic" stage was further constructed through the Mughal style of the principal administrative and railway buildings in the heart of old Kuala Lumpur (Kessler 1992). Artisans from Sri Lanka and India were recruited by the colonial administration in order to give the capital a distinctive, graceful, and dignified Islamic character—albeit one that is produced out of the colonial imaginings of Islamic civilization.[3]

While the archaic Malay culture was potently imagined and politically inscribed through the new "traditional" institution of the national monarchy, the "neotraditional" Malay imagination, according to Kessler (also see Mahli 2003; Milner 2003; Shamsul 2003; and Peletz 2002), is fueled by the romanticized longings of middle-class Malays, who have benefited most from the government's development agenda yet are unmoored from village "tradition." In parallel with what Morris (2000) has observed in Thailand, modernity and national identity afforded new possibilities of becoming and being but simultaneously created awareness of a "loss" or lack (Ivy 1998) that, in turn, became figured as "tradition"—a discovery of



Fig. 15. Downtown Kuala Lumpur. The colonial era Abdul Sultan Samad building is flanked by the Kuala Lumpur Tower and the Maybank building, which can be seen in the distance.

history that itself requires displacement, repetition, and metonymic representation. Kessler explains:

> Centrally involved in this *process of traditionalization*—as targets and consumers rather than creators—have been members of the new Malay middle class: various groups closely and multiply identified with the national government as the products of its affirmative action policies . . . the Malay middle class becomes increasingly involved in and committed to what is now seen as "traditional Malay culture": a simulacrum, a *hyper-realization* even, of Malay tradition that, since it . . . is *nothing if not modern.* (1992:146, emphasis added)

I would add, given the concerns of both this chapter and the ideology of the state, that the centerpiece of Malaysian modernity and nation building is its iconic capital and, moreover, that the "hyperrealization" of tradition in it resists the partial awareness of the foreignness of its ideology (in both

cultural and geographic terms). Kuala Lumpur,[4] prior to the 1970s, was a city visually marked by Hindu and Chinese temples, coupled with the "Moorish" and Mughal-style administrative buildings built by the British. Nestled between the Indian temples and mosques were Chinese enclaves, with a few Indian areas surrounding them. *Kampung Melayus* (Malay villages) surrounded the city (Gullick 2000). But the last thirty years have witnessed a concerted effort on the government's part to introduce a Malay presence and identity into the nation's capital. Malays were given special incentives, including discounts and lower interest rates, for investing in homes or businesses in the city. Mosques were built in nearly every housing area so as to encourage Malay settlement. As a result, the Malay population in Kuala Lumpur dramatically increased (Means 1991; Lee and Ackerman 1988).

Rapid urbanization and increased interethnic encounters and ethnic neighborhood demarcations in Kuala Lumpur have also fueled self-identification with idealized notions of cultural identity. Being cut off from old social networks and being exposed to "Westernized" lifestyles, as well as marking "difference" from Chinese and Indians, were also factors that contributed to Islamic revivalism (Muzaffar 1987; Ackerman and Lee 1988). Robert McKinley (1979) has argued that *zaman modan* (the modern era or modernism as promoted by the Malaysian state) has disrupted more fluid notions of time in Malay thought, in which various pasts (such as *zaman Hindu* or the Hindu era) were retrievable without conflict. He suggested that modernity, as experienced by urban Malays, produces "negative judgements about attitudes derived from the past" (1979:314). Michael Peletz, in several important works, in turn, has demonstrated that in the context of Malaysia these reforms and purges of "Hindu" and "animist" elements have produced schisms and ambivalences about and within modern Malay subjects. In this sense, self-consciousness over ethnic identity is exacerbated by the uncertainties of identity that ensue from these temporal and cultural demarcations.

In Malaysia's case, as is perhaps true elsewhere, this sense of displacement is figured onto an ethnic Other that is also marked by class and mapped onto urban space. That is, nationalist ideology, functioning like an ego-ideal, demands the impossible, the submission unto the law of singular (in this case ethnic) identification. In this sense, the necessity of adding a Marxist dimension to a phenomenological analysis of identity,

and vice versa, remains imperative if we are to understand the social symptoms that exacerbate uncertainty and/or the compulsive dimension of identity politics that exceeds rational explication and interest (Žižek 1989, 1993).

Recalling the discussion of Chakrabarty in chapter 2, in theorizing possible postcolonial dilemmas that mirror the dialectical logic being argued here, he warns of the *fetish effects* of nationalist imaginaries of becoming, or the objectifying fantasies that cluster around disavowed pasts, and their displacements in moments of crises. Chakrabarty's[5] notion of the objectified past and its relation to the uncanny is homologous to Freud's conception of the uncanny as that which is "already surmounted," consciously, yet "secretly familiar" (1997:227–26) within the repressed corridors of the self. To be more specific, the past is not automatically uncanny. Indeed, as McKinley argued with regard to Malay conceptions of time, the past only became "negative" in the *zaman modan*, the state-sponsored modernist ideology. Rather, and following Freud closely in conjunction with Chakrabarty's argument, the uncanniness of the past arises when there is a concerted effort within a state-driven ideology to define a national ethnic subject.

Acting like an ego-ideal, such a national subject can demand identification that demarcates and metonymizes (or condenses) boundaries of self and other that, in historical and experiential terms, are more permeable (Mandal 2004; Milner 2003). This demand, like that of a superego (Žižek 1993; Hansen 2001), can only be sustained through an overidentification or perverse jouissance in the compulsive obeying of the letter of the law. In Lacanian terms, a potentially neurotic identification with the Other's lack, in this case, the big Other that is the state ideology, is produced through the subject's partial recognition that the ego-ideal is capricious, historically and materially contingent, and ultimately lacking in its universal claim. Lacan's definition of *neurotic identification* thus builds closely on Freud's conception of the uncanny double (1997). In Freud, it is not simply that narcissistic and animistic residues are uncanny in their inevitable returns—that is, the surmounted pasts in the service of the ego-ideal. Rather, it is the frightening "automaton" of socially conditioned reason that is the uncanny alien "double" within, with its contingent morality overwhelming and enveloping the subject through its impossible demand for obedience. That is, in the context of this discussion, the demand for

ethnic and cultural singularity is indeed impossible given Malaysia's fluid past and present. Recognizing the lack in this demand, paradoxically, can redouble the rigidity of the demand itself.

More succinctly, Benedict Anderson captures the modernity of the archaic brilliantly in his pithy comment, "The nativeness of natives is *always unmoored*, its real significance hybrid and oxymoronic" (1998:62, emphasis added). I am suggesting, in other words, that a fixation on an authentic Malay Islamic identity produces an ideological negation of its contingent economic and cultural sources of value produced by the "Indian." Specifically, Indians, in reading the transference of Malay desire, produce this interpretive fantasy (i.e., Malay denials of the Indian) in their own countertransference.

The ostensible cultural conservatism of the emergent urban Malay middle class (Peletz 2002; Mahli 2003; Shamsul 2003) makes it possible and necessary for the UMNO to champion Malay and Islamic culture in order to silence the partial recognition of its contingent status and "hyperrealization" of "tradition." This was especially so during the Mahathir[6] era due to his economic programs for rapid development, which required tremendous foreign capital—a source of political and cultural power that had to be masked. Mahathir had the added problem of *his Indian ancestry*[7] (his father was an Indian Muslim from Kerala) and the fact that he did not come from a royal background, unlike the first four prime ministers. While the latter would prove both an asset and a hindrance, the former was a stigma that could only be erased through adopting the posture of an ardent Malay nationalist. He combined the politics of populism and Malay discontent over Chinese economic superiority into a platform for Malay economic uplift. This was clothed in a language of Islamic and Malay piety. On the one hand, his influential books, *The Malay Dilemma* and *The Challenge*, were critical of the neofeudal status quo in Malaysia and presented an ambivalent critique of Malay cultural "backwardness" more generally. On the other hand, both works were fiercely nationalistic and prodded for greater Malay and Islamic cultural hegemony.[8]

The prime minister's modernization program and his lack of aristocratic background contributed to a growing legitimacy crisis during the 1980s. As economic recession had gripped the nation, Mahathir was attacked by rival UMNO leaders and the Islamic opposition (the Partai Islam SeMalaysia or PAS) for failing to help poor Malays. Also, a number of

Islamist and left-leaning opposition party members became critical of his economic policies. Concerns over corruption were raised (Kua 1993; Crouch 1996; Gomez and Jomo 1997). The PAS and Muslim leaders protested the "decline in morality" among Malays (Ong 1987; Khoo 1995). In answer to the serious political threat posed by Islamists (who also, by extension, were perceived by impoverished Malays as pro-Malay), a government-sponsored Islamization program was inaugurated, which, among other things, placed greater cultural restrictions on non-Muslims.

A sense of Malay and Islamic encroachment was experienced by members of the Indian middle class, who felt particularly displaced by the government's *bumiputra*-first quota policies in awarding positions and contracts, in addition to the rhetoric of *bumiputraism* and its ideological face, an archaic Malayness partially divested (through a temporal narrative of progress) of an Indian presence.[9] Malay cultural practices suspected of deriving from an Indian-Hindu source have been targets for reform or purging altogether. Mahathir himself wrote: "*Hinduism and animism . . . had shaped and controlled the Malay psyche before the coming of Islam. . . . If the Malays were to become Muslims, these old beliefs must be erased and replaced with a strong and clear Islamic faith*" (1986:19, quoted in Khoo 1995:52, emphasis added). This urgency was echoed by another informant, a Malaysian Chinese academic, who suggested to me that Hinduism resonates in much of Malay culture and in the unconscious beliefs of many Malays. He said that the government must suppress Hinduism, as it exists very "near the surface" of Malay consciousness. One letter to an Internet newspaper offered the observation: "It seems so hard for the Malay world to live down the historical reality that *the Malay race at one time were Hindus* and that the Malays of today are their descendents. To put it succinctly, nobody 'went away.' It has never been publicly explained why the current Malay establishment or more correctly, why the Islamic establishment, has such a phobic attitude to their pre-Islamic history. *Is the Malay establishment afraid that one day the Malay masses will wake up and contemplate their Indian and Vedic roots?*" (*Malaysiakini* 17/3/01, emphasis added). Of course, this is obviously an Indian imaginary—and one that is taking hold among Tamils in Malaysia in recognition of the lack in the big Other (the ethnosymbolic order) that is epitomized by Mahathirism (Yao 2001). We might call such dialectism in Indian identification the countertransference of Malay desire.

This nearness, this recognition of Malayness within Hinduism, and vice

versa, I argue, is a source of the ethnic uncanny and drives (and reflects) a compulsion for (and of) ethnic categorization—that is, as fetishes that magically mask identity's contingent source. But ideology not only has material consequences but is itself material in daily practice. Kuala Lumpur is not simply an ideological blueprint; it is the icon realized as an ethnic topography that, in turn, possesses its residents, who live within its boundaries and also produce its symbolic boundaries.

MODERNIST VISIONS AND THE DISPLACEMENT OF INDIANS

Malaysia's government-controlled media present the country's urban accomplishments (big buildings, modern transport systems, etc.) as proof of the greatness a progressive Muslim-led society can achieve, contrary to the Western media's bias against Islam.[10] This ubiquitous and repetitive message, under Mahathir's reign, created a far-reaching discourse that conflated progress, as marked by development projects, with a patriotic duty to the nation and ultimately, to Islam. The emergent skyline of Kuala Lumpur, for example, presents a very self-conscious assertion of Islamic motifs (Sardar 2000; Cartier 2002; Willford 2003).

The Pusat Islam (Islamic Center), functioning as a national *ulama* (interpreter of Islam), targets the non-Islamic aspects of Malay culture, which are either deemed "Hindu" or "animistic" (the two were and are often conflated, as we saw in Mahathir's own words, or at the very least suggest that the former is only slightly more "advanced" than the latter in this teleology). The pilgrimages to the *keramat* (graves) of Sufi saints; performances of the Hindu epic *Ramayana* using *wayang kulit*, or "puppet theater"; the patronage of *bomohs*, or "spirit mediums"; and Malay practices of trance within dance were all singled out for critique, reform, or, in some cases, purging[11] in order to progress to what we saw Mahathir call a "strong and clear Islamic faith." Malays who deviate from the state-sponsored vision of a modernist Islam face possible charges of apostasy (Peletz 2002).

In crafting the modern Malay as the virtuous national citizen, certain ironies emerge. Within the government's development discourse and fetish with modernity, not only are Indians and India represented as unmodern, but Hinduism represents a backward Malay past—the darkness out of which the Malay people have emerged. Realizing the modernist

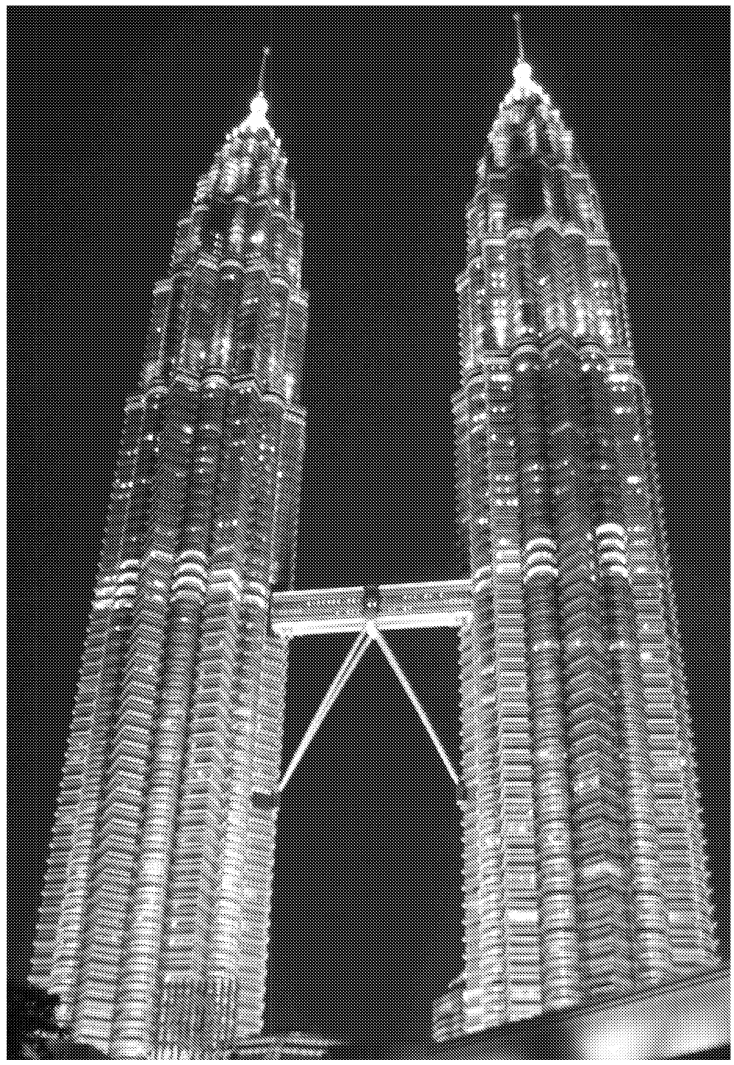


Fig. 16. The Petronas Towers, which are said to resemble the minarets of a mosque

utopia of technological achievement, rational Islam, and international respect—that is, a classic postcolonial identity crisis among the Westernized elite—requires a repression not only of Malay cultural elements deemed Indic or Hindu, but, ironically, of an important source of power in Malaysian history and present urban life: *the labor of working-class Indians* (Stenson 1980; Nagarajan 2004). That is, the fetish of modernity, itself an attempt to harness the nation's spiritual power,[12] requires, due to all its repressions, the vicarious realization of the unmodern through the representation of contemporary Hinduism and how it is figured by the working-class Indian.

The transformation of Kuala Lumpur has, among other things, dis-

placed many of its former residents. Working-class areas of the city, mostly inhabited by non-Malays, were often the targets for urban renewal projects (Bunnell 2002; Cartier 2002; Nagarajan 2004; Nadarajah 2004). Communities were, and continue to be, leveled by bulldozers, with rather paltry compensation, if any, offered in return.[13] The fact that Selangor (the state surrounding the federal capital) had, according to some estimates, close to four hundred thousand squatters in the mid-1990s suggests the serious social consequences of development; however, many squatters are drawn, rather than displaced, to the outskirts of the city in search of economic activity. Many of those being driven farther from the city center (or migrating to the outskirts) are Indians (Nagarajan 2004; Loh 2003; Nadarajah 2004). These "Indians"—either former estate workers or urban "squatters" living in Indian shantytowns, are also increasingly participating in the Tamil Hindu festivals such as Thaipusam and Adi Puram (Lee 1989; Willford 2002b). Practices such as these, as well as the urban spaces they occupy and produce, signify them as Indians while claiming a locality. This locality, I will suggest, also possesses them through the spiritual powers that are produced through ritual processions. In the next section, therefore, I now wish to analyze a ritual agency behind and the production of ethnic "difference" in Malaysia.

ADI PURAM: THE POWER OF SAKTI

The anxieties experienced by the powerless are also indicated by the increasing popularity of collective rituals of spirit possession. The most significant Tamil ritual and pilgrimage in Malaysia is Thaipusam, as discussed earlier. Another festival that is growing in importance for Malaysian Hindus is Adi Puram.[14] Because it is not performed on the national stage or celebrated in the media like Thaipusam, it sheds a different light on Tamil ritualism. Like Thaipusam, however, its revival[15] might speak to the social conditions of despair that many working-class Tamils now face. Its significance here pertains to its role in demarcating Indian space within an ethnic topography.

During the month of Adi (July–August), when the star of Puram (one of the significant astrological bodies in Hinduism) is situated in a particular way, it is believed that Sakti, the divine consort of Lord Siva (Parasakti), descends to earth. The festival honors fertility and has traditionally been

linked to the overflowing of the Kaveri River (Adi Perruku). It is also a celebration of the goddess Minakshi's[16] first menstruation and of her fecundity. C. J. Fuller explains:

> Because Puram celebrates Minakshi's first menstruation, however, the ritual most plainly links the growth and preparation of rice to the advent of her sexual maturity. In other words, the goddess's fertility and agricultural fertility are ritually equated. . . . Puram festivals, especially the one in *adi*, are held for most temple goddesses in the region, including Vishnu's second wife Bhudevi. The symbolic identification between agricultural fertility and the goddesses' sexual fertility made by Puram in *adi* is reinforced in several ways. . . . The rushing waters of the Kaveri—the "southern Ganges" and south India's most sacred river—are said to turn red as the goddess of the river menstruates. Her bleeding ends on the eighteenth day of *adi*, when a major domestic festival is celebrated by Tamil women. It is known as *Adiperruku*, "*adi* overflowing," a reference to the river and, by extension, to the goddess's menstrual flow. (Fuller 1992:192–93)

Special *pujas* must be held in her honor in all Sakti temples. On the eve before, the image of the goddess is taken around either the temple courtyard or nearby streets. This is known as the *urvalam* of the *ratham*—the procession surveying of the god/goddess's kingdom.[17] A circular route is taken around the temple so that the god sees in all directions. This act of *darshan*, or "seeing" (Eck 1981; Fuller 1992), allows those who see to be blessed, and through the symbolic gazing of the Lord, all corners of the earth are blessed.

In the larger temples, there is *bharata natyam* (classical dance associated with Saraswati—the Sakti of knowledge and the arts) offered to the Lord Mother of the Universe (Amman—literally, the "mother"). This commemorates the victorious dance of the goddess celebrating her defeat of the demon Adi.

On the festival day, there is a ceremonial dipping of the Amman or Sakti image, followed by ritual bathing of devotees. Some, who have taken a vow and prepared themselves spiritually—usually involving a vegetarian diet, fasting, and abstinence (as in the case of Thaipusam), take *kavadi* as an offering to Lord Murugan. Full *kavadi*, involving the piercing of the flesh, occurs mainly in rural or squatter temples.[18] *Pal kudam* (milk pots) can be seen in the major temples in the capital city.

I observed Adi Puram celebrations in a lower-status temple in nearby

Pantai Dalam, an area known for its squatters, low-cost housing, and "longhouse" accommodations.[19] On the eve of the festival or *Thiruvizha* (pronounced teeruveela), hundreds of devotees gathered at one of the two *kampung* (village) temples between which the procession would take place. The Kali temple features what is said to be a particularly "fierce" life-size Kali image. To Kali in the fierce form, with tongue extended and painted with dripping blood, various *pujas* were performed. For hours into the night, there was hypnotic and resonant drumming within the shrine while women and men went into trance and danced wildly. There was a lot of body contact, sweat, camphor smoke, and loud drumming. The crowd of dancing devotees, as well as the intensity of their dancing, grew as the evening progressed.

Around 9:00 p.m., the temple palanquin was placed upon the *ratham* (chariot) and circumambulated the Lord's domain. The platform had a garlanded and silk-sareed Kali, sitting on a throne. A generator powered bright lights, which illuminated the goddess. About two hundred devotees left the temple with the *ratham* and made their procession to another Sakti temple—the Mariamman temple a couple of kilometers away. Crossing a dark field, and entering a small *kampung*, the devotees *chanted* "Om Sakti, Jaya Sakti" (Lord Sakti, Victory is Sakti). We were in another world from Kuala Lumpur. Only the Radio Television Malaysia building, with its giant neon "WAWASAN 2020" (Vision 2020) sign shining above the highway reminded us that we were still in the Malaysian metropolis.

A group of children led the procession of devotees. They carried plastic Malaysian flags. I wondered what this patriotic display had to do with the goddess—aside from the fact that her festival occurs around the time of the Malaysian independence day. But, as we entered into the *kampung*, I noticed that the majority of onlookers were actually Malays or Indonesians. This made me feel a bit uneasy, as we were a rather noisy Hindu procession. I had been told by many informants that Malays are not comfortable with Hindu festivals and shrines, believing that these occasions attract a host of "evil spirits." Yet here we were entering what appeared to be a Malay *kampung*, carrying an image of Sakti and loudly chanting "Jaya Sakti"—a phrase that Malays understand, as *Jaya* is also a Malay word (Sanskrit derived) for victory or success. I suspected that the ostentatious patriotism might be intended to offset any negative reaction to the procession. At the very least, perhaps, the provocative aspect of ritual assertion

was somehow downplayed with flags, I surmised. In retrospect, however, the procession, and its display of the flag, read through the logic of the divine Hindu sovereign, asserts a presence and claims a space within the nation and its capital's urban territory. In any event, a dozen policemen had been deployed to "maintain order." But no incident occurred, despite what I perceived as a somewhat tense atmosphere during the procession as Malay gazes fell on Hindu marchers.

As we entered the *kampung* around 10:00 p.m., I realized that there were also many Indian longhouses there. In fact, this village was mostly a resettlement area for squatters. The police had also deployed a dozen or so officers to maintain order. Many Malays and Indonesian laborers, recent immigrants, came to the roadside edge to see the procession. They watched with what appeared to be fascinated unease but certainly not with indifference. Finally, we came to some Indian houses. The procession stopped at each one, and the Pandarams[20] blessed the babies and children. Families presented silver trays full of fruit as an offering to the god. There were *kuttu villakkus* (brass oil lamps used in shrines and temples) along the path. The flickering oil wicks created a magical, templelike aura along the path as the procession slowly and meticulously stopped for each blessing, *darshan*, and distribution of *prasadam*, the sanctified food that had previously been offered (*naiveytyam*) to the goddess. We returned on the same path, arriving at the Kali temple close to midnight. (The *kampung*, the open field, and one of the two temples were destroyed to make room for the Light Rail Transit [LRT] station and tracks in 1996.)

At 7:00 a.m. the following day, the devotees met at the Kali temple again. For a couple of hours, in the morning cool, there was relative calm as devotees prepared for the *kavadi* and *pal kudam*. Outside the *naga* (snake) shrine,[21] and outside the Kali shrine, a collection of milk pots grew in the morning. Beside still empty pots were garlands of margosa leaves and yellow cloths used to cover the milk pots. Women and children dressed in yellow-dyed sarees, Punjabi suits, or dyed T-shirts and pants, carried the pots.

In the meantime, prayers were offered in the main shrine. They were subdued in comparison with the previous night's raucous performance. By nine, the procession began to move once more toward the other temple. In the daylight we crossed the same field and passed the longhouse *kampung*. Men who had taken the vow of *kavadi* solemnly carried their still unattached cagelike structures without fanfare, joking, or chants. We arrived a

half hour later at the Muthu Mariamman Kuil. Within the temple compound the *kavadis* were being prepared in a *puja* in which an *arati* flame was waved before them. *Kunkumum* (ochre) and sandalwood were applied to the image of Murugan resting on the *kavadi*.

Near the entrance of the temple were two large water tanks. The devotees used a large plastic ladle to ritually cleanse themselves. Women clad in now wet yellow sarees released their braids and let their hair flow loosely. This allows their power to flow freely; hair is an important center of *ananku*, or sacred power, in ancient Tamil culture (Hart 1975).[22]

As the heat of the late morning began to mount, the musicians arrived. They played the *tavil*[23] along with another, more hypnotic, resonating hand drum. I was told that the hand drum is often not allowed because it is known to produce deep trance and possession. In the heat and camphor smoke, the drummers relentlessly played their drums and I myself began to feel light-headed with the intensity of the beat and the sight of yellow-clad devotees dancing with abandon. It was not hard to imagine how trance could easily be induced.

The *kavadis* and *pal kudam* carriers had fasted for the previous twenty-four hours. Gradually the men and women began to sway to the music. Many fell into trance. They did so in a patterned manner: breathing is rhythmical, audible, and slow, as if breathing in as much air as possible through lips that are nearly closed (something like the imitation of wind sounds). After a few heavy breaths, they would stick their tongues out and begin to dance in an energetic yet stylized way—often involving hand gestures resembling classical *mudras*, the iconographic poses of Sakti. A middle-aged woman, who was also a part-time medium, told me that she becomes possessed and is able to reproduce classical *mudras* and dance steps that she had "never learned" (we will meet her again in chapter 6). Everyone, she said, was astounded to see the phenomenal dancing she can produce if the Sakti takes over her body. I suspect that the *mudras* and dance steps are actually learned from epic Tamil movies, which feature scenes of the gods dancing in a semiclassical manner. Ritual and trance seem to imitate Madras-produced films, showing the extent to which these images and songs have permeated Malaysian Tamil religious identity, especially among members of the working class.

As the women are possessed by Sakti, they roll their tongues about, indicating the presence of Kali by invoking her most famous and fierce

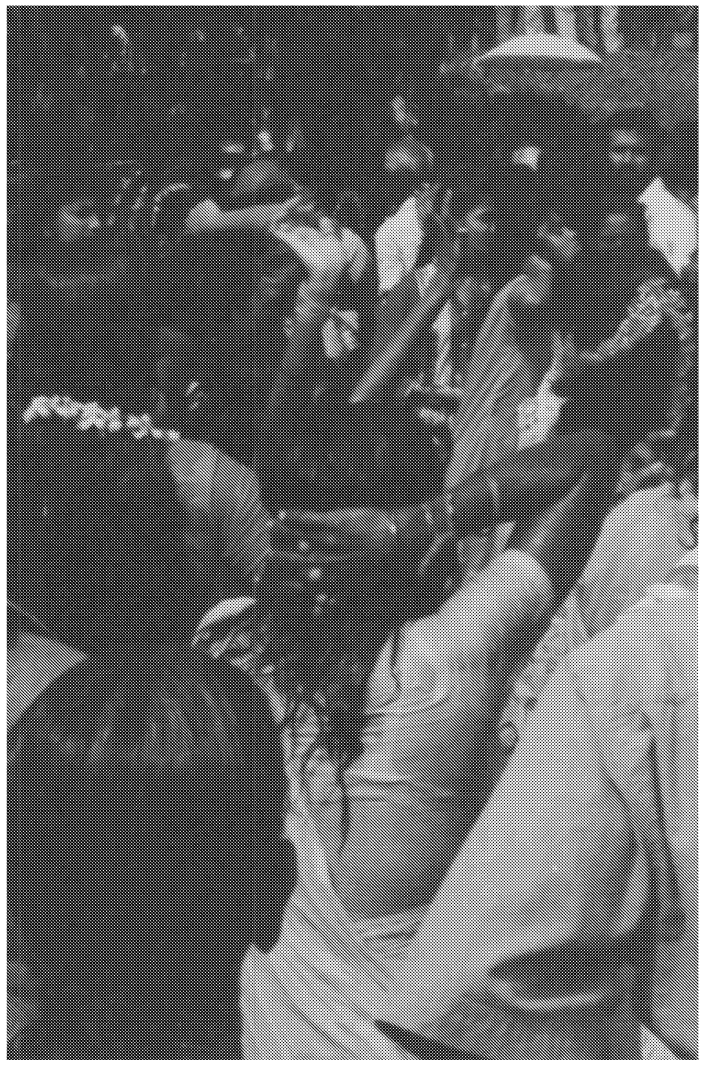


Fig. 17. Women falling into trance during Adi Puram

pose—the bloodthirsty destroyer of proud and self-righteous men. Some women sobbed uncontrollably, and others thrashed about in an agitated manner. When the Pandarams deemed it "necessary," they brought some of the women out of trance by smearing *vibhuti* (ash, a Saivite symbol representing the impermanence of manifest creation) onto their foreheads and repeating some *mantirams* (mantras). Some of the priests made jokes about the sudden uninhibited behavior of normally reserved Indian women. Women in trance carrying milk pots are mostly young and unmarried. A common reason for them to take the vow, sometimes under the urging of family members, is to earn enough blessings from the goddess to find a suitable husband and begin a family. Clearly issues of power,

repression of emotion, and gender are of importance here. A woman told me, "The *pusaris* feel that they should teach the girls a lesson if they get too wild." The fact that they, the men, can end a trance state by applying *vibhuti*, says much about spiritual authority, gender hierarchy, and the control of dangerous "feminine" forces. It is an ancient Tamil belief that women are potentially socially disruptive unless properly controlled by male "sacredness" (see Hart 1975).[24]

Some women in trance offered their tongues in a defiant, taunting manner to the priests and men in the crowd (in imitation of Kali). The priests, if they felt the woman was sufficiently entranced, and if they were deemed old enough, pierced their tongues with a Vel (lance).[25] This symbolically unites Sakti and Siva (male and female principles). This iconographic representation completes the process of becoming a full manifestation of Sakti—the divine consort—through the piercing sign of Siva. At the same time, it is the Vel that symbolizes the Sakti, or power, in Siva. Uncontrollable and dangerous powers associated with women (Sakti), however, are domesticated through this union and act of submission to the Lord's "invincible lance" (Vel).

There is also a paradox, perhaps typical of many Hindu theologies: the women appear to act in submission to the priests through this act while at the same time assuming the full *arul*, or grace, of Kali's presence. The Vel is Sakti. The symbol represents a state of complementary synthesis between Siva and Sakti while obviously the male deity's "spear." While in that state of full possession, in which pain cannot be felt, Kali is manifest. Sakti possession is one of the culturally coded avenues of empowerment for women. This idea is found clearly in Tamil films, a primary source of cultural models available to the working-class Malaysian Tamils.[26] In Tamil movies, there is often some outrage that befalls an innocent woman; she is quite helpless to fight back against the male-dominated society, but in a state of desperation she pleads with Amman (the goddess) for mercy. Then, in dramatic fashion, the goddess enters the woman, and henceforth she is charged with superhuman abilities, which allow her to take vengeance on those who have wronged her. This pattern is a modern adaptation of mythological stories that have Sakti taking the role as destroyer of demonic males (Fuller 1992; O'Flaherty 1975).

Some women verbally abused the priests while in trance. As Sakti-Kali, they embody the rage of the goddess against the vanity of men in the patri-

archal society. The presentation of tongues and uninhibited dancing with hair unbound are mythologically consistent "antistructures." Whether it can be interpreted as a "hermeneutic implosion" (Dirks 1994) of gender hierarchy or as "resistance" is more complicated, in that the protestations are firmly within available cultural models, which, in effect, might make them reinforce existing hierarchies. In other words, this version of feminine rage, as represented in Kali iconography and mythology, is part of a dominant patriarchal discourse. Thus, the enactment of gendered stereotypes might reproduce this discourse. On the other hand, the symbolic idiom afforded through Sakti worship and possession might also be interpreted as being part of a critical counterdiscourse—an ironic representation of submission. That is, those who are most wronged are ultimately empowered by the goddess, regardless of class, gender, or status. This interpretation lends itself to the suggestion that increasing Sakti possession and ritualism in Malaysia have come to embody a floating signifier as it is directed alternatively against the paternalistic presence of the state—with its narrative of Islamic modernism—and patriarchal Indian values. I was told as much by a few of the devotees, though in indirect ways. More devotees commented that the conscious intent of "revivalism" was in direct response to the perceived encroachment of a Malay Islamic urban presence.

As the hot sun became unbearable, the entranced women were doused with water. With each dousing, the women appeared to become more enraged. They danced, lashed out at the priests or other males, screamed, laughed uncontrollably, sobbed, and let the trance take over their behavior. I witnessed young women beating elder women, husbands, and siblings. Much aggression was expressed or released. The public symbols seemed to have great personal significance.[27] It is believed that the behavior exhibited during trance does not "belong to that person." Hence, the unspeakable can be said and done. Repressed emotions can emerge and be enacted through available myth models.

The men were preparing to take *kavadi*—the carrying of the *mayil*, or peacock frame, which is the vehicle of Lord Murugan, the son of Shiva, and consort of Valli and Devanei, both of whom represent different aspects of Sakti. Some of the men sat quietly on stools, or cross-legged on the ground, presumably to save energy for the hard work ahead. Relatives surrounded them, and often younger males, along with a few women, would

shout: "Om Sakti, Jaya Sakti" rhythmically, while the men meditated and attempted to enter the single-pointed trancelike state of mind necessary to perform the *kavadi*.

The priests applied *vibhuti* before the hooks were inserted into the backs and chests of the devotees. Some also had Vels put through their tongues or even through their cheeks. Some of these cheek Vels were up to three feet long. Some men also hooked fruits and tiny milk pots to their bodies, representing an offering to the goddess.

The men were more solemn than the women. Before carrying the *kavadi*, devotees must spend at least twenty-one days preparing themselves with a vegetarian diet, abstinence from sex, fasting, and meditation. All of this is supposed to happen under the supervision of a priest. The women carrying the *pal kudam*, or milk pots, were also ritually prepared, but I was told that for them the fasting and vegetarianism generally lasted only a couple of days to a week prior to the event. Those priests involved in the preparation encourage their clients to emphasize the solemn nature of the ritual and to avoid "attracting attention."[28]

Off to the left side of the temple, there was another group of male "penitents." They were different. They were Paraiyans (pariahs). They wore red sashes and skirts rather than the customary yellow associated with Murugan's devotees. They carried clubs and swords, thus signifying the god Muniandy (sometimes called Munneswaran)—the village protector god.[29] This burly god, the cigar-smoking and beer-drinking (traditionally toddy or coconut beer) deity is reminiscent of the modern Tamil film hero—an antihero[30] who is ultimately just and brave. Thus, this god is the principle male counterpart of village goddesses that are often associated with shamanism and sorcery. In Malaysia, these gods are often invoked by spirit mediums for various client services.

This group of penitents indulged in more elaborate forms of self-mortification. Some had long and thick Vels piercing their cheeks. Some also pulled ropes attached with large hooks in their backs. While pulling the ropes forward another would pull the ropes from behind, thus stretching the skin from their backs. One had attached a wig of long straight hair and had slit his tongue, which was slowly bleeding, thus assuming the form of Kali. This Sakti had a male counterpart in another penitent walking together with "her," holding the hammer and sword associated with Muniandy. Others hung large fruits such as apples and oranges from their



Fig. 18. A possessed devotee blessing a child

bodies on sharp hooks inserted into their flesh. Another, deep in trance, puffed vigorously at cigars that were handed to him as a kind of offering. In a deep trance, he began giving counsel to those around him. I saw many approach him—at other times a low-status person—and seek his advice.[31] I listened hard to decipher whatever cryptic advice he gave, but what he was uttering was incomprehensible. Yet many continued to listen intently to his strange sounds and occasional phrases. His body movements, and the intensity of his expression, the strange bloodshot gaze in his eyes, suggested he might be drugged. I was assured, however, that drugs play no part in the ritual.

In the midday sun, the *kavadis* and *pal kudams* began their long trek to the Sakti temple, where the procession had earlier begun. Leaving the temple, and passing through the *kampung* by day, Malays came out of their homes to observe the ritual of self-mortification. Passing from the village onto a main artery in Kuala Lumpur, the Federal Highway, the procession made its way on the road's shoulder as cars and motorbikes slowed or paused to observe the spectacle. Again, a good proportion of those watch-

ing with greater interest were Malays. Passing a giant neon Vision 2020 sign alongside the architecturally modernist Radio Television Malaysia building, the procession of ecstatic, possessed, yet fairly orderly devotees made their way to the other temple. The juxtaposition of Malaysia's modernist aesthetic and the ritual of the *kavadis* struck me as discordant, reminding me of the temporal placement of Hinduism within the Malaysian nationalist discourse. The motorcycle lane and shoulder were used by the procession. The procession moved very slowly. Those carrying the *kavadis* often stopped and danced around in a stylized manner.

In the peak heat of the day, the *kavadis* arrived in succession at the other temple. The milk pots were offered to the image of the goddess, and milk was poured over the icon (*abhisheckham*). Within the temple sanctum, women danced to devotional songs, repetitive and rhythmic, emanating loudly from the loudspeakers. Those still in trance were drenched in sweat, with very little awareness of the external world. Some fell out of trance and rested in a state of exhaustion. The Red Crescent was on hand (though only Indian members) to help any who might overexert themselves. After recovering from the trance state, or after pouring the milk, the devotees sat on the temple floor and were served a vegetarian lunch on banana leaves.

The medium mentioned earlier explained to me that in this festival Sakti is actually accessible to all women. At other times, only those with special powers could feel her direct presence. She herself felt it doubly difficult to maintain normal consciousness as we observed the others in trance. She also feared losing herself to the mysterious powers of Amman.[32] She said that she would not enter the shrine for more than a few minutes, for fear that Sakti might possess her. Nevertheless, at one point, she briefly burst into an uncontrollable spinning dance. She bumped other people before falling down herself. The wildness and abandon of her dance attracted a lot of attention; some of those present must have been aware that she was one with powers. Apparently this has happened many times to her in temples or during festivals. She cannot control her actions when she sees the image of the goddess or hears certain *bhajans* (songs) or *mantirams*. So she tries to avoid public worship and prefers to experience Amman in the controlled environment of her household shrine. But, she added that these public experiences, while undesirable, earn her a lot of respect from others in the temple.[33]

I had inexplicably decided not to eat the *prasadam* lunch being served to



Fig. 19. A woman falling into trance spontaneously while observing other devotees

all. I felt that the festival was too exciting to miss while eating. Also, I was getting carried away with the rhythmic drumming and heat, and the devotion of the *kavadi* bearers had, I suppose, mildly entranced me as well. I decided to fast that day in order to feel something of what it might be like to be one of the participants in the festival. I did not, however, go into trance. My interlocutors and friends, particularly the medium mentioned earlier, said it was a terrible thing to refuse temple *prasadam.* It is tantamount to assuming that one is a god—the only beings who can refuse consecrated food. In fact, she said, Krishna could be clearly seen in my eyes and this was Krishna's *Lila* or "play." Krishna might try to resist Amman, as he is the one god beyond her control. But, the medium said, even



Fig. 20. A devotee speaking in tongues to the entranced woman seconds later

Krishna might relent. Later my alleged Krishna possession became the focus of a special *puja* (see chapter 6) designed to exorcize the god's influence from my behavior! Significantly, my refusal of the ritual of eating the sanctified food did not raise the possibility in my in interlocutors' minds that I was a skeptical outsider, not awed by the awesome power of the goddess. Rather, my negation was put into the idiom of an elite Hindu expression of spirituality: a refusal of *communitas* with the "true" *bhaktas*, the Tamil poor. This is a charge often leveled at elite Hindus, with their perceived disdain of and aversion to Tamil spirit possession. The Krishna signification is perhaps relevant in the context of Malaysian Hinduism (as

opposed to the figure of Krishna as an unorthodox, antihierarchical deity in Vaishnava *bhakti* traditions), in that Krishna devotees are primarily North Indian or Malayalee speakers, in both cases, non-Tamil Indians in Malaysia who are collectively relatively well-off compared to the Tamil working class. However, such an interpretation of my refusal only makes sense if one assumes that the ethnographic encounter was produced within a dynamic of transference and countertransference. That is, for example, my desire to interpret what I was experiencing through recourse to some normative, and thus more orthodox or philosophical, understanding of Hinduism was recognized and/or I recognized the desire of my interlocutors for recognition and spiritual validation and identified but negated their desire.

After the lunch, and after all of the *kavadis* had finished, the crowd dissipated. Firewalking was scheduled to begin around 6:00 p.m. Actually, it began around 7:30, as the sun was setting. This made the glowing embers more visible. All of those who were lined up to perform the firewalk—another testament to the power and presence of Sakti within the devotee's body—were first examined by a couple of experts, who had prepared and raked the coals. Some of those in trance were not very steady. Only those who appeared focused and balanced were allowed to cross the embers. One exuberant devotee ran out onto the embers and fell down, burning his back in the process. All of them carried a pot of burning *samrhani* (camphor) as they crossed the fire. As they crossed, they shouted "Om Sakti." At the end of the short ember path (about fifteen feet), the devotees were to step into a small ditch filled with water. A couple of the devotees ran so fast over the coals that they dropped their incense pots at the other end in the ditch. Others seemed to play to the assembled crowd (about 150 people observing from a grassy hill). They would walk slowly and deliberately and shout in triumph to the crowd, which would respond with roaring approval. Those who demonstrated bravery, and apparently did not get burned, earned cheers from the crowd. There was a bit of competitive showiness in this event. I witnessed a couple of devotees actually stop, stand on the embers, and with their hands pick up red-hot coals, apparently without any pain. Others appeared to get burned, even those who rushed across in a couple of seconds.

Into the evening, the activities continued. There were games and competitions, prizes were given, and music (popular and devotional) filled the

air. Stalls lined the paths around the temple, selling food and drinks. Non-vegetarian food was served (outside the temple), in contrast with the Thaipusam festival, which is reforming its image to some extent. Traditional Indian sweets and snacks (*palkaram, murukku, ladoos, jelebis,* etc.) were being sold. The festival provided an opportunity for petty traders to sell to a crowd eager to buy things Indian. The main music shops from nearby Brickfields (an Indian enclave in Kuala Lumpur) had set up stalls with the latest Tamil film hits, as well as devotional tapes. These stalls had excellent stereo systems blaring songs into the temple compound.

The temple sanctum, as the evening descended into night, filled with dancing devotees. Many were still in deep trance, or had reentered the trance state. The drummers continued to beat out their resonant, hypnotizing rhythm. My housemate of mixed Tamil-Chinese descent (Chindian in the local slang), began to get light-headed in the heat, noise, and smoke and told me he had to leave, as he was sure he would fall into trance if he stayed inside the temple. He offered prayers to Sakti and stepped outside. Outside, he felt better, and he explained to me that the drums and the "fierceness" of the Kali image would have easily put him into trance if he had stayed much longer. Many were still in deep trance, or had reentered the trance state. As a large crowd of Malay onlookers watched from beside or atop their motorbikes, which were gathered alongside the road, one Indian man told me that Malays "get the trance very easily" and so they would find it difficult to observe the ritual for long. He cited a recent commentary and criticism by the Pusat Islam (Islamic Center) of the "horse dance," a Malay dance trance from the state of Johore, as evidence that trance was very natural to Malays. The power of the Hindu gods, in turn, would be so great, he added, that no Malay could resist. In recognition of the Other's lack—in this instance, the impossibility of Malay Islamic modernism as promoted by the state—in the denigration of the Indian, the apparent inversion of the futural vision allowed Tamil subjects to anchor their beings in the transcendent *yet* immanent power of the Hindu gods. This fantasy of Hindu power is (as was the case in the opening vignette), however, profoundly alienated from the social and psychological conditions of its production. The same Indian, it should be added, feared entering the Kali temple, where the drummers played their hypnotizing and resonant instruments. These same drummers continued to beat out their rhythm until well after midnight, when the festival came to a close. I was

told that the turnout for this festival had doubled in the last few years at this temple.

At the end of the evening, the *karagam* dance was performed in the temple by a group of ten devotees, male and female. This traditional Tamil dance is done with stacked pots balanced on the head. The pots are colorfully painted and have flowers in them. This folk dance highlighted the carnival atmosphere that was emerging from the intense religiosity of the day's events.

RESISTANCE AND DISPLACEMENT

Given the questions I have raised, we must now ask what is produced through this ritual. There are a number of issues worth addressing; however, power, alienation, ambivalence, and the production of intraethnic and gendered hierarchies and interethnic (spatial and symbolic) boundaries will occupy this concluding section. Seen in this light, the question of resistance as a "hidden" or "subversive" text serving as an incipient form of political mobilization (Scott 1990) is addressed. All of the devotees with whom I spoke emphasized that their motivation for participation was inspired by the awesome power of the goddess to intervene in some tangible way in their lives.

One very old lady, whom we called Nagamudi (snake hair), danced with abandon in the temple. Her matted locks, reaching to her waistline, earned her respect, as such hair is seen to be a gift from Siva or Murugan. This particular woman lived in poverty, going from house to house in search of meals and a place to sleep. Working as a spirit medium, she gave advice when possessed by the goddess in return for small offerings. She only wore yellow, indicating that she had renounced the world, and spent most of her time in devotions at various small temples in the city. Her husband had left her years before, and her only son was being held in Pudu Prison, on death row, for drug trafficking. I had spoken to her a few times and had observed her on many different days, as she often visited and prayed at the shrine in the house of another medium, with whom I often conversed. The latter told me that, in reality, Nagamudi did not have many of Sakti's powers, only the matted locks. But, as her life was tragic, it was best to let her stay over for meals and a place to sleep. Thus Nagamudi spent most of her nights in the medium's house. One night, however, while in one of her

prayer trances, Nagamudi lashed out at all present and made ominous threats in the name of Kali, and henceforth she was less welcome. In the temple, however, at the climax of the Adi Puram celebrations, she appeared to be transfixed with the Kali image. She danced like a woman one-third her age. Others bowed their heads and folded their hands before her, for she appeared to be genuinely possessed by the goddess.

I suspected that hope and despair were mingled in her efforts to transcend her suffering through ecstatic yet anguished communion with the deity. The rage she felt against her fate was objectified for her through the angry goddess. She, in turn, showed her own ambivalence toward other Tamils through her demonstrably angry and scornful persona, which emerged when she was under the trance. Men were a special object of scorn.

Kali trance and worship involve an inversion and critique of gender hierarchy and oppression. But this assumes an alienated and ambivalent form in this ritual, both within the theology of Tamil Hinduism and in its materialization out of the very marginal social enclave that produces it. We cannot say unequivocally that Adi Puram represents a coherent or tactical "hidden text" of resistance. Consider the trance itself—a controlled space where male priests control the entry and exit points of trance through Brahminical practices. In this sense, the ritual also reinscribes hierarchy as it produces male-controlled spheres of female disorder, emotionality, and rage (Stallybrass and White 1986; Holmberg 2000; Sangren 2000). Gender relations are reconstituted, albeit ambivalently. On the other hand, the arbitrary nature of hierarchy could be partially exposed in this disorder—its ludic quality unmasking that which hierarchy attempts to silence. Though by no means the only productive way to interpret the ritual, a psychoanalytic reading allows us to see the unmasking and masking of order, and thus the contradictions that are productive of ambivalence, more sharply. The partial recognition of what Lacan calls the Real, meaning the ultimate contingency of the symbolic order, produces anxiety and a concomitant redoubling of the superego, or a submission unto law, in order to silence the feelings that accompany this partial recognition of the alienating double of the ego-ideal.

As Lacan (1977) argues, neurotic fixation, or what we might call fetishistic attachment, is produced in recognition of the Other's lack. The spiritual core that Indians seek in order to complete this lack becomes, in

turn, blind to the dialectical unrest that produces this very desire for power and transcendence. Moreover, the internalization of the stereotype and stigma of the Tamil subject goes unrecognized, as illustrated by the inwardly directed scorn and ambivalence of Nagamudi. Stallybrass and White (1986), in suggesting that the psychic and spatial can be linked, argue that the psychic and social effects of transgression through ritual can congrue in terms of a reinscribed social topography coupled with a fetishistic overidentifying with a particular ego-ideal. In this sense, the transgression of Indianness can ultimately and quite intensively reinscribe an Indian ritual space and subject position, both in terms of intraethnic gendered or status hierarchy and in terms of Indian-Malay relations, as imagined by Indians to be inverted through the ritual.

Another participant did so because she had hoped that the goddess would help her find a husband. She, at the age of twenty-seven, and being a factory worker without education beyond high school, had few prospects for attracting a husband. Moreover, she had recently loaned what little savings she had to a boyfriend, who, after promising to marry her, had run away. Unhappy and disillusioned with her fate, she became an earnest devotee of Kali under the guidance of her aunt, who was a middle-aged and unmarried spirit medium herself. Both expressed to me their hatred of Indian men, demonstrating the profound ambivalence of their ascribed ethnicity and neighborhood. The aunt had to be restrained by friends and relatives during the ritual due to the fury her trance produced. The younger one, a soft-spoken and shy woman who had, with resignation, explained to me her life's many frustrations, began the ritual calmly, but when others around her fell into trance she suddenly became possessed. She dangled her tongue with eyes wide open and danced in the manner of others possessed by Kali.

Later, when resting after the ritual, she was extremely embarrassed and one might say ashamed of her display when her cousins, nephews, and nieces teased her for "having the Amman" (mother). In recounting the experience to me later, she expressed, on the one hand, awe at the power of Kali to take hold of her like that and, on the other hand, hope that this *marbo* (madness) would not happen to her again. She felt that such behavior was unbecoming for a young Indian woman and feared the intrusion of this ritually bracketed self into the everyday self-image she carried. In psychoanalytic terms, the symbolic disguise and social circumscription of

Kali possession were ambivalent images of her own social frustration. In Marxian terms, her marginality, like that of others in this working-class Tamil area, produced and enacted alienated expressions of spiritual power through the ritual (Sangren 2000). Her transgression, in other words, redoubled her identification with a certain, more orthodox kind of Indian propriety.

The power of the goddess to right a situation of community powerlessness helps reconstruct the Tamil enclave while also reconstituting, with great ambivalence, the individual's identity and psychic investment in Indianness. Interestingly, a number of Tamils told me that Malays are afraid of the Hindu gods—particularly Kali—and that Adi Puram's vigorous revival and assertive celebration were unnerving to them (the same being true for Thaipusam). That, one Tamil man suggested, is why the police must keep order—that is, *to keep Malays from dabbling in Hinduism.* Here the stigma of Hinduism in Malay Islamic public discourse was transformed through the ritual into the locus of Tamil power. While one could read this as subversion or the hidden text in one sense, I believe, when viewed through a dialectical lens informed by material and psychological practices and compulsions, a more complex picture emerges.

As mentioned earlier, Pantai Dalam and other Indian areas are undergoing transformation. These are prime lands, close to the heart of downtown. The predominantly Indian working-class residents, aside from facing uncertain economic conditions, faced eviction and the literal destruction of their communities (as indeed happened) in order to make way for the projects purported by the government to be necessary for Malaysia's modernization. The Indian enclaves, unlike their Chinese and Malay counterparts, have less political muscle to exert through their elected representatives. Nevertheless, it is critical for a place like Pantai Dalam to secure political patronage to ensure its survival. There is much at stake because significant pieces of these predominantly Indian spaces have been slated for destruction. Moreover, the very Indian and squatter orientation of these neighborhoods signifies an urban blight in the national imaginary and everyday stereotypes. Indians living there, naturally, see things differently.

An influx of Malay migrants to the city, coupled with the arrival in the 1980s of thousands of Indonesian migrants-cum-immigrants in these same spaces, has generated insecurities that take on an ethnic and reli-

gious hue. An assertive Hinduism and resurgence of Tamilness in these marginalized, yet desirable, areas produces a habitus of ethnic boundedness—a fixation on ethnic identity that is fragile and contingent on ritual power and the social mobilization that enables it. Moreover, the MIC capitalizes on ethnic insecurities by championing Tamil schools and temples in these enclaves. Without MIC backing, the "Malayanization" of urban space will go unchecked, the Tamils fear. In fact, the Malaysian Hindu Sangam and the MIC have made an effort to promote Hinduism and legally register squatter temples, while also securing permission to stage rituals. Tension between Malay/Indonesian squatters and Indians benefits both Indian and Malay political parties, which attempt to mediate between, but ultimately champion, their communities' interests. Pantai Dalam, for example, eventually came to be represented by the UMNO rather than the MIC, as I was told it had been before.[34] Moreover, one of the two temples described here was destroyed, as was the longhouse *kampung*. More significant, for our purposes, was how this political dynamic produced heightened ethnic awareness and the reinscription of ethnic boundaries. In this sense, the performance of ritual is also a performance of ethnicity, demarcating a spatial and cultural separation.

The performance of ethnicity and spiritually transcendent power is also fraught with ambivalence. Though a stigma is inverted through devotional ritualism, the inversion is partial, as we have seen the emergence of gendered (and orthodox) hierarchies within the ritual itself. Moreover, the cultural reproduction of Indian space is also a locus of and for stereotypes, many of them having been internalized by the residents living within it (e.g., abusive men, "backwardness," irrationality, danger). In a larger scheme, the production of Indian enclaves, and the ecstatic rituals conducted within them, signifies backwardness in the ideology of Islamic modernism. As a result, elite Indians, as we will see in chapter 5, often distance themselves from the working-class culture and its dramatic staging of rituals.

Even the apparent reversals or negations desired by some Tamils to see Hindu power as a future source of Malay recognition suggest a particularly ambivalent postcolonial subjectivity exacerbated by the structured narratives of ethnicity in Malaysia. That is, the stigmas attached to the "Hindu" past in the teleology of Malay-Islamic modernism, itself a desire born out of a particular colonial and postcolonial measurement of ethnicity, pro-

duce their counter, a particular Indian subjectivity in a dialectic of transference and countertransference. The contingency, and thus ambivalence, in turn, of this Tamil Hindu imaginary—as structured vis-à-vis the inauthentic or "lacking" Malay—is belied in the fantasy of spiritual power and transcendence.

In sum, the ritual described here produces mixed results for the Tamils in Malaysia. While it is undeniable that the practice of trance is experienced as a moment of spiritual validation and empowerment, it is clear that ambivalence is experienced and expressed by some of the devotees who participate and by the middle-class and elite Tamils who are wary of the growing stigma attached to the Tamil ritualism in Malaysia. Part of this, no doubt, is a residual ambivalence within Tamil Hinduism itself between orthodox, or "brahminical," and antibrahminical[35] and between subordinate- and dominant-caste ideologies and practices. The Tamil *bhakti* tradition, dating back to at least the tenth century, inverts and incorporates orthodox categories, demonstrating an uneasy relationship between so-called colonizing Aryan ideologies from the north of India and so-called indigenous Dravidian[36] systems. This, however, is made more complex in Malaysia by the numerical weakness of the Tamil community coupled with its history of oppression in the plantation sector and continued economic disadvantages today. That is to say, while the revival of Tamil ritualism signifies both a "culture of poverty" and backwardness among elite Indians and non-Indians, it is also inspired by the very hopelessness that it signifies.

Seen in this light, when James Scott (1990) refers to a "hidden transcript" as the disguised politics of the weak, we might now add a Lacanian supplement. Scott locates in rituals of reversal, exaggerated deference, song, gossip, and oral discourse a probing of the limits of "infrapolitics," which can be incipient forms of revolution. One obvious problem with this formulation of resistance is that it creates a two-tiered analysis of society—the dominant and the dominated. Of course, what Scott might term infrapolitics being expressed by Tamils in the ritual should also be read as intrapolitics—that is, as constituting internal hierarchy through the ritual itself and producing disdain among middle-class Tamils, who, in turn, are subordinate, politically speaking, to Malays. Middlemen, those with ambivalence toward those above and below, and ultimately of the ethnic label ascribed from above upon those stigmatized below, are given greater

attention through the Lacanian lens suggested here. Even the working-class Tamils in the opening vignette and the Adi Puram ritual are caught between the rails—a kind of middleness—between Hindu reformist discourses and a desire for power and transcendence, both of which are generated in the ambivalent shadow of Malay Islamic modernism. The psychology of subordination and subjection is thus fertile ground for theorizing what might be called ethnic fetishism, as it, I suggest, points to ways that ideological complicity is produced in multiethnic societies governed by an ethnic system of separation. Indeed, Lacan proves helpful, I have argued, specifically because the Other's perceived lack can redouble one's subjection vis-à-vis the Other rather than inevitably leading to critique and political mobilization. Whereas Scott's interpretation of hegemony is strictly ideological in a nondialectical sense with regard to subjectivity, Lacan's analysis of fetishistic fixation, where "metonymy" condenses and anchors one's imagined autonomy vis-à-vis the Other, presupposes a subject always already split and "caught in the rails" (Lacan 1977:167) of recognition and desire. That which tips the scales toward a more pathological identification, however, is, in fact, the excessive demand of the ego-ideal, which can become acute precisely where it appears to be lacking, or in Malaysia's case resting on a "shaky bed" (Peletz 2003) of identification buttressed by state bureaucracy and legality. In this climate of ethnic and religious revivalism fostered by the state, and responded to by Tamil ritual possessions, the only truly multiethnic socialist[37] party—the Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM), has actually declined in strength among squatters and the urban poor.

Freud argued that the production of a self-reflexive ego is always fraught with ambivalence. The superego is internalized and mirrored on a self-reflective subject. The Self, in other words, is produced within matrices of power, in which the expectations of others—the stereotypes[38]—become ambivalently part of our self-image. That is, reading this in a practice perspective, the dialectic between the I and the Other, is mediated by power, class, status, and the ideological weight attached to them. Thus the role of the nation-state, a the key disseminator and producer of cultural ideologies, plays a role in the production of social identities and the ambivalences and mirrorings of Self and Other they produce. For example, elite Indians, who now serve Malay masters rather than British in the postcolonial symbolic order, feel more keenly a conscious sense of cultural

ambivalence given the state-sponsored discourse of Islamic modernism. Being Indians, they also produce their elite Indian identity in the reflection of the stigma attached to working-class Tamil culture (and vice versa). Therefore, I also locate their attempt to distance themselves culturally in the structures of class and status produced by ethnic politics.

"Boundary maintenance" (Barth 1969) is sustained by the performance and witnessing of "ethnic" rituals. It is also conceivable, and, I have argued, likely, that Malays experience recoil and fascinated unease when witnessing rituals that resemble those that a state-sponsored Islamic ideology asks them to purge from their Malay culture and psyche (McKinley 1979; Peletz 2002). In this sense, assertive Tamil ritualism is both threatening and enticing and therefore produces a schismogenetic counter while vicariously objectifying the Other—that is, as wholly Other—as the surmounted past within the historiographic desire Malay Islamic modernism. But, this kind of reading is insufficient without mapping the social conditions of its production. Part of the habitus, I have suggested, must be located in the system of representational politics and patronage in Malaysia. Through a practical investment in ethnic forms of education, religious institutions, and job allocation, the everyday boundary of ethnicity becomes partially naturalized. In one sense, it might appear that I am advocating a transactionalist model of ethnicity, following Barth's (1969) classic lead, in which increasing competition and interaction within a growing urban center are generating emblems of difference. I have argued, however, that the ways in which ethnicity becomes psychologically compelling and fetishistic deserve greater attention. For one thing, racial or ethnic stereotyping can produce palpable material suffering and psychological anxiety. As one participant in the Adi Puram ritual told me later, in ten years "*all the Indians in Malaysia will be dead*," when referring to what she perceived to be a growing anti-Indian sentiment among Malay politicians and policemen.[39]

The assertion of ethnicity through ritualism—even within the bracketed space of spirit possession and the momentary *communitas* and/or catharsis it produces—can, among other things, reproduce internal hierarchies and stereotypes. Indeed, asserting Indianness involves a psychic and material investment in ethnic forms of political representation and patronage that ultimately helps cast the problem of class suffering among the urban poor in the direction of communalism. The reinscribing of stigmas can also be

domesticated by intraethnic, gendered, and national hierarchies and can even lead to violence,[40] though in this analysis I have emphasized how the fascination with the power of the god's possessive force is symptomatic of an ambivalence within the postcolonial Tamil subject. In both the opening story about the goat sacrifice and the case of Adi Puram, the transcendent desire behind the locus of power immanent in the Hindu shrine is generated in the shadow of a state-driven ideological Other, in which, we recall, there is a perception that "everything is done for Malays."

My discussion here has emphasized the Malay Islamic presence within the politics of urban life in two senses: first, the iconographic nature of urban transformation in Malaysia is aimed at bolstering a nationalist ideology premised on culturally authenticity and modernity; and, second, the patronage of neighborhood politics, among both Malays and Tamils, in part, fuels the ritual reclamation of encroached upon Indian space that inspires its vigorous procession and possession. However, and related to the second point, I have suggested that this ritually produced locus of power is fetishistic to the extent that it produces a submission to the very symptom of ethnic identification that silences the material and ideological contingencies that allow for its partial naturalization in nationalist ideology and neighborhood boundary production. Moreover, the spiritually transcendent quality of Tamil ritualism, though produced out of a state of subordination and displacement, produces a partial awareness of its own contingency. The desire, in turn, to escape the contingency of class power in the value (or stigma) attached to the Hindu or Indian signifier within the political economy of Malaysian nationalism fuels not only interethnic difference, as I have suggested here, but also intraethnic status difference, manifested in distinctions of "authentic" spirituality that are ambiguous and historically contingent. This final point is important, as it is the dividing force *within* the Indian community within Malaysia.

DEVOTION AND THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT

To briefly reiterate an important theme of this and the previous chapter, many Malaysian Indians believe that Hindu religious revival, as witnessed by the growth of Thaipusam,[41] and now Adi Puram,[42] is related to rapid urbanization and modernization, coupled with the perceived pressures of Islamization, with its veiled tendency of stigmatizing Hinduism (at least

from an Indian point of view). In this view, urban and newly urbanized Indians are experiencing a cultural void and crisis of meaning as modern life is increasingly compartmentalized and alienating, particularly given the increasing Islamic ethos of urban space. Thus, religious festivals become condensed markers of both individual and collective identity. It is certainly true that the religious rituals discussed here are focalized in the urban center of the rapidly modernizing nation. As I have argued, however, such an explanation fails to capture the fetishistic pleasures and ambivalences that religious revivalism produces, particularly across a class- and status-divided Tamil minority. The desire to transcend the symbolic designation of the Indian in nationalist discourse oscillates with a desire for ethnic recognition (asserting Indian and Hindu identity) and/or, in Lacan's sense, a submission to the symbolic—the partially naturalized, thus hegemonic, ideological structure of ethnic social organization. Identity formation, and particularly in its fixated-upon form, takes place in this interstitial, unstable, and socially contingent space. From this theoretical perspective, it is not sufficient to theorize what identity means, in an intellectual sense, but, rather, we attempt to defetishize or disclose what identity masks.

A local explanation, however, as told to me by many Tamil Hindus, maintained that Malay Islamic religious revival during the current and previous decade had "awakened" Hindus. Continued restrictions placed on non-Muslims, such as the laws governing the media or marriage laws requiring conversions to Islam, as well as the constant Islamist critique of Hinduized aspects of Malay culture, have created a sense of being threatened. During the 1980s, a few Hindu temples were actually desecrated by Muslim activists. Census numbers also show that Hinduism is actually declining[43] while Islam and Christianity are growing. Therefore, the need to feel and demonstrate solidarity with other Indians on festival days was a response to the perceived threat to Hinduism in Malaysia. This explanation casts Hindu revivalism as a form of ethnic resistance in response to political pressures. While potentially offering a more instrumental explanation in that cultural ideologies are activated by political circumstances, it too, leans toward a functionalist interpretation: that solidarity and the reaffirmation of cultural identity are necessarily linked, and urban multiethnic life requires the reinscription of identity along ethnic lines—a view that mirrors both the government ideology, and that of religious apolo-

gists within the community. While such an interpretation lies closest to the structures of meaning still hegemonic in Malaysia, I cannot rest with such a perspective.

Continuity in the theme of the righteous power of Sakti is demonstrated by Hart (1975). He shows that the great Tamil epic, the *Cilapatikaram*, conveys the message that injustice meted out by the state or the king can be best punished by the dangerous power of *ananku*, only possessed by women. In the modern Malaysian context, it would follow, political, economic, and cultural marginalizations are perceived by the Tamils as injustices that can be righted only through spiritual means. Amman is a manifestation of Sakti and so is analogous to Kannaki, the heroine of the ancient Tamil epic.[44] Murugan, as discussed earlier, is similarly the destroyer or *asuras* and invincible warrior for his devotees, yet only through the agency of his Vel, or Sakti, a female principal. At the same time, for the more philosophically inclined, both Murugan and Sakti can also represent the twin aspects of the godhead. They, as gods of *bhakti* and power, are gods for all reasons and all seasons, though particularly relevant when there is injustice meted out by demonic forces onto the true devotees or *bhaktas*. This does not suggest a sociological cause for ritual revivalism, but it helps explain the cultural idioms that are utilized for its expression.[45] However, as suggested earlier, the transference of sociopolitical drama into the cosmic battle between *asuras* and the *devas* (gods) could be emotionally salient through a process of psychological displacement and projection. In this sense, the transcendental spiritual value produced through the rituals conceals its contingent origins. Breaking that threshold, in turn, one could speculate following this logic, would "destructure," in Heidegger's sense, the ensnared "ethnic" Being that is historically (ontically), but not ontologically, true. The primordial illusion of ethnic authenticity is retroactively "true."

Let me turn to a more circumspect sociological and culturally specific assessment of Tamil ritual revival in Malaysia. Shulman (1980) has also pointed out in his study of Tamil myths and rituals that shrines generally become more popular as they develop their own mythology. As Batu Caves and other significant shrines are celebrated as markers of Malaysian Hindu identity, it follows that they should also become correspondingly more and more invested with significance by the local Tamil community. My observations support this suggestion. Thaipusam, in particular, is clearly

putting Batu Caves squarely within the sacred topography of Tamil devotional Hinduism.

Another aspect of Hindu revivalism being enacted through the festivals[46] obviously reflects class polarization. Malaysia, during the rapid industrial development initiated by the New Economic Policy, has witnessed a dramatic growth in key industries and the nation's overall GNP during the last twenty years. Kuala Lumpur, and surrounding Selangor, in particular, have changed rapidly. At the same time, as Jomo (1986; see also Gomez and Jomo 1998) and others have noted, class inequality has increased. In particular, the discrepancy between urban and rural areas in standards of living has grown. The estate sector, where most Indians formerly resided, has been adversely affected by industrialization. Many estates were closed because rubber and palm oil were seen as less profitable than land for industrial purposes. Other estates continue to operate but on a smaller scale. Very large estates can still be found, but they are usually owned by large corporations, which recruit cheaper labor from other countries.

The Indians who have left the estates in search of work have encountered difficulties (Nagarajan 2004). Many end up in squatter areas near the larger cities, and given the tough quota policies that openly favor Malays against non-Malays, most former estate laborers cannot obtain higher-paying jobs (Rajoo 1993). Most end up in low-paying menial labor occupations. The result has been the creation of an urban and rural Indian underclass, which has little political or economic leverage (Nagarajan 2004). I return to this issue in chapter 6.

Pilgrimage and penance accord the devotee direct contact with the gods of love, salvation, and power—a potent mixture for an ethnic subject suffering the combined effects of cultural, economic, and social marginalization. In this sense, to suggest that the growth of ritualism has personally and socially redemptive qualities for the devotee and the community (Collins 1997) does not necessarily contradict the suggestion that there is a fetishistic ethnic body that is reproduced at the same time that a spiritually transcendent power is generated. One can in that sense interpret Tamil revivalism as overdetermined. Last, if the festivals of power and penance are reviving due to the increasing search for a miraculous "power" by an increasingly displaced community, in both the social and psychological senses, it is also clear that this consciousness, even when taken to be a col-

lective ethnic expression (much less an incipient class consciousness), reproduces the fetishistic hold of ethnic ideology, which, in turn, is appropriated by state rhetoric of "ethnic diversity" and accommodation.

To conclude, I have argued that understanding the vicissitudes of Tamil and Indian identity in Malaysia necessitates a national frame in which ethnicity is formed in a dialectic of mutual recognition and misrecognition. In such an approach, its compulsive or possessive force can be critiqued by revealing what it negates. That is, the very source of ethnic certainty may lie in its converse, a sense of angst produced by the historically contingent symbolic order.

Indeed, the transference of sociopolitical drama into the cosmic battle could be emotionally salient through a process of psychological displacement and projection. In this sense, the transcendental spiritual value produced through the rituals conceals the contingent social and political real, while in part it is generated from it. This would help explain why the incipient political critique noted in the festival (e.g., reversals of hierarchy and the conscious expression of response to Islamization) cannot reveal itself fully, to the extent that the transcendental fantasy of surmounting the symbolic order is critiqued from within the ritual as—one might imagine a politically awakened devotee observing—an "alienated expression of our own contingency and ambivalence as ethnic subjects."

Uncanny hauntings take hold only when objectifying models of thought take hold through disavowals of the past, and in Malaysia's case, through a past figured as an ethnic Other. In this sense, the historicity of the subject that Freud implicitly recognizes through the ego-ideal, or that which is introjected in sociality, forecloses any schematic modeling of postcolonial subjectivity and, perhaps, of a universal typology of psychological diagnostics. Indeed, as McKinley (1979) argues, the intimacy of past and present in Malay perceptions of time suggest possible selves clashing with the objectifying relationship with the past that state-sponsored ethnoreligious ideologies (particularly Mahathirism) demand from so-called Malays. McKinley argues that Malays are often "called upon to make continual reentries into the symbolic orders of their pre-Islamic past," particularly to "meet the Hindu pantheon" (1979:307). Yet the objectifying relationship to the past in Malay Islamic modernism produces potential uncanny displacements in figure of the Indian.

The historical coincidence that the Hindu Malay past and the contem-

porary Tamil Hindu are intertwined in the imaginary being constructed in the ethnotemporal teleology of Islamic modernism is rendered problematic by the "negative" relationship with the past that, as McKinley (1979) and Peletz (2002) have argued, is working its way into a conflicted Malay subject. This uncanny presence, in turn, I have argued, is rendered signifiable through the displaced figure of the Indian. In turn, the Indian perception of this lack has produced a desire for transcendence among Tamil Hindus.

CHAPTER FIVE

HINDU ECUMENICAL MOVEMENTS AND "MIDDLENESS"

Familiarity and Ambivalence in Tamil Identity

We want to lead mankind to the place where there is neither the Vedas, nor the Bible, nor the Koran; yet this has to be done by harmonizing the Vedas, the Bible, and the Koran.
—Swami Vivekananda

KUALA LUMPUR AS SYMPTOM

As discussed in the last chapter, the emergent skyline of Kuala Lumpur symbolizes modernity and a "nostalgia" for Islamic, and by extension, an imagined Malay glory. Kuala Lumpur was largely a Chinese- and to a lesser extent an Indian-dominated area until recent times. Within a thirty-year period, however, the Malay population in Kuala Lumpur more than doubled (Means 1991; Lee and Ackerman 1988) as a result of government planning and economic incentives. As the city's demographics changed, the existing Chinese and Indian ambiance was somewhat alienating to the recent Malay settlers. A sense of foreignness is perhaps the product of interethnic interaction. On the other hand, the ideological foreignness of the Islamic modernist ideology is itself alienating and therefore demands a suppression of a more heterogeneous Malay cultural memory (Peletz 1997, 2002). V. S. Naipaul captured this sense of foreignness while interviewing a Malay who had settled in Kuala Lumpur in the late 1960s.

> [O]n approach to KL, we realized that we are passing by a Chinese community, a Chinese neighborhood, which is quite familiar to us, and we realized the pessimism we faced about the problems of having good Muslim food and not being able to meet more Malays. We were seeing more Chinese and Indians. Quite difficult for us to communicate. Because we don't know them. For us it's easier to talk to a Malay who knows us. It was a *shock*, but not an upset. Because *we expected* that. But we were not in the least frightened. . . .
>
> But we felt we were nowhere. We were lost in the huge community. Each time we go around, out of ten people we could hardly see a Malay. We had expected that. But we were in a group and we didn't bother with them very much. We were staying right in the middle of a non-Muslim, non-Malay community, and that was the difficulty we had. (Naipaul 1981:xx, emphasis added)

The sense of dislocation experienced by the newly urban Malays, whether working in the city or attending the University of Malaya under new quota and scholarship opportunities created by the NEP, was articulated for the first time on a national level, through Islamist critiques of the government. However, in this passage we also see an aversion to the Other that asserts a lack of fear, yet clearly produces "shock," though it was oxymoronic in that it was "expected." Moreover, the fact that no effort is really made to "know" other Malays in the urban environs is, perhaps, suggestive of an uncertainty surrounding the ideological category of the Malay ethnic category—that is, that it comes into reality vis-à-vis the non-Malay others (Kahn 2003). In this light, the phantasms of identity that accompany urban transformations produce ideological fixations to inscribe an authentic and timeless authenticity, such as the one being constructed in the nation's iconic capital.

In light of Michel de Certeau's discourse on urban planning, we can see the emergence of an Islamic modernist city as a discursive strategy aimed at bolstering Malay pride while also serving "as a totalizing and almost mythical landmark for socioeconomic and political strategies" (1984:95). As de Certeau suggests, the city itself becomes a "universal and anonymous subject" within a state narrative. That is, its transcendent spirit, its cultural authenticity, its "universal" nature are all contingent on the particular contradictions and interests that produce them. The "utopia" of Islam, science, and prosperity is the apotheosis of Mahathir's Vision 2020. That the city must educate the Malay about his or her potential speaks

more to the attitude of the prime minister's idiosyncratic didactic vision than it demonstrates the organic growth of a bourgeois Malay ideology. The impetus to top-down planning and guided change can already be observed in Mahathir's earlier and influential *The Malay Dilemma.*

> Even feudalism can be beneficial if it facilitates changes. The reason why animist Malays became Hindus is because their rajas became Hindus. Later when the rajas became Muslim, the *ra'ayat* (people) became Muslim. The political rajas of today can therefore institute change if they themselves are willing to change. Such a change would spread rapidly. (1981:173)

One can observe both the didactic approach to inaugurating ideological and social change and the evolutionary model of Malay Islamic modernism from animism, Hinduism, Islam, and modernity. In Mahathir's words, "There is no reason why the Islamic faith, properly interpreted, cannot achieve spiritual well-being as well as material success for the Malays" (173).

That Kuala Lumpur should have a distinct Malay Islamic identity requires tremendous foreign capital—an irony not lost on many educated elites. Just as the city erects symbols of ethnicity, religion, and power, the presence of foreign engineering, construction, and other high-tech firms brings with it much of the dreaded "Western" decadence (nightclubs, promiscuity, alcohol, drug abuse, etc.). It is this apparent contradiction that leads many Islamists to question the prime minister's "edifice complex."

In the presence of the "Indian," Malays, including (and especially) the ex-prime minister, recognize themselves. The negation of the Indian within the Malay suggests a source of ethnic uncanny within Malay Islamic modernism. Through the process of transference, the metonymic representation of this consciously surmounted, yet unconsciously familiar (Freud 1997), appears only as a "semblance" of a being, "distorted," as Heidegger suggests, or, in Freud's theory, as a monstrous pollution, producing aversion and desire, which, in turn, generates more aversion and desire. This, as Žižek (1989) notes, is the very condition for submission to the symbolic, that is, an attempt to master or silence that which has been negated. As in Freud's theory of the repetition compulsion, the mastery of consistency provided by the repetitive play of a child[1] is not unlike the

"mastery" obtained through an overzealous adherence to the superego's introjected voice.

Returning to the mastering of temporalities aimed at Islamic modernism, we can now speculate that the archaic and the modern figure each other in Malaysia's political discourse. We earlier saw Mahathir's call a "strong and clear Islamic faith" (quoted in Khoo 1995:52) through a process of suppressing so-called pre-Islamic Malay culture. Malays who practice forms of Islam that are deemed non-*agamic* (unorthodox) face possible charges of apostasy. This ban on non-Islamic practices can extend to the fine arts, where dancers, writers, and visual artists are monitored for dabbling in Hindu or Indic residues and aesthetics within Malay culture. Certain elite Indians belonging to neo-Hindu organizations and/or disciples of well-known gurus in India were quick to point out to me that several prominent Malay politicians visited Hindu spiritual advisers secretly. These same elite Indians, we will discover, sometimes harbor millenarian hopes that these wayward Hindus (the Malays) will find their way back into the fold after recognizing their "true" selves and culture.

Yet the rational planning of the city, with its Islamic symbolics, is not Bentham's panopticon. As de Certeau says:

> The city becomes the dominant theme in political legends, but it is no longer a field of programmed and regulated operations. Beneath the discourses that ideologize the city, the ruses and combinations of powers that *have no readable identity* proliferate; without points where one can take hold of them, without rational transparency, they are impossible to administer. (1984:95, emphasis added)

As de Certeau notes, those who do not have "a readable identity" are not so easily placed into the narrative of progress, as it is ethnically figured in Malaysia's case. Elite and middle-class Indians, as discussed earlier, do not participate nor identify with the working-class Tamils in everyday social life or in ritual celebrations. These elite Indians exist in "middleness"—a state of domination and subordination, and, as Chatterjee suggests (1992), it is from this class of subordinate elites that private ambiguities and ambivalences tend to generate public discourses that attempt to resist the dominant ideologies. However, in what follows, the strategies of resistance are not necessarily, nor even likely, to have conscious intent behind them. Rather, the recognition of contingency fuels a desire for transcendence in these discourses of cultural authenticity and spirituality,

which, in effect, foreclose unmasking the real trauma of ethnic signification. Put simply, the modernist Malay Islamic discourse and the Hindu modernist counter to it, which is the focus of this chapter, are locked in a dissonant and negative dialectic.

This sense of middleness, as an ambivalent postcolonial subjectivity, becomes manifest when considering the middle-class Indian community in Kuala Lumpur. Middle-class Indians occupy important professional positions in Malaysian society and, in their better than marginal economic capacity, own homes in and around Kuala Lumpur, patronize Indian businesses, and attend to their religious "traditions" in a variety of ways. Many middle-class Indians enact strategies of negation that "resist" the framework of national identity that is literally being constructed in the capital city. But they too are possessed by notions of spiritual authenticity, as they are physically and culturally estranged by the emergent ethnic topography, both in terms of an ostensible Islamic core towering iconically and in terms of the production of ethnic enclaves or massive ethnic pilgrimages, as described in the previous two chapters.

A brief overview of the so-called Hindu Renaissance will help us understand the ambivalence of identity British colonialism engendered among elite Indians, which was subsequently transplanted and assumed a new significance in postcolonial Malaysia.

THE HINDU RENAISSANCE AND THE SUBALTERN ELITE

The Hindu Renaissance, arguably, had its origins in the Bengal of the nineteenth century. The "Bhadralok," or Western-educated Bengalis living in Calcutta, experienced a crisis of identity and culture as "Macaulayism" gradually supplanted the earlier Indological impulses (Sanskrit and Hindu philosophy) among the British intelligentsia.[2] Along with an erosion of interest in Indian culture, the arrival of missionaries and their vigorous proselytizing contributed to the emergence of a "Westernized" class of elite Indian officials who were groomed to occupy middle-level positions within the colonial bureaucracy in Calcutta (Jones 1989). After all, it was reasoned, it is much easier to control a population if they believe you are bestowing on them "civilization" and, more important, status and power. These Bhadralok (sophisticates), drawn mainly from the high-caste Hindu population, were to carry out much of the work of bureaucratic management.

This position of middleness, that is, of subordination and domination, recognition and subjection, created ambivalences of self and cultural identity within the subordinate elite community. On the one hand, self-denigration, or ridicule of Indian culture, was often expressed in the literature and attitudes of the time. At the same time, some reacted with equally bitter attacks on things "English." A third group expressed this state of ambiguity, alternating various shades of ambivalence. This third alternative, beginning with Rammohan Roy and continuing through such important figures as Keshub Chandra Sen, Bankim Chatterjee, Devandranath and Rabindranath Tagore, and Swami Vivekananda, captured a range of thoughts and feelings that were intensely introspective, deconstructing colonial discourse and "Indian customs" simultaneously.[3] Trained in science and logic, and believing in a rational plan of national uplift, reform, and cultural rejuvenation, these groups, each in their own way, articulated public discourses that resonated with the needs of their private selves.

A dialectic between these spheres seemed to provide the necessary models "of" and "for" reality (Geertz 1973), drawing on the need to heal the fractures born of a deep ambivalence of middleness (Chatterjee 1992). The emergence of an imagined community, facilitated through print capitalism (Anderson 1991) and made emotionally salient in the religious discourses of Vivekananda and the novels of Bankim and Tagore, made possible the emergence of a countercolonial discourse, which was later expanded by the political genius of Gandhism.[4]

First, emphasis was placed on withdrawal from material pursuits and other forms of "worldliness," which hinder spiritual growth, for spiritual "freedom" meant a realization that all knowledge and action grounded in worldly pursuits were "futile." This attack on "materialism" was an attack on the British themselves, as well as the loathed "Anglo-beast within," born out of the elite, middle-class identity.

One of the greatest criticisms of Hinduism from Christian missionaries was its absence of charity and social service.[5] The missionaries, and later the early Hindu reformers, compared the emphasis on charity and compassion in Jesus' teaching with the "otherworldly" pursuits in Hinduism. The Bhadralok had greatly internalized this criticism, as seen through the writings of Bankim,[6] and the call for moral action from Vivekananda and his successors, Aurobindo and Subhas Chandra Bose.

Bhakti (devotion), with its withdrawal from pragmatic actions, while

emotionally salient, was also countered by its opposite, Karma Yoga (selfless service). These polar sides of modern Hindu practice were also inflected by gender, as the British stereotype clearly feminized the Bhadralok, whereas the call to action uttered by Vivekananda and others was often expressed in masculine terms (Chatterjee 1986, 1993; Kakar 1981). Moreover, the Hindu origins of selfless service could be justified through sacred texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita* and in the "life histories" of the saints.

Last, Jnana Yoga, the search for self-knowledge through philosophy and logic, was also given preeminence in the writings, in particular, of Vivekananda and Aurobindo. Both were intellectuals, well read in science, logic, and metaphysics. They argued that the early Hindu scriptures, primarily the Vedanta philosophy, were "scientific" in the modern Western sense.

THE HINDU RENAISSANCE IN COLONIAL MALAYA

The large-scale immigration of Indians into Malaya included many recruits among the educated classes, who came to serve in the expanding civil service and educational sectors. In particular, Ceylonese Tamils ("Jaffna Tamils") and Malayalees were recruited from the middle classes. With their command of English, as compared to Malays or Chinese, and their knowledge of Tamil, the language of the estate sector, they were seen to be ideal community leaders and managers of estates, educators, and government employees (Rajakrishnan 1993). This same influx of English-educated Indians brought with it that religion of middleness discussed earlier. Hindu organizations that were transplanted into Malaysian soil, however, were mostly controlled by the parent branches in India.

The colonial recruitment policies introduced two tiers of Indians into Malaya. On the one hand, there were the indentured laborers, who were recruited from the absolute bottom of the social hierarchy in South India (Rajakrishnan 1987); on the other hand, the Ceylonese, educated "Madras Tamils," and Malayalees were drawn from the educated urban elites.[7] While the former brought with them various folk beliefs and ritual practices, such as the ones described in the previous chapter, the latter brought the religion of reformed and orthodox Hinduism. Hence, in the urban centers of Kuala Lumpur and Penang, organizations committed to Hindu

reform and "Sankritization" emerged. Later on, with the rise of anti-Brahmin sentiments in Tamil Nadu, so-called Dravidian movements arose from within the ranks of the working class.

In a sense, the first-generation Indian elites were occupying the same status in the social hierarchy as they had in India or Ceylon. They were, in a sense, existing in middleness between the British and the laborer Tamils. As in India, their relationships with Indian traditions and English education were ambivalent. Furthering their social status meant obtaining an English education for their children; however, this might mean a loss of Hindu identity, as the English-medium schools were multiracial and often run by missionaries. Various Hindu organizations arose in response to this perceived threat to Hindu identity. In Kuala Lumpur, large and ornate temples were founded. These temples had Brahmin priests and offered Agamic services to the more orthodox. However, the temples were decidedly conservative, leading many of the English educated to the reformed vision of Hinduism and the compelling apologetics offered by Vivekananda, Aurobindo, and others.

During the first half of the century, arguably the most influential Hindu reform organization in India was the Ramakrishna Mission (RKM), Vivekananda's project. The same organization had established a foothold in Malaya by 1905. An ornate ashram was built in Brickfields, an Indian section of Kuala Lumpur, in 1903. Vivekananda's visit to Singapore, en route to the West, had inspired the construction of ashrams in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. Early on, the Ceylonese Tamil community of Brickfields was instrumental in popularizing his teachings, having the ashram constructed, organizing the Vivekananda Society, and later convincing the Ramakrishna Mission to send a swami to run the ashram. For a brief time, in Kuala Lumpur, and later in Penang, the Mission helped unify the various Hindu organizations. According to Arasaratnam (1993), this Hindu body had a large impact on Malaysian Hinduism.

> Through both these missions, a body of well-educated monks trained in missionary methods in India came to settle in different parts of Malaya. . . . They were articulate spokesmen of Hindu doctrine who established contacts with leaders of other faiths, securing for Hinduism a recognition as one of the major faiths practiced in Malaysia. (205)

Later, a related movement arose in India called the Divine Life Society.[8] It too was soon transplanted in Malaysia. This movement adopted, in

essence, the same message that the earlier Ramakrishna Mission had popularized, and, perhaps significantly, its founder was a Tamil speaking Hindu, who, prior to his "enlightenment," had done years of research in the jungles of Malaya as a natural scientist.

Friction later developed in the Ramakrishna Mission, as the Ceylonese trustees and management in Brickfields had clashed with the resident swami, who had been sent from the movement's headquarters in Calcutta. Eventually, the swami left for India and the Ramakrishna Mission no longer operated through the main ashram in Kuala Lumpur.[9] The Vivekananda Society, under Ceylonese management, continued to offer classes and sponsor a Tamil school and a classical dance and music academy. Later, during the Second World War, the Indian National Army, operating in Japanese-occupied Malaya under the leadership of Subhas Chandra Bose, also introduced Vivekananda's teachings to a wider audience.[10] This left the Divine Life Society, with its resident swamis from India, to carry on the social work and reform efforts among Malaysian Tamils. This movement also attracted a mainly middle-class, educated Indian (and Ceylonese) clientele. Later, a third movement emerged out of the Divine Life Society, known as the Shiva Family. This movement, started in the 1970s, has grown quite large and active, particularly in its promotion of Indian arts and music through the Temple of Fine Arts (TFA). All of the movements share the same basic ideological features: the emphasis on meditation, devotion, charity, and ecumenism. Thus, they have appealed to the middle-class Indians, who are less interested in the traditional practices of Tamil Hinduism.

Another source of reform, aside from the Vedantic, or Sanskritic, Hinduism that characterized the movements so far discussed, came from the anti-Brahmin or so-called Dravidian movement, which was growing in Madras during the 1920s and 1930s under the leadership of E. V. Ramasamy Naicker, also known as Periyar (Great Man) to Tamils. This man's efforts to counter the "Aryan" Brahmin[11] hegemony in Indian nationalism, and in particular in Gandhism, theosophy, and the other neo-Hindu movements, had a dramatic impact on Tamil politics in the latter half of the century (Irschick 1969). Ramasamy Naicker advocated a casteless society and was an outspoken critic of Hinduism, with its "divinely sanctioned" social hierarchies. His eloquence and passion for social justice also became symbolic for Tamils in general. Casteless Tamil "golden

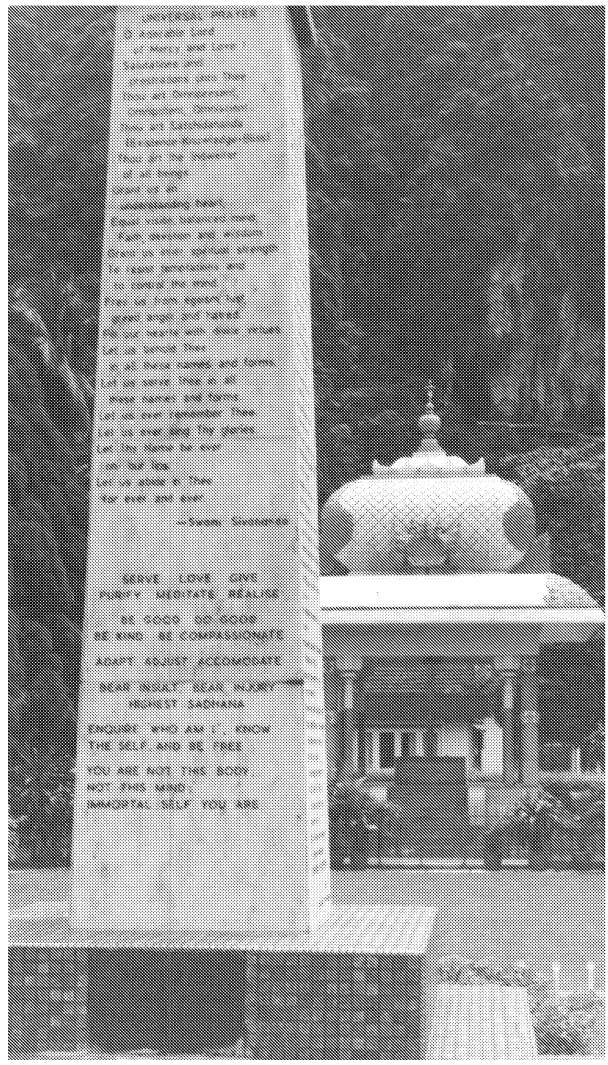


Fig. 21. The "universal prayer" outside the Divine Life Society ashram near the Batu Caves

ages" were imagined in the writings of various supporters of his cause. The radical social agenda was greatly supported by many of Tamil Nadu's college-educated non-Brahmins.

After Ramasamy Naicker visited Malaya in 1929, a movement was inspired to further his aims. The Tamil Reform Association was formed in 1931 with two aims. First, it attacked Sanskritic Hinduism as divisive and oppressive, and, second, it tried to put an end to Tamil practices such as the self-torturing penance of *kavadi*, animal sacrifice, and the drinking of alcohol. To some extent, the efforts of the Tamil Reform Association were successful in inspiring religious reforms. But, in the absence of Brahmin domination,[12] the movement had less sympathy for the radical agnosti-

cism advocated by Ramasamy Naicker. Rather, the organization is said to have inspired a revival of Tamil Hinduism or the Saiva Siddhanta philosophy. Saiva Siddhanta is based on Tamil scriptures known as the Tamil Agamas and the epic *Periya Puranam*, by Sekkilar (ca. twelfth century), which tells the story of the sixty-three Nayanmars or Saivite saints. The stories emphasize *bhakti* toward Siva as the best way to approach God. They also champion the devotee with a "pure heart" over priestly or caste-based authority. Saiva Siddhanta, while not rejecting Vedantic doctrine, is a unique Tamil contribution to Hinduism, particularly to the growth of *bhakti*, which does not emphasize caste or priestly rituals.

The upsurge in popularity of these scriptures only intensified Saivite temple worship and a sense of Tamil pride. This, in turn, has influenced the more Vedantic (based on the Sanskrit Vedas, particularly the Upanishads) movements. The Divine Life Society, Shiva Family, and Ramakrishna Mission are now incorporating elements of Saiva Siddhanta into their journals, lectures, and forms of worship.[13] For example, the Divine Life Society, with its main ashram at the Batu Caves, participates in Thaipusam by opening up its ashram as a hostel for pilgrims, providing medical aid and refreshment, and distributing literature on the "higher" meaning behind devotion to Murugan, the carrying of *kavadis*, and so on. One year, the swami from the ashram carried a wooden *kavadi*, minus the hooks and skewers, with milk pots attached to the ends. This effort was designed to show that the ritual itself was meaningful and could be interpreted from within mainstream Hinduism; however, it was clear that the society aimed to cleanse the ritual of the folk elements deemed non-Sanskritic.[14] The Shiva Family, as its name indicates, positions itself within Tamil Saivism. It also celebrates all the major Saivite festivals with great fervor; however, like the Divine Life Society, its parent organization, its members prefer not to engage in acts of self-mortification.

Overall, the Tamil Reform Association may have given Hinduism in Malaysia a decidedly Tamil orientation, as it nudged the Sanskritic-inspired organizations to reflect South Indian culture. Many other organizations dedicated to the Saiva Siddhanta philosophy and Tamil mystical literature emerged in the 1950s, which tended to shadow political developments in Tamil Nadu (Lee and Rajoo 1987). Just as the earlier religious sentiments were influenced by Indian nationalism, making for a pan-Hindu emphasis, so also the politics of Tamil language and anti-Brahminism in

India contributed to a revival of Tamil consciousness in Malaysia. This was also reflected in the MIC's leadership, which was gradually becoming more Tamil oriented (Ampalavar 1981).

Efforts to consolidate the Hindu reform movements with Saiva Siddhanta organizations were furthered with the founding of the Malaysian Hindu Sangam in 1965. This organization attempted to provide a central body for all Hindu temples and organizations in the country. The Sangam now represents Hindu interests on a national level by serving on the National Unity Board and the Malaysian Inter-religious Council. The Hindu Sangam has promoted Tamil Devaram competitions, while also arguing for a need to reintegrate Sanskritic learning within Malaysian Hinduism. But the Sangam has many critics among members of the Indian intelligentsia, who feel that the organization has been very passive in its leadership efforts and, moreover, that it has contributed nothing intellectual, or even institutionally tangible, to Malaysian Hinduism.

At this time, there are still two "tiers" of Hindu practice and belief in Malaysia. While popular Hinduism resides mostly in the temples and the festivals they sponsor, the urban movements tend to appeal to English-educated members of the middle class. While not in conflict with one another, they seldom work together to produce a collective Hindu identity, in spite of modest efforts by the Hindu Sangam and other organizations. In Max Weber's sense, they are separate "status groups," each having different interests, lifestyles, and relationships with the national narrative and the structures of power within it. But I will argue that these tiers are dialectically constituted within a political field and the cultural politics within it, especially in the shadow of a Malay-Indian dialectic of modernity and religious hierarchy in terms of competing temporal fantasies. In exploring some of manifestations of this middleness in the form of religious practice, the historical consciousness shaping the modern revival of religion and its larger "ethnic" implications will also be considered.

THE CHANGING OF THE GUARD

After Malaysia gained independence in 1957, the educated middle-class Indians suffered a loss of social status. Within the colonial infrastructure they had been seen as a somewhat high-ranking class; however, under the terms of the constitution, they were a "foreign race" within a new Malay

state. As such, their position was changed to one of subordination to a new master, the Malay leaders of the UMNO; however, their self-perceived superiority over the lower classes continued. After the NEP was implemented, with its complementary Islamic agenda, a growing sense of betrayal and unease arose among professional Indians. Not only were Malays becoming more economically powerful, but the representation of national culture was becoming more Malay and Islamic. Modern mosques were constructed in areas that hitherto had been Indian or Chinese. New housing estates emerged in and around Kuala Lumpur, aimed primarily at bolstering a Malay presence in the city. As government jobs, and the politics of promotion within them, were reserved for Malays, many Indian civil servants left for the private sector. Also, as the language policies came to enforce Malay as the language of government and law, an advantage was created for the younger generation of Malays. Moreover, middle-class Indians, who had thrived under the British due to their knowledge of English, were at a disadvantage now, as they, more often than not, were not very proficient in Malay. This, coupled with the quota policies in the educational, governmental, and legal sectors, led to some erosion in class status (Muzaffar 1993).

Interviews and discussions about social changes in Malaysia with many representatives from the Indian middle class produced a clear picture: a religious and artistic revival is occurring, to a great extent, in reaction to the combined effects of rapid Westernization, modernization, and the increasingly intrusive Islamic presence. Many spoke with nostalgia of the earlier, more "genteel" life in Kuala Lumpur before the Muslim "fanatics took over." Many belonged to one or more Hindu reform organizations and expressed optimism that the future would incorporate a more ecumenical, more Vedantic understanding, balancing "spirituality" with material progress; universal religious tolerance would reign as people gradually "outgrew their narrow dogmas." But, it was obvious to them (and, as they intimated, it should have been to me) that Islam would not provide a satisfactory framework for this "positive" development.

HINDU ACTIVISTS: THREE CASES

Mrs. and Mr. Rajasingham

While discussing the Hindu community with a Ceylonese woman named Mrs. Rajasingham, who was a teacher at a Tamil public school in

Brickfields, an Indian enclave in Kuala Lumpur, told me that a cultural revival among urban Indians had begun in the early 1980s in response to rapid Westernization and the destruction of Indian community spaces. The middle-aged woman, clad in a red saree with gold trim, pointed out the proliferation of development projects in Brickfields and the resulting tearing down of older neighborhoods. The neighborhood known as Little Jaffna[15] in Brickfields, for example, had been cleared in order to build a high-rise apartment and business complexes. She said with resignation that the "Prime Minister feels that in order to accommodate the growing population of KL [Kuala Lumpur], high-rise housing is necessary."

Mrs. Rajasingham went on to tell the story of two prominent dancers of *bharata natyam* (classical Indian dance), both of whom are Malay. She felt that these two Malays, having "discovered" the beauty of Indian culture, had greatly inspired a renewed interest in the art form within the Indian community. Dr. Chandrabannu, I was told, paid the price for his conviction. Upon studying *bharata natyam* and odissi (Orissa's classical dance form) in India, he had converted to Hinduism and changed his name. After this apostasy, from the Islamic standpoint, he was ostracized in the media and eventually resettled in Australia.[16] The other dancer, Ramli Ibrahim, also studied in India, mastered the art form, inclusive of the Hindu symbolism inherent in it; Ramli chose, however, to remain a Muslim. Still, his association with a "Hindu" art form has made him an object of contempt and/or ridicule from more "extreme" Malays. Ironically, being a Malay, she said, had raised the position of Indian dance, as Ramli's genius was ambivalently received by the urban intelligentsia of all three races. Certainly, the attention he received stemmed both from his race (as there were many talented Indian dancers around) and his virtuosity in other dance forms. Ramli's efforts, in turn, helped the Indian-run Temple of Fine Arts gain popularity (to be discussed later). Clearly, this point was intended to convey the notion that a few "brilliant" Malays had recognized the "richness" of Indian culture. Moreover, and by implication, they had found their true selves as Malays through this recognition.

I asked her about the Dravidian movement and whether it has made much of an inroad among Malaysian Tamils; she replied that most Hindus were "interested in *universal* Hindu beliefs." She added that she saw herself following the "Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition" and showed me a colorful program from a recent theater production that she had produced

at her school, marking the centenary of Vivekananda's address at the Parliament of Religions. Visiting her home, I was invited to see her shrine room.[17] On the altar was a picture of Parvati, or Sakti, and photos of Ramakrishna, his "spiritual consort," Sarada Devi, Vivekananda, Sivananda, Swami Shantananda of the Shiva Family, and Sai Baba. She told me that she "prays in the room every day, but didn't really worship Sai Baba [a controversial figure claiming to be an avatar of Siva, a contradiction of scripture], but I received his picture as a gift after speaking in a Baba devotee's home, so I feel compelled to honor it as well." "I feel totally happy on those days when I have time to make a *mala* (garland) for the shrine," she added. In general, her ecumenical attitude and prayer room exemplified those of many middle-class, educated Hindus that I met in Malaysia. Her charitable activities, aside from her teaching, were centered on the Pure Life Society, an ashram-cum-orphanage run in a Hindu manner.

During the Navarathri festival, I accompanied Mrs. Rajasingham to the Pure Life Society in Puchong, an area associated with Indian poverty. Her maternal uncle was the founding swami, who "after struggling in life" had started this service-based movement. The swami had been initiated by, arguably, the most famous Tamil mystic of this century, Ramana Maharshi, in Tamil Nadu. After completing religious training, he settled in Malaysia, where the rest of his family had migrated from Ceylon. He then opened the ashram in Puchong during the 1950s with blessings from the Divine Life Society, a major Hindu organization in India. It was designed as "a school, an orphanage, and a temple for all religions." Originally, the ashram cared for orphans from all races. In fact, under the first prime minister, "the ashram had received accolades for its humanitarian and patriotic efforts." But, "as the Islamic movement took hold in the eighties, the Malay children were pulled out by the government" because of its Hindu orientation. She, and her younger brother, who had also come along that night, expressed their disgust with the actions of "small-minded men." They emphasized that the ashram "never asked any child to pray in any religion other than their own"; they conceded, however, that all religions received the "same reverence," Islam being propagated on an equal footing with other religions; that, they lamented, was too "liberal for the Islamic department." To emphasize the point further, the brother told me of the suffering experienced by the Malay children who had to leave their homes, friends, and teachers while relocating to a new "Muslim orphan-

age" subsidized by the government. He added that "the ashram has also suffered a loss of government financial support." While listening, I could not help but notice that the "temple for all religions" was obviously Hindu, both inside and out. It had a North-Indian-style dome, with lotus trim around the edges, and within its walls the shrine resembled any ashram-style temple I had previously seen in India or Malaysia. Of course, I was seeing the temple at a time when it no longer had Malay patrons.

The Navarathri worship at the ashram began in the early evening. It involved the singing of devotional songs followed by the *arati* before an elaborate *kollu*—an altar of dolls, a customary practice during this festival.[18] After singing *bhajans*, a *bharata natyam* performance was given by students who were also orphans in the ashram. After the performance, I was introduced to the charismatic current head of the ashram, Mother Mangalam. This Hindu "nun" was a dynamic woman around sixty years of age (in 1994). She acts as an administrator, educator, counselor, disciplinarian, and guru. I was told that all the children both respect and fear her.

The following day, I was invited to Mrs. Rajasingham's house in order to witness Navarathri "at home." Ceylonese Tamils, in particular, are known to erect elaborate *kollus* in their homes. Indeed, her house had a colorful and meticulous shrine decorated with rice *kolams* (designs), coconuts, *kuttu villakus* (oil lamps), and *malas* (garlands) made from flowers. *Bhajans* and *devaram* were sung in Sanskrit and Tamil, respectively. After this, one teenage girl performed a *bharata natyam* piece in the house to the accompaniment of taped music. While I was whisked around to meet all of the guests, in order to explain how an American man had been "drawn to Tamil culture," which seemed to somehow please them very much, the men sat outside in the shade discussing politics. When I could finally join them, the Ceylonese men asked my views on the prime minister's "baiting of the West." Before I could answer, one man told me that Malaysia would have to change someday and "let other races take more part in the building of policies which affect our future." Just as this was said, the nearby mosque announced the call to prayers. At that moment Mrs. Rajasingham's husband looked toward me and said: "Do you see what sort of *nonsense* we have to put up with? Five times a day we are forced to listen to that noise, in spite of the fact that there are hardly any Malays living here.[19] The government just built that mosque to *intimidate* us."

The following week, Mr. and Mrs. Rajasingham invited me to attend a

Ceylonese wedding in Brickfields. They wanted to explain to me the intricate symbolism behind the marriage rituals. After the ceremony, while down in the reception hall, I noticed a wooden model of a future temple to be built in Brickfields. The elaborate structure was a replica of a temple existing near Jaffna, Sri Lanka. Mr. Rajasingham explained to me that the temple was supposed to have a "brilliant *gopuram*" (tower), but the government had interfered with the construction because a mosque was somewhere nearby. He explained that no structure can be as tall as a mosque if one is in the vicinity. The same thing had happened in nearby Petaling Jaya (a suburb), he added; when the Vinayagar (the elephant-headed god) temple was under construction a few years back, the government had interfered with the *gopuram* construction on that temple, again for the same reason—a mosque was somewhere in the vicinity.

Mr. Rajasingham went on to ask me how the "Muslim problem" in America was. With great candor, he told me how "*fanatic* Muslims are ruining the country." They (Muslim activists) were "against the modern integration of the nation and insist on pushing Malay language and Islam onto every aspect of society." He added:

> Before, the Indians and Chinese pretty much ran the show. The Indians were brought in by the British for labor and Jaffna Tamils for administrative work. The current trend is to hire *unqualified Malays* over more qualified Tamils. The Chinese, because of their economic power, are still doing fine. But, the Tamils are being left behind. The rapid industrialization is also affecting the Indians as the green heritage and historic homes and buildings are being destroyed—especially, the *Indian areas are being upgraded* by projects.

Traveling to a function in Seremban[20] later that day, he discussed the Indian influence through the ages in Malaysia. He described the "Chola empire" and their settlement in Kedah (northern Malaysia),[21] as well as the Indianized aspects of Malay culture, citing certain Malay words and marriage customs that derive from Sanskrit Tamil sources. Speaking of the Hindu kingdom in Malacca, he told a version of its "history" that cannot be found in the "history book" versions being taught to Malaysian students. He argued that King Parameswara, the king who was to become Iskandar Shah, the first Malay sultan, in the fifteenth century, "*was really a Tamil.*" History records him only as a Sumatran prince; however, Mr. Rajasingham claimed that his true ethnic origins, as well as other evidence of an ancient

Tamil presence, were deliberately ignored because "Indians were not encouraged to think about their deep roots in Malaysia." He concluded that Parameswara's conversion had "forever changed the history of the country"; but he added that this conversion was only a "political necessity" and was sure that the king "*didn't really convert.*" This is a statement regnant with desire. The putative father of the Malay nation was secretly a Hindu, despite his public conversion to Islam. Yet, the "fanatics" with their "nonsense" are anxious about Indians—so much so that they must tower over their temples, pull their orphaned children free from their influence, and silence a "history" in favor of an inauthentic ideology, so insecure as to require "intimidation."

The "Colonel"

The Malaysian Hindudharma Mamandaram is the brainchild of the "Colonel," a retired officer from the Malaysian Armed Forces. He is an amiable and energetic man around sixty years of age, whose parents came from the Chettiar community of Tamil Nadu. The Colonel is fairly well known among Indians above the age of thirty, as not many members of their community had achieved such a high ranking in postindependence Malaysia. After retirement, he has focused his energies on religious pursuits, first with the Malaysian Hindu Sangam, where he was formerly secretary general, and now with his own allied organization. The Hindudharma Mamandaram is a small organization that works with other Hindu bodies in an advisory capacity.

Finding the Colonel's office in Brickfields was no easy task. I wove my way past a "red-light" district, only to arrive at the YMCA doorstep, where I noticed a poster in the second-floor window across the road, down a side-street alley. On it was a picture of a Hindu temple from India. In small lettering above it was written "Malaysia Hindu Mamandaram" in Tamil. On introducing myself to the small-sized Colonel, I was warmly received and offered tea. After tea, he asked what my "spiritual aspirations" were. I, startled by the question, and perhaps recognizing myself in his question (and his desire for an aspirant), mumbled something about an interest in Hindu movements and briefly described my earlier research in India.[22] This seemed to satisfy him, as he began a long and eloquent monologue, stopping briefly to ask what questions I might have for him. But my ques-

tions were less important to him than was the message he wanted to express. The following passage encapsulated his view of Hindu culture, how it is practiced in Malaysia, and what is needed in the present social context.

> When we speak of religion, it covers the entire life. Not just for weekends. To me, I look at religion, as compared to the man on the streets, who is not well versed in the *Veda*, it is still part of his life. If you look at *Sutras* and *Samskaras*,[23] it is integrated into his life, isn't it? He just practices it without giving it a religious name. . . . Only now, with education and exposure, we want to question it, isn't it [don't we]? Then we are required to explain why this is done. . . .
>
> When we talk of the Hindu culture, it is a total force. It will take care of man until he departs. When we talk of the Hindu culture as such, we include divisions. First, our religion involves philosophy. Secondly, it talks of rituals. Third, it is a system of paths; and lastly, it is a system of morality. The conflict in our country occurs between the first two. Let's say we go to the temple. We offer a coconut as a ritual offering. To the layman, it is just that. But when one goes to the *higher field of philosophy*, it is the sum total of the whole religion. The outside husk is like the body; after peeling it, which is very difficult, you open to see the fruit. Only God can peel away the body with its muscles and flesh, strip open the ego, and reach the *Atman* (soul). But to the man on the street, it is just an offering, *usually for material benefit.* We Hindus believe in One God, He sees all as manifestations of That. He argues about this god or that ritual or *Sadangu.*

The Colonel clearly separates himself from the "man on the street." He argues that educated Hindus must interpret the philosophy behind the rituals so as to reach the "higher field"; however, "this is lacking in Malaysia." He told me that in olden times many of the priests in India were also gurus. The "high priest, when you talk to him, he should be a guru like Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, or Sivananda, or anyone." But, the priests in today's temples, he explained, "just do the ritual for the money they can receive."

He mentioned that the Samskaras, and in particular, Purushottam,[24] the four Hindu aims in life, were designed to "lead man to the ultimate." But now, especially in Malaysia, "material pursuits" were taking precedence over all else.

> When we talk of wealth, we mean money, children, and wife. In Malaysia, what has happened? In our papers and T.V., the Prime Minis-

> ter will say "we must not forget our values." Being an Islamic government, we cannot appeal to our community with Hindu traditions through the media. When we look inside the culture—"get money, have a car, own a house, and have a good job" . . . you know? And religion and culture are being pushed back, back; and religion must be there too. One must have both. But money must be obtained and used in the *dharma* way.

This passage suggests a careful critique of the modernization process promulgated by the government. While he does not blame the prime minister for materialism, and the erosion of "proper" Hindu notions of a balanced life, he suggests that the government-controlled media have been appropriated by a capitalist agenda through its emphasis on consumerism, which, simultaneously, is tempered by Islamic messages, leaving non-Muslims with little in the way of media weaponry to fight the "loss of values." By extension, the hedonistic "Western ways" of non-Malays can be contrasted with the concerted efforts to inculcate spirituality among the Muslims, especially when considering the sort of programming allowed for Chinese and Indians, which tends to be somewhat vulgar (martial arts films, bawdy musicals, etc.) to educated Indians. The Colonel is thus fighting a war with limited technical means.

When I asked him whether media materials from India, in the form of books, magazines, films, and devotional songs, were of any use in his efforts to revitalize Malaysian Hinduism, he suggested that the homeland of Hinduism had lost its way.

> We in Malaysia, it is a real sore point with India. We are being polluted by Tamil Nadu. We don't want anything to do with Tamil Nad[u]. The culture there has completely gone to the dogs—you know what I mean! We have witnessed it. We are now drawing a line between Tamil Nad and us. We are now talking about Malaysian Hindus. That is our context. We are born here, *we want to build a Malaysian Hindu.* You look at the books and pictures from Tamil Nadu? Let me tell you, I just went to Tamil Nadu in search of a special edition of the *Mahabharata* in Madras. I searched there far and wide. In one shop, I asked the owner, he said that I was "wasting my time" and that I should "go and read some popular novels." I was flabbergasted!

Yet, his relationship with India was ambiguous and perhaps ambivalent. He later described pilgrimage tours to India he organizes for Malaysian Indians every year. They visit all of the principal sacred centers in South

India, as well as the Sankaracharya Mutt (ashram) in Kanchipuram for *darshan* and spiritual counsel.[25] If fact, he said his organization follows the instructions of the Sankaracharya, as he is their *archarya* (guru).

His criticism of India, and in particular of "Madras culture," was really directed at the flow of Tamil movies, tapes, and magazines, which are the main sources of entertainment for the average working-class Malaysian Tamil. This "pollution" is what the government allows, while disallowing a serious Hindu media forum or even locally produced dramas. This became all the more clear in a second meeting, when he told me that he "wished that the government would *ban all this rubbish*," referring to the film culture and its related industries. To the Colonel, this transnational link, via the proliferation of media materials, was hardly "liberating," nor raising cultural awareness, at least of the authentic kind. Rather, this "film fetishism" produced rather unsavory cultural and social consequences.

On a second visit, over lunch at a vegetarian, Brahmin-owned and operated restaurant in Brickfields, we continued our conversation over the sounds of traffic noise and the latest Tamil film hits blaring from the music shop next door. With dal and rice stuck to our fingers, we discussed Hindu symbolism. He impressed me with his knowledge of mythology and the apparent ease with which he was able to interpret stories from a Vedantic viewpoint.[26] Mixing Tamil and English, he outlined the basic philosophies of Hinduism. After tea, we moved upstairs, where a member of his organization had a flat. For the next two hours he critiqued Hinduism as practiced in Malaysia and the pressures faced by the Hindu youth and proposed a remedy to these problems.

He began by criticizing the self-mortification witnessed during festivals such as Thaipusam. This practice, he maintained, was not part of Hindu culture; however, he advocated that penance be observed through the carrying of a milk pot (*pal kuddam*). But, he also said that it was getting blown out of proportion by the media.

> You may have some youngsters running wild in how they carry *kavadis* during Thaipusam at Batu Caves. But we have a silent majority. They condemn all this; they approach us all the time and ask what can be done to *stop this embarrassment.* It is over reported, like the TV2 [government-controlled channel] showing a chap dying of famine, while suppose . . . over 90 percent are living free.

He is defensive here about the negative stereotyping of Indians, which is perpetuated by "overreporting." I suspected that the second statement, regarding the famine victim, was also suggestive of how many middle-class Indians resent the way that India is represented on Malaysian television. Some middle-class Indians told me that India is only shown in a very negative light (e.g., with political violence, poverty, degradation, and bawdy entertainment) on TV in order to contrast it with the veritable "paradise" of Malaysia.[27] While one can understand why he resists the signification of Indians in terms of *kavadi* trance, it must also be remembered that over one million people attended each of the last two Thaipusam celebrations at the Batu Caves and it was estimated that approximately ten thousand people carried *kavadi*—unless, of course, he is right, and the numbers are exaggerated to create an impression. In any case, his reference to "youngsters running wild" suggests an attitude of moral indignation, or at the very least an evolutionary hierarchy of Hindu practice, as leading inevitably to the "higher field of philosophy." To "build a Malaysian Hindu," in other words, required a builder.

The Colonel further argued that "the fire is there, especially among the young, to *purify* Hinduism." This apparent zeal for revitalization was due, he argued, to the pressures felt by four basic challenges affecting the younger generation.

> First, modern life in Kuala Lumpur requires that we work hard, and chart our own course, being a doctor, lawyer, etc. Secondly, we talk of technology, everybody is tuned to that, so we are interested always in time management, unlike in India where time is free. Here, as in Western countries, he has worked out his life plan, and daily plan, so we can't interfere. We don't have the time to do the rituals. Thirdly, we are exposed to other religions. In school, children are exposed to Islamic culture. And fourthly, other cultures are *equally strong, if not stronger.* Islam is very strong here. The young people want a *purified culture.*

Once again the themes of Westernization and Islamization dominate his thoughts. Purity and strength seem intertwined in his project of building the Malaysian Hindu. By implication, exposure requires a steadfast commitment to purification—to be "equally strong, if not stronger." Nostalgia for an imagined and "timeless" India contrasts with the compartmentalized ruptures of time and space (technology and modernity) and culture (Islam and the West), experienced in modern Malaysia. While the

Malaysian Hindu project he describes is admittedly produced out of the crucible of "four challenges"—immanent to the contradictions of contemporary Malaysian life—they rest on a transcendental and timeless truth outside of the modern swirl. In the Himalayan heights of Hindu philosophy, a timeless and purified essence of origins can be rediscovered.

I mentioned to the Colonel that the temples in Kuala Lumpur are fully packed with devotees on Fridays during the evening *pujas.* He answered that while the resurgence of temple worship is not a bad thing,

> welfare is totally neglected. We are fighting a losing battle because they [the temples] do things in an ad hoc way . . . *nothing ever progresses.* One small town will have five temples. One for Murugan, Vinayagar, Perumal (Vishnu), and Mariamman. People are always willing to give donations for some ritual *kumabhishekam* (temple christening), or something. During festivals, even more money and time are wasted. If only one-third of this money were spent on education . . .

Furthermore, he argued that the priests had "spoiled religion" because they "just break the coconuts," adding, "Ramakrishna was a priest, but he realized that God was not a stone." To my surprise, he even told me that priests in Malaysia were inventing or elaborating rituals in order to collect higher fees. Here, while "progress" is a key concept, the ad hoc nature of Hindu practice in Malaysia is not simply unevolved, it is corrupted. Indeed, he implies that "welfare," as the Christian missionaries also charge, has been neglected in Hindu ritual practice.

To further necessary reforms, the Hindu Mamandaram is involved in three main areas: the family, schools, and temples. The Colonel believes that the materials his organization is producing will serve as a "course on Hinduism" that parents can teach to their children. Thus, "we can get away from priests." Education, aside from the take-home pamphlets and books, consists of courses in Hindu "basics" at participating temples.[28] Unfortunately, he lamented, the "Minister of Education will not allow us to teach courses at Government schools." Third, he believes that the temples can be reformed in order to reflect "proper Hindu" practice. Unnecessary rituals can be done away with if some "standardization" is enforced, which his organization, together with the Hindu Sangam, can oversee. Two ways to "purify" the temples would be to make sure "only one deity is honored in every temple," as the vast array of deities, and the elaborate sets of rituals for each, confuses rather than enlightens the devotee who needs to "focus

the mind" while entering a temple; second, all Hindus must begin to make annual pilgrimages to the temples in different corners of Malaysia. This, he argues, will foster Malaysian Hindu consciousness and create a sense of the sacred topography within the nation. Here, perhaps, the impetus to pilgrimage appears to counter his rationalist leanings and critiques of Malaysian temple worship, yet he sees value in ritual so long as it progresses to the "higher understanding." Moreover, there is a sociopolitical project embedded within his notion of pilgrimage.

The planning of a national Hindu pilgrimage within an Islamic nation is an interesting endeavor. While the Colonel does not directly contest the Islamic status of the nation, nor the special rights and privileges of the *bumiputras*, he is suggesting a possible "Hindu Malaysia" existing within the framework of the larger national rhetoric. This carefully situates him where he and his organization are not easily labeled. Also, as a former military officer, he harbors much patriotic sentiment for his homeland. His repeated emphasis on creating a "Malaysian Hinduism" positions him well. The charge often leveled against non-Malays is that they are not loyal to Malaysia. Hence, his "nationalist" credentials are strong, and in that position he is freer to imagine building a Malaysian Hindu identity.

As I left the Colonel, he emphasized his organization's dilemma. "The government in this country is very good—we are free to worship as we please. We can produce what we need to do this [implement his plans]. But, we lack the financial support because priorities are all wrong."

The Professor

The "Professor" is from a prominent Ceylonese Tamil family. As she welcomed me into her university office, I looked around to see a statue of Thiruvallavur, as well as pictures of Gandhi and Ramana Maharshi.[29] When I told her I was interested in Hindu and Tamil revivalism in Malaysia, she seemed pleasantly surprised.

While not belonging to a particular movement, the professor devoted much of her time to various Hindu-related causes. She was acting "patron" of various Indian student organizations, served as an adviser on scriptural matters for the Hindu Sangam and various temples in the area, and gave public lectures on Hinduism. She prides herself on her "clear mind, unclouded by prejudice, nor fanaticism." She recounted to me the

influences that had given her the "strength and wisdom" to maintain her "individuality." Since her early schooling days, she said, "Vivekananda has always been my hero." He, she maintained, had always spoken "the truth, without trying to confuse the people." His "logical and reasonable mind" had helped her realize the importance of individuality and not succumbing to the "fanaticism of various sects." The "invigorating words" of the swami had given her the inner strength necessary to achieve what she had. Another source of inspiration was a man who was both a "Gandhian," wearing a "white cap," and an agnostic supporter of Ramasamy Naicker's Self-Respect Movement (an anti-Brahmin movement) in Tamil Nadu. This man, her music teacher, was "more spiritual" in his generosity and sincerity than "most religious people." Knowing him inspired her to fight religious bigotry and self-righteousness. These two influences account, in her estimation, for her iconoclastic viewpoints.

The Professor argues that the more "esoteric philosophical schools spend too much time and energy trying to confuse the people," while they squabble among themselves over fine theological points. She recounted a story about a dispute between the "men" on the Kandasamy temple board in Brickfields. This temple, as described earlier while discussing the Rajasinghams, was rebuilding. While planning the new structure, a heated debate broke out among the "pundits" planning it. Some felt that a separate Sakti (Rajeswary, in this case) shrine should be included in the temple, while others argued that Kandasamy temples must be purely Saivite, without the "pollution" of goddess worship.[30] The Professor was summoned for advice on the matter. The debate, she recounted, centered on whether Saktas and Saivas were complementary or separate spiritual forces. To her, the matter was academic; as a nondualistic Vedantist at heart, she saw all deities as aspects of, or human conceptualizations about, the "One." But, from within the Saiva Siddhanta school of thought, she cited the Tirumantiram[31] to show how both sects could worship in each others' temples. Going beyond advice, she "scolded these men" publicly (within the board meeting) for "trying to confuse the people."

In another incident, she was angered by the publisher of a Malaysian Hindu magazine called *Sakti*. The publisher, upset that so many Hindus were converting to Christianity, wrote an editorial criticizing Christians for worshipping God as a "dying man on a cross." For his uncharitable comment, he earned her scolding. She countered in another journal that Hin-

dus should never stoop to that level, in spite of what "other religions often do."

In both of these incidents, and in other discussions regarding Malaysian Hinduism, she directed her critique toward those "men" (usually gender specific) who try to represent the religion at the "highest level" for the Hindu masses. Rarely does she criticize "folk Hinduism" or those who practice it, though she herself is a vegetarian and follows the path of Jnana Yoga, the intellectual and rationalist stream in Vedanta philosophy. Rather, she reforms the reformers, placing herself, either consciously or not, into the role of a Vivekananda or Ramana Maharshi—that is, a defender of individual paths, and yet critical of the self-righteous impulses within any elite community that carries its religiosity as a badge of distinction.

The Professor told me that she had noticed a distinct revival of Hinduism in Malaysia. Among her students, she explained, the number of activities and participants in them demonstrated a growth of Hindu consciousness. There are both "inside and outside" challenges contributing to this. Choosing her words carefully, she discussed a "camouflaged situation." From the outside, the proselytizing of Islam, through the educational system and the mass media,[32] has impacted Hindus, not so much through mass conversions as by creating a "sense that their cultural heritage is being left out of the picture," as images of the nation are broadcast without the inclusion of a Hindu presence. As such, she claimed, the students actively seek to "find their roots."

Also, she said that Christianity is gaining converts among the Hindus and Sikhs. Thus, the Hindu Sangam is worried and has created the Hindu Action Committee—a group organized in order to propagate Hindu philosophy in the Indian community. Their five principal aims are to: (1) offer religious education, (2) provide social services for those in need, (3) utilize the mass media through printed materials, (4) offer cultural activities such as Tamil language classes, and (5) transform Malaysian temples into centers for learning. Upon the Hindu Sangam's request, she is preparing an explanatory book with "guidelines" for Malaysian Hindus. As her academic position provides her with a forum, she is determined and honored to "serve God in this way." Perhaps she is also ambivalent about this enterprise, as it might overly "standardize" the diversity within the religion, which is its strength and the focus of her critiques of those who would

speak on behalf of others "less wise" than they. I gathered this impression, as she seemed reluctant to start the project. But, she said, "Keep reminding me to finish." I faithfully reminded her for over two years but to no avail. I also wanted a copy for my own academic purposes, and she knew it.

Like the educated Hindu activists discussed previously, and the many more I met while studying Hindu movements in Kuala Lumpur, the Professor is concerned with a "spiritual vacuum" that is enveloping Malaysia as it becomes more affluent. She decries the shopping malls, Western popular culture, and the "Rajanikanth mentality" within the Indian community.[33] She has addressed the latter problem when visiting estates in the countryside, telling the young men that "fighting makes Rajanikanth a rich man. But fighting will make the Indians a poor race."

The problem of materialism, in its many manifestations, is a concern she "shares with the prime minister." Like the Colonel, her "strategy" is to position her rhetoric within the power structure. "The spiritual values campaign of the prime minister will hold in check the advance of materialism. *I fully support his efforts.*" "This will," she insists, "also help stop the disturbing racial segregation we see on the campus." I took this to mean that Islamic revival will affect non-Muslims. That is, a spiritual awakening among all Malaysians will foster ecumenical dialogue. But the reaction of non-Muslims—is it a counterdiscourse, as was suggested earlier (i.e., the "outside" challenge)? Or is it coming into the prime minister's fold in order to hopefully affect national religious policies and discourses (i.e., strategic ecumenism)? During my last meeting with her, she left me with a final, and more definitive, message.

> *Hinduism is the religion of the future.* [There] are too many fanatics placing too many restrictions and qualifications in so many ways on people's lives. *As Hinduism is suppressed,* the law of karma will make it *rise up* again. Slowly, by the next generation, its unique liberalness and profundity will attract other races and it will rise up.

As I left her office, I added, "But this isn't going to happen unless you finish your 'essentials of Hinduism' book." The Professor answered, "I knew you would remind me of that."

Seen in the context of a Malay nationalist ideology that emphasizes de-Indianization, the statement encapsulates a desire for recognition within Malaysian Hindu ecumenism. The "restrictions" on people's lives, on the

one hand, refers to the prohibitive religious and ethnic policies that "protect" Islamic and Malay interests and categories and, more generally, to the ascripted ethnic identities and the stigmas and ambivalence they produce, particularly among elite Indian Hindus, who suffer the wound of a veiled anti-Indian discourse. In this statement, we also see a desire to transcend the symbolic order beyond what is suppressed in the name of the discriminatory ethnic categories. Moreover, in this statement, and in the two movements discussed shortly, we witness a desire that Malays come to recognize their true selves. The Malays will, in other words, recognize a transcendent and universal truth manifested in the superiority of Hinduism. The exacerbated diasporic sensibility must, in turn, be understood from the perspective of subordinate eliteness and class difference, that is, as an ambivalent and alienated expression of one kind of Indianness and the suppression of another (i.e., the stigmatized working-class Tamil).

In the next part of this chapter, I examine two contemporary Hindu reform movements in Kuala Lumpur. Both of these organizations have historical links with the elite religious culture that had earlier come into Malaysia. Also, the followers of both movements (like those discussed earlier) are articulating ideologies of ecumenism and cultural plurality.

THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION

The Ramakrishna Mission is one of India's most established representatives of "modern Hinduism" (van der Veer 1994; Chatterjee 1992; Srinivas 1966). The movement, started by Swami Vivekananda at the turn of the century, was instrumental in the revival and reform of Hinduism. The Ramakrishna Mission in Malaya, and later Malaysia, went from initial prominence in the early part of the century, to relative inactivity during the postwar years, to, again, greater influence within the Hindu community. Even during the years when the India-based organization was not actively holding an ashram in Kuala Lumpur, nor stationing one of its swamis in Malaysia, the organization continued to influence middle-class Hindus through its readily available publications. Also, the Singapore ashram has served as a base for activities in the peninsula throughout the century. The Divine Life Society and Vivekananda Ashram also utilized a similar "renaissance" platform, which included, among other things, hagiographic literature related to the lives and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and

Swami Vivekananda. It is fair to say that among the educated middle-class Hindus in Malaysia the Ramakrishna movement, either directly or indirectly, has had a great impact on the development of a modern Hindu identity (as was also seen in our three previous examples) within the Tamil community (Arasaratnam 1979, 1993; Lee and Ackerman 1988). Also, among non-Tamil Indians, the movement has always been popular.

Today the Ramakrishna Mission is once again extending its efforts in Malaysia through a core group of devotees. They were[34] planning a multimillion-dollar ashram in one of the most exclusive neighborhoods in Petaling Jaya, the prosperous suburb of Kuala Lumpur, which also has a sizable Indian population. Also, the movement is reaching out through social work to the non-Indian community, and, significantly, it is proselytizing within the more or less marginalized Tamil estate communities. As such, it is enhancing the movement's potential for Tamil involvement rather than resting content as another "elite" movement for high-caste, wealthy Hindus. The "Vivekananda Centenary,"[35] celebrated in 1993, which had worldwide ramifications among diasporic Hindus, also garnered momentum for the movement in Malaysia. For the following section, I conducted research at the movement's Petaling Jaya ashram.[36]

TOH PUAN UMA SAMBANTHAN

I was a bit nervous about meeting Uma Sambanthan, the widow of Tun Sambanthan, one of the important figures in the story of modern Malaysia. Uma, known respectfully as Toh Puan, an honorific title of the highest order in Malaysia, is the chairman of the National Land Finance Cooperative Society (NLFCS), an organization started by her late husband while he was a cabinet minister and president of the MIC. Also, she is the most important individual behind the efforts of the Ramakrishna Mission in Malaysia.[37] The cooperative grew out of the idea of a swami associated with the Ramakrishna Mission and later the Divine Life Society. It was designed to assist estate workers who wished to buy their own land and become rubber or palm-oil smallholders.

I approached Wisma Sambanthan, a modern twenty-eight-story building in downtown Kuala Lumpur. This building is the only high-rise in Malaysia with a giant neon sign in Tamil script. After arranging the interview over the phone, she asked me to meet her at the building in order "to

see how far we have come as an organization." Indeed, the building made an impression, especially considering that it belonged to a cooperative. Not only was it huge, but marble floors and glass panels also gave it a corporate feel. Outside by the door, VIP parking spots were filled with gleaming new Mercedes sedans. After clearing the security checkpoint downstairs, I rode the elevator up to the main office of the NLFCS. I was glad to have worn a tie and slacks, noticing how sharp everyone was dressed. After waiting some time in a frigid air-conditioned room, a secretary to Toh Puan led me into her office. There, I was warmly greeted by a heavyset woman, who, with some difficulty, stood up from her desk and walked to greet me. I noticed she had a very bad limp. In contrast to all the "business suits" around me, I was surprised to find Toh Puan wearing a simple cotton saree, without makeup or fashioned hair. She complained to me about the cold building and the Mercedes car in which she is chauffeured. "I would have preferred a 'Proton' [Malaysian car], but the deputy director insisted I take the car, because people would talk if he had a Mercedes and I only used a Proton," she said with gentle sarcasm. Perhaps reading my mind, she added, "The building is not exactly what Tun Sambanthan was about, but it is a symbol to the Indians of how far we have come," adding that, "Indians come to us from every corner of the country for financial assistance—we even give scholarships to needy Indian students so that they can get a college education." She explained that the building was not occupied solely by the NLFCS; rather, the rent collected from various tenants also helped in the organization's efforts. In addition, the basement of the building had an auditorium, which served as an "Indian community center." Indeed, I had a hard time at first reconciling the image of the saintly Toh Puan within the environment of corporate luxury.

Uma Sambanthan is legendary within the Indian community for her generosity and compassion. When I first met her, her mother was very ill and soon thereafter passed away. Uma was also suffering from ill health, and told me that she is almost seventy years old and would also be "leaving soon." In spite of her troubles, she generously gave a great deal of time to me, recounting many stories about her husband and the early days of the MIC. In particular, she focused on the connections among Hinduism, the Ramakrishna movement, and political developments in Malaysia.

She began by describing the origins of the NLFCS. It was the idea of a Ramakrishna Mission swami who later broke from the movement over a

conflict in assignment. After founding a boy's home in Trichy, Tamil Nadu, the swami came to a newly independent Malaysia and became concerned with the welfare of Tamils on the estates. He suggested that a cooperative society might be the solution to the impending splintering of the estates.

Discussing the first election in the newly independent Malaysia, Toh Puan described how the climate in the coalition alliance was gradually shifting toward an ostensibly pro-Malay platform; with the selling off of the larger estates to private interests, mostly under the jurisdiction of UMNO, there was an upsurge in "ugly Indian opposition" to the MIC and Sambanthan's leadership of it. She recalled that her husband visited the estates during this period and remarked, "Where are our people?" The uncertainty experienced by the Indian community, as the economy and government were still in the formative stages, especially regarding the citizenship rights of immigrants, resulted in the voluntary repatriation of a substantial segment of the Indian population (Sandhu 1993; Arasaratnam 1979; Ampalavar 1981). Later, this repatriation was made mandatory for many Indians under stricter citizenship legislation. In response to the growing distrust among the Indian opposition that the MIC had "sold out to UMNO," Sambanthan took the swami's suggestion. He approached Tunku Abdul Rahman and asked him if it was possible to start a cooperative society to help the Tamils. "Tunku, being a practical man, saw this as a way that the Indians could solve some of their problems without state assistance," she said. Tunku, she added, shared the very close confidence of Sambanthan, and both, she claimed, "agonized terribly" over political decisions that affected their constituencies.

The NLFCS was, by most accounts, the most effective agent for rural Indians, as well as the highlighting achievement of Sambanthan's MIC tenure. But, its association with the MIC was also a hindrance, as radical labor unions saw it as weakening their playing hand. Uma Sambanthan maintains that the NLFCS has helped numerous Indians own their own land, which in turn might have been sold to a developer or utilized as a smallholding estate. Her father, she told me, was one of the biggest investors in estate land. He would then sell pieces of his estates to those who wanted to own their own land. In this way, it was believed, the majority of Indians in the country would have some economic security and hence, be less likely to migrate back to India.

While her husband was not particularly religious, he had great respect for the Ramakrishna Mission, especially its social work. He also used to feel "refreshed" when praying to Mariamman (the Tamil goddess). In contrast, Uma's family was deeply committed to the Ramakrishna Mission, as her father had been "initiated" into the order as a lay disciple. The Sambanthans, on the one hand, subsidized temples for the principal Tamil deities, such as Mariamman, on the NLFCS estates, and on the other hand, were themselves drawn more to the Vedantic message and "Divine" personages associated with the Ramakrishna movement. She explained it to me thus: "Swamiji's [Vivekananda's] message will surely help the Malaysian Hindus unite and awaken their inner divinity." but at the same time, "it is in the estates where one finds the real Hinduism, *the simple religion of faith and devotion. Have you seen the Tamils at Thaipusam?* There you can see the wondrous faith in God." In Uma Sambanthan's view, the Ramakrishna Mission is not to supplant the beliefs of Tamil Hindus but to fortify them with a Vedantic core, which will, in turn, imbue them with greater philosophical and moral weight, leading to the uplift of the community. Her attitude is consistent with Vivekananda's own defense of "village" Hinduism.[38]

Part of her philosophy can also be understood in light of her wartime experiences. During the Japanese occupation, "Netaji," the affectionate title given to Subhas Chandra Bose, was a powerful figure to the Malaysian Indians. His Indian National Army, organized through Japanese backing and training, existed during the first, and perhaps the only, time when Malaysian Indians realized themselves as a collective force. Netaji, a nationalist leader exiled from Bengal, represented a more aggressive side of the Hindu Renaissance ideology, as compared to his rival, Gandhi. As a Vivekananda devotee, he saw a way to articulate an emotionally salient ideology, making armed struggle into sacred devotion to Mother India. While on the one hand, the Malaysian and Singaporean Indians were imagining a patriotic duty that was articulated through the public rallies of Netaji, they were also forming the basis of a Malaysian Indian political entity. The MIC, as will be discussed in the next chapter, had close ties with the Congress Party in India. While Netaji advocated a different approach to Indian independence than Gandhi did, they both utilized the discursive strategies begun by Vivekananda and Bankim Chandra. The fragmentation and general marginalization experienced by the powerless estate workers (Raja-

krishnan 1987) also made them suitable for recruitment from the seemingly invincible Japanese. Promises to liberate a "greater India," which, in the minds of some, would include Malaya, were very attractive to the estate Tamils—in spite of their servitude to the British estate owners. Netaji's patriotic call, given the ripe social conditions for diasporic consciousness, was a unifying, and perhaps fortifying, message to the oppressed. At least that is how Uma Sambanthan remembers it. In her own words:

> Though Netaji preached differently than Gandhi, and while many of us admired Gandhi, and while Netaji associated with the monsters in Germany and Japan, he *gave us backbone.* Somehow, he transformed the *meek Tamil* estate worker *into a proud and disciplined fighter.* At that time all MIC leaders held posts in the INA. John Thivy, the first MIC leader, was secretary to Netaji. Netaji himself was increasingly tormented with his alliance with Germany and Japan. You could clearly see it on his face; and it got worse over time. Many of the educated Indians did not admire this about Netaji; but at that time, the British were equally obnoxious. The survivors of the INA went on to become the leaders within the Malaysian Indian community. Perhaps the experience also accounts for the fact that the MIC was the first political party in Malaysia to demand independence for Malaya. After the war, the British had the bad judgment to blow up the INA war memorial in Singapore. The memorial stood for *Indian sacrifice and unity*, couldn't they have left it alone?

Thus, under the right conditions, Indian unity can be forged. Now, it is the "unifying" ideology of the Ramakrishna Mission that Uma Sambanthan hopes will promote a similar solidarity, without the moral uncertainty that accompanied the INA. Like others who knew or met Netaji, they could not help but be influenced by his convictions and dedication to the Indian cause.

I asked her what her estimation was of the Malaysian Hindu Sangam's efforts to unify the diverse Hindu bodies under one umbrella organization. She answered with a resounding negative appraisal that surprised me, given her normally charitable disposition.

> The Malaysian Hindu Sangam does absolutely nothing for the Indians except organize *devaram* competitions, which actually furthers divisiveness between them as people take pride in their singing ability, thus it does nothing but foster individualistic aims. . . . The Hindu Sangam has not even organized a *Gita* seminar. If there is any sacred book in Hinduism, is it not the *Gita? Shameful!* The Hindu Sangam was organized

around fear of Muslim and Christian proselytizing, and thus, the *devaram* competition is just an *imitation* of the National Quran Reading competition.

As Hindus, "imitating" the other form is insufficient. Indeed, being like the Malay Muslim is "shameful." Hinduism, rather, must offer a transcendent path. She also argued that many "representatives" for the Indian community were extremely narrow in their response to the cultural pressures felt by Indians. Better than responding to perceived threats in equally provincial terms, as she seems to imply about the Hindu Sangam, religion is only redemptive for a community if it constitutes actions fostering goodwill and ecumenism. Following this logic, she told me of a recent controversy in the ashram in Petaling Jaya. She said that a poor Indonesian boy, who was the child of a migrant laborer, was badly injured in an accident. In response, the ashram raised money and purchased a wheelchair for the boy. Some Indians, she claimed, had criticized the ashram, as the boy was not a Tamil, nor even an Indian. Furthermore, some argued that Muslims had their own charitable organizations and thus questioned why the Sri Ramakrishna Sarada Ashrama (the Petaling Jaya branch) should devote its limited resources in this way, given that Malaysian Tamils were in need of charitable assistance. She said that "it is the wrong spirit to see it that way," as the "ashram (and by extension, the Ramakrishna Mission) never looks at nationality or religion." Also, she added, the boy was not receiving help anywhere else.

Here we see the essence of the Ramakrishna Mission's "strategy." While essentially Hindu, the movement refuses to declare itself in "narrow" or nationalistic terms. Through charitable social service, care for others can be shown, in spite of the Malaysian tendency to place everything into "ethnic" terms. The publicity the Indonesian boy garnered, in turn, would highlight the ecumenical spirit of the movement, as well as provide an opportunity to "upstage" Islamic charitable organizations, which, evidently, had overlooked this case. It is an assertion of moral ascendancy within the divisive discourse of the narrow Hindus and Muslims alike. Recalling the Pure Life Society story, and the argument that Muslim children should only be raised in Muslim orphanages, we see an opportunity to gain the upper hand in true Gandhian fashion. This charitable act, with undoubtedly good intentions, subverts the ethnic discourse, while the

Hindu criticism of it is shortsighted in that it does not realize the strategic potential of ecumenism while also making Hindus appear uncharitable and communal minded. Transcending the Indian critique (i.e., that Indians should help Indians) points toward the arbitrariness of these symbolic categories and thus raises an awareness, though only of a "semblance"—that is, partial and distorted—perhaps, of the fetishistic character of identity in Malaysia and of the countertransference, or ambivalent desire and negation, among Malays toward things Indian. I say "semblance," in Heidegger's sense, or "symptom," in Lacan's, because the transcendental Hinduism invoked is also fetishistic in that it attempts to overcome the Other's desire and reinscribe a cosmology of hierarchy in which a transcendental truth towers over and outside of the contradictions of middleness that produce it. An essential, timeless truth, masks, as fantasy, an inessential and contingent self-consciousness. That is not to suggest, however, that this fantasy is not benevolent or even beneficial as an alternative vision to the identity boundaries fostered within the ethnic politics of the dominant nationalist ideologies. Rather, I am suggesting that its utopian aspirations are born out of its paradoxical social and phenomenological sites of production: a diasporic intensification of displacement among elite Indians in Malaysia.

THE SRI RAMAKRISHNA SARADA ASHRAMA

There were six RKM centers in Malaysia in the mid-1990s, along with many smaller prayer groups. The smaller groups consist of gatherings in private homes for *bhajans* (devotional songs) and readings. The principle centers are affiliated with the parent organization in Calcutta. The regional center is in Singapore, where a large ashram houses a monastery, temple, library, orphanage, and classrooms. In Malaysia, the Sri Ramakrishna Sarada Ashrama (Petaling Jaya branch) was, during the mid-1990s, trying to become a full-fledged RKM center (and now has). When completed, the ashram will resemble Singapore's ashram in size and activities. But, as Petaling Jaya and Kuala Lumpur have a far greater concentration of Indians than does Singapore, those involved in the ashram see its future role as more pivotal to Indians. They planned a boys' school and orphanage, free hospital, and publications department, in addition to constructing a temple and separate classrooms. At the time of my research, the parent orga-

nization was stepping up visits, monitoring the development of the ashram closely. The RKM became slightly hesitant, I was told, after the "swami was chased away" from the old ashram in Brickfields by the Ceylonese managers.

While I attended the ashram as a participant-observer between the fall of 1994 and the winter of 1996, there were numerous visits from various swamis and nuns in the organization. One Malaysian-born *brahmachari* (celibate monk-in-training) was also living in the ashram. He planned to go to India for his many years of training at Belur Math, the central headquarters. First, he told me, he had to serve the Petaling Jaya branch faithfully, until "the Lotus feet of Guruji" in India felt he was ready for formal training. This *brahmachari* ran the temple, attending to the daily prayers before the altar, cleaning the ashram, and participating in the functions taking place within it. While not yet a swami, the young man would counsel visitors who came to seek advice on religious or personal matters. He told me that sometimes people "ask for worldly things, like passing an exam or something. They ask me to pray for them, and bring various offerings for Holy Mother (Sarada Devi, Ramakrishna's "wife")—I cannot say no, even though I am a monk, and not to be mixed up with worldly pursuits." He added, "I will offer their prayer, but I won't ask worldly things from the Master." When I asked him why he had chosen this path in life he explained, "What is this life? Suffering all the time. It is all meaningless. Through the grace of the Lotus feet of Guruji, I can serve the Lord." But the Ramakrishna Mission has tough standards for admittance. First you must have a college degree, and only then may you begin the many years of study necessary to be a swami. Therefore, the young monk was taking night classes in a nearby private college. While studying English literature, he remarked that it "is very difficult for me to study about all this worldly knowledge when my heart only wants to pray to God."

The ashram is engaged in a range of charitable and cultural activities. Celebrations are held for important festivals on the Hindu calendar[39] in addition to the daily worship and weekly scriptural classes. Throughout the year, volunteers organize "medical camps" in the rural estate areas. As many of the members of the ashram are doctors, they can offer their services through these events. As in the wheelchair donation discussed earlier, the ashram has also presented new televisions to a spinal ward in Kuala Lumpur, as well as raising money for needy patients in need of spe-

cial surgical treatments. Generally, in keeping with the philanthropic emphasis of its parent organization in India, the ashram is usually engaged with charitable projects. But, as the ashram has only about two hundred members, and only twenty or thirty of them are very active, these activities are usually limited in scope, isolating one particular case after another. After the completion of the new ashram, the apparatus for larger-scale charitable projects will exist, the core devotees insist. On the cultural side, the ashram has Indian classical concerts from time to time. Once in a while, a notable performer from India will donate a performance, either to raise money for a charitable cause or to raise funds for the new ashram building.

In addition, a bimonthly journal is published, *Arise Awake,* which features articles about the activities of the Ramakrishna Mission, as well as reprinted articles or sayings by Vivekananda, Ramakrishna, or Sarada Devi; usually there is also a guest article by a non-Indian devotee. Total circulation for the journal was limited to three to four hundred copies, as of 1995; however, donations are requested from the Petaling Jaya devotees in order to widen its circulation into the plantation villages. Also, to further this process, the journal is including more articles in the Tamil language. But a balance must be struck, as many of the members in Petaling Jaya cannot read or write Tamil. Aside from these activities, the ashram operates as a religious center, with worship and various classes on Hindu philosophy, more recently led by the swami from India who has been assigned the task of leading this ashram by the parent organization in Calcutta.

THE PUJA AND VIVEKANANDA STUDY CIRCLE

Puja, the Hindu style of worship, is a key aspect of the ashram's daily ritual. Like other Vedanta-inspired institutions, the devotional worship (*bhakti*) offered to the founding guru or gurus is central to the practice and ideology of the institution. While Vedantic philosophy was emphasized by Vivekananda, *bhakti* is the modus operandi in ashram life. Vivekananda himself was concerned about this when starting the movement. While he personally believed that Ramakrishna was a perfected saint, or even an avatar, he claimed that India needs the "Vedantic spirit" more than another personality cult.[40] The same multiplicity of "personality cults" can be found in Malaysia, where various ashrams teach essentially the same mes-

sage, yet are divided in their allegiances to and worship of different gurus. Nevertheless, worship of Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Sarada Devi is now considered beneficial for the monks and lay devotees in the Ramakrishna Mission, in spite of Vivekananda's initial misgivings. This, perhaps, shows an ambiguous dimension in this and similar organizations. While purporting to represent the intellectual face of religion, which is seemingly absent from temple rituals, the general ethos of ashram life and its appeal lie in the emotional involvement they afford to each devotee through *bhakti*. This, while rationalized within the Vedantic tradition as Bhakti Yoga, also offers a therapeutic benefit to the urban devotee, as it is an escape from the "tyranny of reason" as well as a "reenchantment" of the world (Singer 1972; Babb 1986; Kakar 1991; Lee and Ackerman 1988). *Bhakti*, however, as noted in the previous chapter, is also somewhat ambiguously close to disorderly practices of possession deemed unorthodox and dangerous. Thus urban middle-class movements often justify the practice of intense devotion in terms of an evolutionary and rationalized model of spiritual evolution. I return to this problematic in chapter 6.

Every morning and evening at 6:30, *arati*, the waving of the flame, is offered at an altar in the ashram. On Wednesday evenings, the *arati* is followed by *bhajans*. The shrine itself had a large portrait of Ramakrishna on the left side, Vivekananda was situated in the middle, and Sarada Devi was on the right (from the devotee's perspective). Also, off a few feet to the right and below the shrine, at ground level, a gold-colored life-size bust of the "Holy Mother" Sarada Devi, was adorned with a *mala* (garland). During the morning *puja*, the *brahmachari* placed *malas* and loose flowers around the portraits and at their base. On the floor, about ten feet away from the altar, a large *kuttu villakku* (brass oil lamp) and a large silver tray with some fruit and milk offerings rested on the floor rug.

After about fifteen minutes of quiet meditation, in which males sat on the left and females on the right, the *brahmachari* would begin the service with a salutation in Sanskrit to each in the RKM "trinity." He lit first the *kuttu villaku*, then an ornate camphor lamp. The camphor lamp was then waved by the right hand in a slow and controlled motion by the now-standing *brahmachari*. In his left hand, he rang a bell while offering the *arati*. After doing this, he allowed the devotees to touch the flame, which they would do with both hands, with which they would immediately touch their foreheads. About thirty to forty devotees usually attended the

Wednesday prayers. In most respects, the ritual was similar to the *arati* performed in any Hindu temple. It was different only in that the temple deities were replaced by modern saints. Also, neither *vibhuti* and *kunkumun*, nor milk or water, were distributed. For those wishing *vibhuti* or *kunkumun*, a small bowl with both was off to the right.

After the meditation and *arati*, the devotees would sing *bhajans*[41] to Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Sarada Devi. All were in either Sanskrit or Bengali, Ramakrishna's native tongue. None of regular *bhajans* was sung in Tamil, but during retreats and camps, which included devotees from the lower-class Tamil communities, Tamil songs would also be incorporated into the worship. The devotional singing lasted about thirty minutes and was usually accompanied by the harmonium. At the conclusion of each session, an invocation would be chanted in unison to the three "divine" personages. After *bhajans*, *prasad* (consecrated food) was often distributed to the assembled devotees. This normally consisted of fruit or nuts.

On Wednesday evenings, after the *bhajans*, a study circle on Vivekananda's teachings would take place. Sitting around a rectangular table, each participant held a copy of a passage from the swami's catalog of speeches, letters, and essays. The previous week, those participating selected the passages in advance, thus allowing time to read them and consider their meanings. Devotees usually came prepared with notes. In seminar fashion, passages were read and interpreted by each member. After each devotee read aloud a passage with his or her interpretation, a group discussion would ensue. Sometimes, lively debates over interpretations occurred. All of those attending the discussion were professionals holding distinguished positions. A retired engineer, two sets of doctors and their wives, a computer scientist, Uma Sambanthan, a lawyer and his wife, an anthropologist from India in Malaysia on a work permit, a law student, and the resident *brahmachari* took part regularly. Disagreements were common but cordial, as there lacked an authoritative figure, such as a swami, to impose a "correct interpretation." On a few occasions, aspects of the movement that challenged both their ecumenical proclamations and the state discourses were manifested.

On one occasion, while considering the religious experiences that Ramakrishna had while following different paths, the discussion turned to his practice of Islam. While all agreed that Islam had a spiritual core, one made the point that only in the "Hindu tradition" you would find someone

liberal enough to experience all of the great religions. When I, playing devil's advocate, mentioned that Sufis, especially in India, had sometimes embodied the same liberal spirit, and reminded them that Hindus waged war against Buddhists in ancient Tamil Nadu, there was some backpedaling on the man's part. He then readily changed his position to "all the great religions have an orthodox as well as a mystical path." This exchange underscored, in my view, the paradox of much "neo-Hindu" rhetoric: while proclaiming itself as liberal and ecumenical, it attempts to encompass other religions through a transcendental philosophy, which, in turn, places the individual faiths (such as Islam) at a "lower" stage of spiritual development.

Uma Sambanthan, on another occasion, spoke about a Malay official who, after reading some of the Ramakrishna Mission's literature for children, found a passage highlighting Ramakrishna's encounter with Islam. After practicing Islam for some period, and "realizing the truth of Allah," he returned to his worship of Kali, his *ishta devata.* This was inaccurate, according to the Malay reviewer, because anyone who really realized Allah, and practiced true Islam, would never return to a non-Islamic faith. She went on to say, with exasperation, how the children's books had to be altered, omitting the account of Islam, in order for them to be used in the children's classes.

During another discussion, while covering Vivekananda's advocacy of Raja Yoga, a passage was read aloud about the pitfalls of religious fanaticism. The section made mention that "*Muhammed had fallen into this trap at times.*" There was a hush, and one of the discussants said that "it" could never be repeated outside the room, as it could "jeopardize the ashram's future." He went on to suggest that if certain Malays were to "catch wind of this" there might be problems registering the ashram and organization—not to mention obtaining permits for Indian swamis to stay in Malaysia.

This incident shows that the movement realizes some of the inherent tensions between their ideologies and the government's Islamic modernism. They see in Islam not a progressive force in which they will play an important minority role, coconstructing a national culture. Rather, the discourse of Hinduism as a forward and "modern" religion, assumes with it a leadership role in the forging of a new national, and even international, discourse. This was Vivekananda's proclaimed global project, or India's "destiny" as he saw it. While I am not suggesting that a conscious revolu-

tionary or nationalistic strategy is foremost on the minds of the devotees in this movement, remnants of this ideology are used to articulate alternatives to Malay Muslim hegemony. Islam, as many educated Hindus see it, is at odds with ecumenism, modernity, and national unity. It is probably part of the ambivalence found in neo-Hindu discourse that "orientalist" accounts of Islam derived from colonialism (Said 1978) would also inform the Hindu construction of a nationalist discourse (Chatterjee 1986; van der Veer 1994). As we have already seen in this chapter, the educated Hindu middle classes see themselves as an intellectual vanguard, slowly planting the seeds of "tolerance" and "spirituality," in contrast with Muslim "extremism" and Western "materialism."

The ashram also offers religious classes for children on Sundays, as well as Friday evening Srimad Bhagavatam[42] classes conducted by a Sanskrit pundit trained in India. After the Friday evening prayers, the devotees will sit before the pundit as he reads a few pages and offers an exegesis. These classes were attended by about twenty to thirty devotees. Also, during 1995, the ashram began organizing youth camps for the Indian male youths around the area. A professional counselor and psychologist worked together with college-age devotees, who functioned as mentors for the youths. Weekend activities, such as sporting events, hiking, visiting local Hindu temples, and recreational games, were organized. Attendance at these events ranged from fifty to one hundred individuals. The aim was to provide wholesome activities for Tamil boys who might otherwise be tempted to join gangs or take drugs, a growing problem in urban slum areas. Also, the organizers told me, they believed that Vivekananda's message would give them the "moral strength" to uplift their community. Moreover, they believed that neither the MIC nor the government would take action to prevent the continued marginalization of the Indians.

SURESH

Suresh was one of the youngest (at twenty-three years old) and most active members of the movement in Petaling Jaya. Born and raised in Brickfields, Tamil-educated, and a law student at a private college in Kuala Lumpur, he is an example of the movement's growing appeal. He explained that he became interested in the teachings of Vivekananda while playing the part of Sri Ramakrishna during a school play marking the Vivekananda cente-

nary of his historic address in Chicago. This attraction to Vivekananda, he admitted, was exclusive—he had little interest in Ramakrishna, with his emotional, *bhakti*-oriented religiosity. But, the "fiery" rhetoric of Vivekananda appealed greatly to him, as it seemed direct and forceful. Growing up in Brickfields, and seeing the problems faced by the Indian community on a daily basis—alcoholism, low self-esteem, unemployment, superstition, and the "enervating apathy" of political leaders—made him somewhat cynical as a teenager. But the edifying message of Vivekananda, he told me, provided the answers to these problems. Moreover, Vivekananda, like Gandhi, made him "feel proud to be an Indian." As a child, he had passed the Vivekananda ashram daily in Brickfields and had later attended the Vivekananda School, but only after reading his words did he realize the significance of his "message for all Indians."

Suresh is very cynical about Malaysian politics and the practice of Hinduism in temples. He told me that he did not attend services at temples regularly, as he saw the people seeking "things," rather than seeking God, with their prayers. In the temples, he argued, "even the god is dressed up rich, with silk cloth and gold ornaments." The whole premise behind this, he maintained, was to impress on people the "riches" they can receive if they pay the priests for certain *pujas*. Interpreting the "richness" of appearances in the temple literally, rather than metaphorically, had led him to explore various ashrams. When he met Uma Sambanthan, he knew he had found a spiritual home with the RKM.

He described the MIC as a party staffed by "lower tiers" of Tamils. Arguing that "UMNO has articulate leaders who know Western thought and the subtle arts of persuasion, whereas the MIC relies on brute intimidation," he explained that the "educated Indians feel out of place in the Party." At best, he said, "they get their leaders from Tamil schools—but there are no PhDs, doctors, lawyers, or other intellectuals involved with them, as they prefer to work for ashrams, orphanages, service organizations, etc." Obviously, this pattern makes the MIC an impotent party when compared to the craftier UMNO and MCA—which, Suresh feels, are able to recruit better and more educated members.[43] He went on to tell me sordid tales of corruption, "coffee money," and "gangsterism" within the MIC. In his model of the Indian "situation," the MIC simply reflects the culture of gangsterism and "hooliganism" that one sees in backward Indian areas such as "Puchong and Sentul." In the Machiavellian world of

Malaysian politics described by Suresh the "Gandhian politician cannot be found, as they will not play the game." Hence, it is easy to see why he wants to devote energy to the ashram, as his idealism will not allow him to join the political fray.

In order to preserve his integrity, Suresh shies away from politics, yet in preserving his individual conscience he is all too willing to submerge his ego in the self-annihilating practice of *bhakti*, as he believes that a "higher self" will emerge through the death of his "smaller self," or ego. This, in the mystical and seductive voice of Vivekananda, will transform social conditions, and thus it offers a model for reality. Hence, work in the ashram is personally fulfilling, as it, in Suresh's interpretive scheme, has the potential to affect a larger segment of the community. This will happen, he believes, due to practical efforts (social work), as well as unseen forces (spiritual power). The growth of ashram-based Hinduism, and the rejuvenation to the Indian community that it can provide, must therefore be understood as reflecting an awareness within the Indian community that politics and conventional religion have failed them. Suresh said that if all goes according to plan, and with the patronage and funding that Toh Puan can attract, there could be two hundred sub-branches of the Ramakrishna Mission in Malaysia by the end of the century. But, he admitted that this was an optimistic scenario. Still, he offered this analysis of the present-day Malaysian society.

> Malaysian political leaders always say, "where else can you find prosperity and racial harmony?" in order to justify their rule. Freedom of the press is non-existent and religious programming is not allowed—the *Malays being so insecure.* They are using Islam, but in a materialistic interpretation—"one must have prosperity." Thus nobody questions. Chinese and Malay cooperation is just economic collusion. Indians, being weak, are mainly ignored. A non-racial party will not emerge because the power basis is secured through racial cards. To integrate is to restructure power bases. *This evolution could only occur if progressive Malays change* the course of politics. These are the people who must be convinced.

Thus, the message of Vivekananda will "strengthen" the Indian community, so that it cannot be ignored, and it is hoped that the "progressive Malays" will eventually respond favorably. Here again we see the desire for recognition among educated Indians coupled with a fantasy of Malay

"insecurity," premised on the notion that they deny their potential as "progressive" when they cling to this "backward," "racial," and "materialistic" version of national identity.

The Ramakrishna Mission is certainly increasing the scope and intensity of its activities in Malaysia. As one of the swamis at the Singapore Ramakrishna Mission explained to me: "The ashram in Malaysia will come up in the near future. Great devotees are there, and their work in the estates and villages has been well received." At this time, the diffusion of various Hindu ashrams and societies weakens the prospect that the Ramakrishna Mission will expand greatly in the near future. But, the movement has capital and political patronage is strong, as many of the most prestigious Hindu families belong to it. Moreover, when the new structure is built, and a swami from India arrives to run it, it will surely grow in popularity.[44] Already, the movement is trying to shed its "elite" badge by recruiting more devotees from the estate sector. But what role these new devotees might play in the movement is still not clear. Will it acquire a more "Tamil" identity as it broadens its clientele? Or, are the "lowly Tamils" being appropriated or "led" by an elitist movement? A sense of urgency is apparent in the energies devoted to increased activities; but at the same time a sense of resignation, surrender, and "otherworldliness" reflects the "realization" that all worldly activity is futile. This profoundly alienated "unhappy consciousness," in Hegel's term, drives the compulsion to a higher and transcendent identity—one outside of the ambivalent position of middleness produced by the ethnic- and class-based hierarchies codified within colonial Malaya and reproduced within the politics of identity within contemporary Malaysia.

THE TEMPLE OF FINE ARTS

> India has always proven irresistible to travelers and seekers of wisdom. Her mystery and kaleidoscope vitality, her creative energy and imaginative wealth have found expression through her every art form for centuries. India is indeed legendary. Like a banyan tree, she has spread her branches of knowledge, wisdom, and culture far and wide into the vastness of Asia and taken root in different soils, to engender there even more new and different manifestations of her beauty.
> —*Annalakshmi Magazine*—The Temple of Fine Arts

The Temple of Fine Arts is the leading Malaysian Indian cultural association. It is also a religious organization headed by a swami from India and is active in many other areas besides the performing arts. While the Brickfields-based organization is famous throughout Malaysia, especially among the Indians, as a dance academy and performance troupe, the organization was born out of religious inspiration, and the ideology practiced among the members is palpably religious and devoutly Hindu. Its significance for our discussion stems from two factors. First, the "Temple," along with its religious counterpart, the "Shiva Family," is one of the largest and fasted growing Hindu-based movements. Second, the nature of the art, rich in symbolic content, speaks to a need within the elite Tamil community to act (or dance) out an identity that "restores" the distinctive culture of the "homeland"; at the same time, the strategies apparent in these "acted texts" represent a partial negation of the Malaysian "national culture."

The Temple of Fine Arts was started by Swami Shantanand Saraswati. He is a disciple of the legendary Swami Sivananda, the founder of the Divine Life Society. Sivananda, like Ramakrishna almost a century earlier, came to be one of the most famous "holy men" in modern India. The Divine Life Society, like the Ramakrishna Mission before it, spread throughout India. Sivananda, ironically, first garnered fame while working as a doctor in Malaya in the 1920s. While in Malaya, he earned a reputation as a "miracle worker" with a "heart of gold" (McKean 1996). One of his many monastic disciples became known as Shantanand Saraswati (Shantanand for short). The story, as the swami tells it, begins in Colombo, Sri Lanka. As an "itinerant monk" there, he met a Malaysian Tamil, who invited him to come to Malaysia. He reports to have answered, "God willing, if someone calls, I will come." Alighting from the plane in Kuala Lumpur, he prayed to his guru, Swami Sivananda, "Let me be worthy of your grace and love, that have brought me here."

After arriving in Malaysia in 1971, Shantanand began conducting prayer meetings and *satsangs* (guru-disciple gatherings) with about forty families. As his popularity grew with each subsequent visit to Malaysia, his devotees became more organized. They formed weekly prayer groups and expanded their activities into Penang, Johore Bahru, and Singapore. Within a few years, devotees spread to Australia, as some of the Malaysian members had

migrated there. The group was dubbed the "Shiva Family" by Shantanand—a name paying homage both to Sivananda and the members' mostly Saivite heritage. Most of his devotees were middle class. This included a high percentage of Ceylonese Tamils, as well as many Malayalees. These elite Indians gave generously to further the fledgling organization. But the swami, sensing a "cultural vacuum" among the younger members, came upon the idea to start an institution aimed at preserving Hindu culture and values through the performing arts and dance in particular. In Shantanand's words:

> [P]ure religion is too much for the kiddies. They are brought up in a Westernized environment. And with them, science and technology have come to stay. Ninety-per-cent of the families I knew had children who were brought up in the convent or other English-medium schools. . . . They [children] didn't know the basic things. If you asked them who is Savitri, they didn't know. Or about the Ramayana characters, and they would reply that they were not sure about them. (*Hansa* 1988)

The swami felt that an effective and appealing way to transmit culture to the young would be through the performing arts. Also, Shantanand, perhaps sensing the political and religious constraints facing the growth of a Hindu-based movement in Malaysia, sought to expand the potential for reaching other segments of the society. He explained:

> I am the guest in this country. Islam is the national religion here, therefore, I cannot harp too much on Hinduism. If you come to a country, it is your duty to abide by its laws. If you can't you just have to clear out. I found that religion in its purest sense had its limitations beyond the arena of the Hindu community. I couldn't touch anybody else, and I couldn't go anywhere else.

The Temple of Fine Arts was born out of the Shiva Family. With it, the first aim could be fulfilled through the teaching of classical Indian arts and dance. Hindu mythology and philosophy could be made tangible through the performing arts in a way that would attract the young. Also, the performing arts offered a forum for transcending the "limitations beyond the arena of the Hindu community." Swami Shantanand could now find a way to touch others, outside the close-knit Shiva Family. Herein lies the importance of the Temple of Fine Arts—it enacts stories intended for consumption, both within and outside the Indian community. Sometimes these stories reveal much about the dilemmas of a subordinate elite.

Swami Shantanand was able to recruit two celebrated exponents of *bharata natyam* (classical dance), Sivadas and Gopal Shetty. Both were trained in India and had some fame as performers and teachers before working within the TFA. Sivadas's wife, Vatsala, was initially his student but went on to master the art at the famous Kalakshetra near Madras. She also became one of the foremost exponents of Indian dance in the country. With the best Indian dance teachers in Malaysia in its camp, the TFA was ready to offer classes. A devotee offered a house in Brickfields for use as a studio. The dilapidated house ended up costing around thirty thousand ringgit to repair before it could be used. Again, the Shiva Family donated the necessary funds.

The TFA got under way in 1980 with around thirty students, mostly the children of the core members of the Shiva Family. A nominal fee of ten dollars was charged per month. Shantanand kept the fees low so that the TFA would not become too "exclusive." As Brickfields is not a wealthy area, it was also thought that the poorer Indians would be encouraged to discover the "wealth of Indian heritage." Scholarships were given to some promising dancers and musicians who were financially "less fortunate." After a year of training the first group of students, the TFA planned to perform publicly, as an ensemble, for the first time. Because of the volunteers in the Shiva Family, production costs were kept at around twelve thousand dollars. Even this amount was not easy for the group to raise because of two decisions by Shantanand. First, he said that the TFA would accept no donations from the outside public for the first three years of its operation. Second, he did not want to "price the arts" by charging any admission fees. So, for all practical purposes, no revenue could be generated outside of the paltry instruction fees.

While this austerity was intended to impress the public with the spiritual dedication and sincerity of the organization's members, it also unintentionally impressed the less-affluent section of the Indian community: How wealthy the TFA members must be! But the tactic paid off, after some initial tight budgets, and people began to send donations. Patronage grew rapidly, as the TFA was seen to be the artistically "highest," and most successful Indian cultural organization in Malaysia. Shantanand revealed his lofty ideal or strategy in this way: "I trust that human beings are essentially beautiful. You must march on with trust and incentive. It requires guts, to be sure. But one day you will reach the fountains and the water will flow."

Indeed, very large donations from Indian tycoons in the corporate sector allowed the organization to move into a much larger building down the road. The new building includes a temple and prayer hall, which can be converted into a stage, and a separate stage with room for an audience of about one hundred people. There are many practice rooms, a free clinic for the urban poor in Brickfields, a small cafeteria, and residential quarters for a couple of live-in staff. Now, hundreds of students attend classes. In addition to dance, the TFA also teaches instrumental and vocal Indian music. By offering this range of instruction, those interested in the arts, but not wanting to dance, can also join. Before discussing aspects of their performances, and the ideologies that guide them, it is worth considering the subsequent enterprises that have grown out of the TFA.

The TFA, after a humble beginning in Kuala Lumpur, had, in fourteen years, expanded tremendously for a nonprofit organization. There are now two other TFA branches in Penang and Johore Bahru, respectively. Also, the TFA has very active centers in Singapore, Perth (Australia), Madras, and Coimbatore. In all of these places, the Shiva Family has grown rapidly, in part, perhaps, because of the link between Shantanand and his famous master, Sivananda. All of the TFA branches are under the direction of Shantanand, and the different centers collaborate on productions. As the Kuala Lumpur center is considered the best, in terms of quality performers and resources, and now that Shantanand makes Malaysia his home, it coordinates these collaborations.

In an effort to subsidize the TFA productions, Shantanand decided that an Indian vegetarian restaurant with exquisite food and agreeable ambiance could finance future TFA productions. The Devi Annapoorna (later changed to Annalakshmi) restaurant was opened in the late 1980s with great success. The restaurant, situated in a posh suburb in Kuala Lumpur, serves elegant vegetarian Indian meals in an atmosphere of an ornate, "five-star" Hindu temple.

Lavanya is a "visual arts center" that Shantanand inaugurated after the success of Annalakshmi. Fine arts and crafts from India are sold in order to raise money for the TFA and related charities. Prices are considered steep, but the quality of the art pieces is generally good because the volunteers who run the operation are highly selective. Lavanya is said to also help "provide for the struggling artisans of India" through its patronage and marketing of Indian culture for affluent Indians in Malaysia who are seek-

ing to beautify their houses with representative pieces from the motherland.

In addition to the restaurant and art boutique, the TFA also opened a computer shop specializing in information technologies called Sri Sankhya Systems. With many "multinational organizations" as clients, this branch is headed by the technically inclined devotees. Because of the developing complexity of all the TFA's operations, Sankhya Systems came into being in order to "serve its growing needs." Additionally, this high-tech branch of the organization made it possible for the TFA to publish very high quality brochures, magazines, programs, and so on.

Last, a travel company, specializing in "mystical pilgrimages" to India, was created to further support the TFA. Its brochure reads: "With the TFA idea spreading across the South Asia region, it was only a matter of time before a travel agency was set up to serve the travel needs of this increasingly active family. Thus, Hamsa-Vahini was formed." The Shiva Family members are often traveling to India, or Australia, and having a travel branch facilitates these activities. Also, the agency promotes travel to India through its TFA-organized tours. Marketing the spiritual through pricey tours to India helps raise money for the organization, as well as bringing Malaysian Tamils closer to the homeland.[45] Thus, the travel agency is conceived as a tool to enhance and promote the "spiritual heritage of India." Hamsa-Vahini has spread its wings to the United States as well, with an office in Honolulu.

In quite a short period, the Temple of Fine Arts has built a small transnational empire. While I conducted research between 1994 and 1996, the TFA troupe from Kuala Lumpur had, in addition to three major productions and many minor shows in Malaysia and Singapore, traveled twice each to India and Australia, tours featuring international-ensemble performances. The continual networking between the different branches within the movement and the tremendous expenditure required for increasingly ambitious shows involving large international casts have made the business and fund-raising a central part of this "itinerant monk's" daily concerns. A few eyebrows have been raised by skeptics within the Indian community who have voiced concerns about the spirituality of a swami who is so engrossed in the worldly domain.[46] On the other side of the coin, the TFA is the first Malaysian-born Hindu organization with a following in Australia and India. While the significance of the movement is greater in

Malaysia than elsewhere, it is still an interesting trend in modern Hinduism, as it makes Malaysia the nexus of an Indian artistic and religious network.

THE ROAD TO SINGAPORE

While the businesses associated with the TFA seem to have thrived, it must be remembered (if we are to take the organization at face value) that the purpose behind its business ventures is to support the production of art and charity for the community. The reputation of the organization was built on its performances, in particular the spirit of its young performers. Spending a few days within the Brickfields "temple" reveals an ethos quite different than that of a professional dance academy, with its battle of egos and prima donnas. In contrast, the TFA has the atmosphere of a "noisy" ashram. That is, the participating members see their role as part of a higher good.

On one occasion I accompanied the whole troupe to the historic city of Melaka for a performance at the Rotary Club. The day began with a prayer within the TFA's temple in Brickfields. Chanting in Sanskrit was done in unison. About forty dancers intoned a lengthy invocation in perfect synchronicity. Then all of them knelt and prostrated themselves before the image of Lord Nataraja (Siva performing the cosmic dance). The same devotion was next demonstrated before the picture of Swami Shantanand. Respects were also paid to the late artistic director, Gopal Shetty. Many of the older dancers (twenty-five to thirty years old) seemed to pray quite a bit longer, with fervent devotion. All of the dancers applied *vibhuti* and *kunkumun* to their foreheads before boarding the chartered bus. On the bus, the dancers, along with their choreographer, makeup artist, and stage manager, sang songs and played games. Before reaching Melaka, the bus stopped at a Shiva Family member's house, where the dancers ate an Indian vegetarian lunch.

After arriving at the hotel where the performance would take place, the dancers went through their program in a one-hour dress rehearsal. After this, they retired to the dressing room, where all of them stretched out on the floor for a nap before the night's show. After a couple hours of siesta, some dancers played a game of charades, and other word games, while

others meditated to a tape of sitar music. A relaxed atmosphere belied the fact that the performance would be witnessed by a few hundred people.

Before the performance, the whole group, ranging between fifteen and thirty-five years of age, once again chanted in unison. Then they prostrated themselves at the feet of their teachers, who were also senior members of the ensemble. Taking the stage before a mainly Chinese audience, the group performed a "Bhil" folk dance. The dance began with a taped message from Shantanand that explained how the simple Bhils spend their days in "tribal innocence, living naturally and worshipping Shiva-Sakti." This romantic impression of tribal life was set to Hindu devotional music. After this the dancers performed a *bhangra* (Punjabi folk dance) piece, which pleased the few Sikh members of the audience. Next, they performed a Malay folk dance known as Joget. Again, the Malays in the crowd showed appreciation, while the Chinese gave light but polite applause. But, the next number was a Chinese folk dance. Once the Chinese in the audience recognized the song, they stood and applauded spontaneously. After performing a couple more Indian folk pieces, the dancers performed a modern piece called "Journey," written by Ali Akbar Khan, a famous Indian musician. This electric-acoustic number featured a jazz-rock fusion with a Hindustani raga for its melody. The exciting rhythms and somewhat sensual choreography portrayed life among Rajasthani peasants during the merriment of a village festival. This number elicited greater response from the crowd, which was impressed by the virtuoso display.

The performance, as a whole, was warmly received by the Rotary Club, which had paid around five thousand ringgit for the show (roughly two thousand U.S. dollars). The makeup artist, choreographer, and some senior dancers informed me that the standard of performance was not as high as they would have liked but that the show still went well. They also told me that they will usually only perform the folk dances, rather than classical dances, for these sorts of engagements, as the clients generally want light entertainment only. Also, when I asked how often they do paid jobs like this, I was told that they will accept any paying job in order to finance their more ambitious and costly dance dramas. This meant that they might have a dozen or so such jobs a year.

A week later, I accompanied the TFA to an Asian dance festival organized by the Malaysian Tourist and Information Center. Here, I was able to

observe a classical performance. When the group was introduced before the mostly Malaysian audience, the announcer emphasized that it was "from Malaysia." This prompted applause from the audience. Other dancers represented various countries in Asia. There was also a Malay dance troupe from Johore performing at the festival. It danced a subtle and repetitive number, which in earlier times, I was told by a TFA member, was supposed to induce trance, but that aspect was now banned for Malays. The same TFA dancer leaned toward me during the Malay dance and said "So boring, isn't it?" Compared to the visual complexity of the classical Indian dance (Odissi at this performance), the Malay dance seemed repetitive and somnambulant, without obvious choreography or formalized structure. There may have been subtlety in the slow unfolding of the dance, or in the polyrhythmic drumming accompaniment; to the TFA members, however, the dance was seen as "primitive." I noticed many bored faces and a general exodus of TFA members from the hall during the performance.

A week later, I watched the whole ensemble, plus its Singapore counterparts, perform a dance drama. The show was an adaptation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—but an Indian version, set in Rajasthan. The members of the troupe were as cheerful as ever throughout the rehearsals and performances. They had traveled to Singapore for the shows, which were held in the prestigious Victoria Theatre. A sold-out audience waited for the show while reading a glossy program detailing the plot in this lighthearted comedy. Shantanand had also written an essay about the "universal message" in the play and how, if interpreted properly, it imparts "spiritual truth." The message, as interpreted by the TFA, was translated through the Indian setting, and in its "universal message" (read Vedantic), into something that expressed a neo-Hindu ambience.

About three hundred people came to the show—over 90 percent of them Indians. I was told that many had come down from Johore and Kuala Lumpur to see it. The show itself was a major production, with extensive sets, costumes, professional lighting, and sound. After the show, which seemed to be well received by the crowd, Shantanand, in his usual ochre robe, took to the stage bathed in a soft spotlight. He said a prayer for the crowd as the TFA dancers literally adored him while humming along with a taped New-Age-sounding Ravi Shankar piece. The swami gazed lovingly at the crowd, as if transfixed. The show was pronounced a great success by

the press in Singapore. Shakespeare had been illuminated through the "timeless truths" of Hinduism.

Some of the TFA's other productions have addressed themes drawn from the ethnic diversity in Malaysia. It is in these performances, in particular, that the appeal of the TFA can be understood in the context of Malaysia.

SYMBOLIC PLAY

When Dr. Chandrabannu and Ramli Ibrahim embraced classical Indian dance, and in the case of the former its philosophical premises, there was a growth in interest in this art form in Malaysia. Indians witnessing two of the top Malay dancers performing *bharata natyam* were greatly inspired to revive their artistic traditions. Many of the older dancers in the TFA remarked to me that these two Malays had done much to uplift Indian culture in Malaysia. Quite significantly, Indian dance was elevated to a national stage, where other races were exposed to it. The TFA, recognizing the Malay role in making Indian dance marketable, has sought to extend a similar "appreciation" of non-Indian dance to the Malaysian community. Therefore, some of their most lauded efforts have been productions concerning Malay, Chinese, and, most important, pan-Asian themes.

Mahsuri is an old Malay legend from the island of Langkawi, near the Thai border. While this myth has pre-Islamic origins, the story has become almost a national symbol for Malays. The legend tells the story of a beautiful princess named Mahsuri who befriends a man while her prince is off on business. Though this friendship is purely innocent, when she is seen together with this man, the other men on the island are tricked by a cunning foe of the royal family into believing that she has committed adultery. Mahsuri is put to death for her "transgression." But, while dying a horrible death, she places a curse on the whole island of Langkawi saying it would suffer for seven generations. As legend has it, the island did endure calamity after calamity until this century. Mahsuri has become a heroine for Malays, much in the way that Sita has become one in India.[47]

In the TFA staging of this popular legend, Malay costumes from a later and stylistically more recognizable era were used. Malay music, and the Malay language, with some English intermixed, were carefully chosen, so as to present a "tribute" to the culture of the Malays. When the show

opened, the first prime minister of the nation, Tunku Abdul Rahman, was invited as the guest of honor. Even before the performance took place, his support and patronage had been sought. While concerned about offending Malay sensitivities with its portrayal of the story, the TFA asked the Tunku for advice. The Tunku himself, a devout Muslim, explained that the TFA should not try to harp too much on "spiritual things," which the TFA had seized on in its libretto. Perhaps, one could speculate, he recognized the desire to apprehend the meaning of the myth through a neo-Hindu philosophy. Rather, he advised the TFA to simply tell the story in accordance with the accepted myth, and that alone would be a very nice tribute to the Malays. When the performance ended, the dancers surrounded the beloved Tunku in the front row of the audience and sang him a "Happy Eightieth Birthday." Uma Sambanthan, who was also among the guests of honor, told me that the experience represented the "true Malaysia." The "genuine love they felt for the Tunku" showed how possible it was for Malaysians to live together in "mutual respect."

As it turned out, the performance of *Mahsuri* was given very favorable reviews and commentaries in the national papers and prime-time news. Even the current prime minister was obliged to attend the show, as this was an enactment of a major Malay myth by one of Malaysia's most famous dance troupes. The show of "patriotism" and respect for Malay culture was, in my estimation, a carefully conceived strategy to present the ecumenical and nationalistic validity of the TFA. The TFA was positioning itself to represent a composite Malaysian identity. Draped in this Malay cloak, it obtained government funds and, more importantly, tacit support for future projects. Also, as recounted earlier, the TFA was invited to represent Malaysia at the Asian Dance Festival. When I asked the director of public relations and advertising whether the government supports the organization's efforts, he told me that it was "very supportive" through the Ministry of Arts and Tourism.

On the artistic side, the performance of a Malay story does not require the TFA to learn "authentic" Malay dance. Rather, the troupe presents an "impressionistic" version—seen from an Indian perspective. This diverges from Ramli Ibrahim's or Chandrabannu's efforts to master the technique and subtleties of Indian dance. To a critic of these efforts, it might seem as if the TFA is taking Malay traditions too lightly. The TFA thinks it suitable to appropriate a Malay story (just as it finds the Bhil dance unproblematic),

but if a Malay dance group did an "impressionistic" rendering of *bharata natyam* , would the TFA's highly trained and refined dancers approve? At another level, one could argue that the appropriation of the Mahsuri legend finds resonance in the problematic identity born out of subordinate eliteness. Throughout this chapter, we have seen how representatives of this class of Indians have sought to interpret the cultural and sociopolitical realities of contemporary Malaysia through the matrix of post-Hindu-Renaissance symbolic constructs (Singer 1984). Read in phenomenological and psychoanalytic terms, the Indian-Malay dialectic in Malaysia, as understood by elite Indians, produces a negation of the Malay desire (as they imagine and metonymize it). Read this way, the Indian desire is also a influenced by the countertransference of the Malay desire to recognize themselves as wayward Indians (or Hindu Malays). The Indians become the objects of Malay desire—the "authentic" or transcendental Malays that they, the Malays, can never be, given the public discourse of ethnic and religious types in Malay Islamic nationalism. One can also see in the TFA's efforts a desire to be "Malaysian" and transcend the "Indian" signifier. Against this more optimistic and ecumenical interpretation, which, admittedly, was the conscious interpretation and ostensible meaning behind the narrative, one still sees the encompassing of Malay identity, subsumed, as it were, under the "banyan tree" of the transcendent Hindu truth. This is mostly clearly seen in the troupe's *Ramayana* interpretation.

Last, the TFA's production of the *Ramayana* deserves consideration. Without question, the *Ramayana* is the one epic originating in South Asia that has influenced the development of Southeast Asian performance traditions. It is believed that shadow puppet theater (*wayang kulit*) had its origins in Kerala. In Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, the story of the *Ramayana* has been one of the favorite themes in *wayang kulit*. The TFA, recognizing the significance of this epic story in Malaysia, decided to mount a "multicultural" production of it, set to a juxtaposition of dance styles, costumes, and scenery from India, Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Ostensibly, the production aimed to demonstrate the cultural commonalities throughout the region—or, to put it in their language, a celebration of the universal storyline as enacted through the "rich cultural diversity of the region." But, another way of reading it would be: Indian, and particularly Hindu, culture is the fountainhead of much of Southeast Asian culture. This assertion, while having some truth, must be seen in

relation to the Malay Islamic modernist ideology and its efforts toward the de-Indianization of Malay culture. The creation of set designs representing a Hindu Southeast Asia, as well as the way in which different scenes were presented, emphasizing the uniqueness of each region, created an artfully crafted narrative, which showed the Indian substratum in Southeast Asian art, customs, architecture, and religion. The TFA was creating an alternative Malaysian identity through this performance. Rather than Islam, Hinduism provided a basis for national unity through a shared cultural heritage. By extension, Indians can interpret this as an assertion of cultural superiority. Considering the continued religious significance of the *Ramayana* among Indian Hindus, versus any cultural resonance it might find among Muslim Malays, the message of the production is mostly a reaffirmation of Indian identity in a nation that, in recent times, has consciously shunned its Hindu-influenced past.

When I asked how the show had been received (I arrived in Malaysia after its initial performance), I was told, not surprisingly, that mostly Indians filled the audience, whereas Malays generally shied away from it. Some prominent Malays did attend the show and expressed satisfaction in its "pan-Asian" themes. I was told that the prime minister had attended this show and had appreciated it. But, at the same time, his support is entirely consistent with his verbal attacks on the PAS, a political party that has attempted to purge the *Ramayana* from *wayang kulit*.[48] When I also commented that the TFA had been slightly "subversive" in the manner in which it presented this dance drama, a TFA member said that, while this was true, people generally do not think about it much, so long as they "are doing well economically."

THE SHIVA FAMILY

We have seen that the Shiva Family operates a vast network of businesses and is the active force behind the formation and success of the TFA. But, first and foremost, the organization is religious and firmly espouses a new Hindu ideology.

Shantanand, as discussed earlier, arrived in Malaysia seeking to address a perceived spiritual vacuum among middle-class Hindus. He soon attracted a large following of disciples, which later formed the Shiva Family. Within this organization, the swami could routinize certain teachings



Fig. 22. The Temple of Fine Arts production of the *Ramayana,* Thai court scene. In an Asian confluence, Thai costumes with Indian motifs blend into the background. Notice the Indian sage in the right-hand corner. (Image reproduced courtesy of the Temple of Fine Arts.)

and rituals that would give the movement some identity. In contrast with the eclectic tendency in the TFA and its liking for cross-cultural exploration, the Shiva Family is modeled more closely on mainstream Hindu reform movements such as the Ramakrishna Mission and Divine Life Society. This "ecumenical" neo-Hindu substratum was noted in the TFA productions.

The Shiva Family members meet for prayers and meditation every Sunday at six in the morning at the Temple of Fine Arts. The swami will usually attend and lead the congregation in the chanting of Sanskrit *slokas* (verses) in praise of Brahma, Shiva, Sakti, Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Buddha, Christ, and Sivananda. The members will chant in rhythmic unison—obviously having memorized the verses well.[49] Shantanand will then lead the

group in meditation. Sometimes he will also sing a *bhajan* or lead the whole congregation in the song. The devotees, for their part, sit on the floor with legs crossed. Women sit on the right; men generally sit on the left. After the morning prayers, the devotees congregate in the canteen for tea and Indian sweets.

Swami Shantanand has written some booklets about Hinduism and spiritual life. Though these are not sold in bookshops, one can purchase them in the TFA main office. The devotees are usually given these materials as dues-paying members. There is nothing unique nor remarkable about Shantanand's teachings. They follow those of his guru, which in turn, are based on the themes common to modern Hinduism. *Bhakti* and Karma Yoga are given emphasis. Devotion to the guru plays a very large role in the character of the Shiva Family. Social service is also deemed Karma Yoga, including the service given to the various branches of the organization by professionals from different fields. It is the volunteer force comprised of highly talented and educated individuals that makes the varied business ventures associated with the Shiva Family profitable. Also, there is a select group of doctors and dentists who, through the Temple of Service, provide free care to the urban poor in Brickfields. "To Love and to Serve" is the motto given by Shantanand to the Shiva Family. But a variety of paths exist within the organization through which one can exercise this responsibility.

The Shiva Family makes special efforts to celebrate "traditional" Hindu festivals—especially those in the South Indian tradition. I observed the celebrations of Krishna Jayanthy, Vinayakar Chauturti, Deepavali, and, most importantly, Navarathri. Two of these festivals demonstrated different but significant aspects of the movement's identity and energetic vitality. Navarathri underscored the Hindu core of the movement's efforts as it is presented to the Indian community in Brickfields, and Guru Purnima, a more exclusive celebration, underscored the central role of the guru, Shantanand, as an object of *bhakti*, and as the energy behind the dedicated following that makes up the Shiva Family.

GURU PURNIMA AND NAVARATHRI

Guru Purnima is a festival in which the guru is honored and propitiated. Within ashrams presided over by swamis, the festival is usually quite

grand, as it is considered meritorious for a devotee to pay homage to his or her guru. It is also an opportunity for the devotee to receive the blessings of the guru, as the holiday brings both together. The Shiva Family celebrated this festival with considerable fanfare.

When I arrived at the TFA temple hall, the room was packed with hundreds of devotees. Some had traveled from outside of Kuala Lumpur for the festival. Men were seated, as usual, on the left, women on the right. There was an orchestra comprised of sitar, *veena*, *sarod*, violin, *mridingam*, and tabla playing light classical melodies when the swami entered the temple from the rear flanked by dancers in costume. He was showered with flower petals, which were also thrown before his feet. When he arrived on the stage, two women sat at his feet and performed *puja* to him, complete with *arati* and flower offerings. Shantanand sat on a garlanded chair, while the women continued to shower him with petals throughout the program. The program began with the chanting of sacred verses for about twenty minutes. Following this, the TFA dancers performed a "love offering for the one who is their inspiration." They danced for about half an hour before their "Guruji," with what appeared to be steadfast devotion. Later, a senior dancer and instructor told me that they had had only one day to prepare the performance, as they were so busy rehearsing for upcoming shows. The dancing part of the program was followed by *bhajans*, which were led by Shantanand himself.

During the singing of the *bhajans*, the swami became visibly engrossed. He appeared to be in a state of rapture, his face contorted and his gaze the model of a true *bhakta* (devotee). After finishing the songs, he gave a discourse about the "role of the guru." He began by explaining the word's meaning, which he said meant "that which is potential but hidden and the one who brings it to light." Shantanand said that "one should not seek a guru"; rather, one should "purify one's heart and humble oneself before God. Then the guru will definitely find us." "Egoism" and "the desire for the illusions of the world" were the main obstacles to finding a real guru, he said. Christian verses were sometimes woven into his discourse: "You cannot serve two masters . . . the meek will inherit the Kingdom of God . . . etc."

Shantanand, while extolling the virtues of a "real guru," was careful never to mention himself or the honor being bestowed on him at that time. Rather, he spoke in general terms, identifying with his audience: "We

cling to our little egos . . . we are like the jungle brutes." He did pay personal homage to Swami Shivananda, recalling an incident in which his master "planted a seed," which he didn't understand until another incident later in his life.

After the talk he allowed all of the devotees to have his *darshan* (audience) and blessings. The devotees, one by one, approached the swami, who had come down from the stage-altar and had reseated himself in a chair in the middle of the audience. All prostrated before his feet and received his blessings. The swami accepted the adoration and worship of the Shiva Family members but would also joke around with the devotees; he did not remain distant or aloof. It appeared he was in another world, serene, yet in rapture, while simultaneously quite alert when addressing his disciples. When I was introduced to the swami by a devotee, he joked that my name sounded like "Andy Williams" (the singer). This drew laughter from those around him at the time.

What struck me most was the absolute devotion and submission demonstrated to the guru. While this behavior symbolized a surrender to God and an abandonment of "egoism," it was also clear that to many in the Shiva Family the guru is a living saint. Thus, absolute faith and devotion are poured onto him—be it in the act of prostration or in the devoted volunteerism that keeps the movement successful. I was later told that many of the Shiva Family members have dreams in which their Guruji appears to them in various ways. Others told me that Shantanand was able to "bring out the best in people." Some told me that they had little faith or ability in music or dance until the swami had instilled confidence in them. Another told me that it would be "wonderful if Swamiji chaired a conference with the world's religious leaders." One devotee related the doubts, pressures, and challenges that had always faced him as he chose to follow his dream of a career in dance. Because of his "saint and savior," he was able to have faith during difficult times. Consider this description of the guru, which appears in all TFA journals and programs under the title "Our Inspiration."

> He mirrors the minds of those around him. Infinitely sensitive to every phenomenon and for whom every phenomenon is a stimulus capable of provoking an infinite series of thoughts, he is man whom admirable texts cannot exhaust, do not even define. . . . Homeless in the literal

sense of the word, yet firmly entrenched in the hearts of those who seek answers to the eternal mysteries, he guides by the light of the Masters.

It is this high degree of faith in its guru that makes the Shiva Family as harmonious and dedicated as it appears to an outsider. To many critical outsiders, on the other hand, the Shiva Family is a personality cult centered on the personage of Shantananda. Critics told stories of intrigue and infighting for access to and favor from the swami. I was also told by the same critics that the organization was very exclusive, actually discouraging nonwealthy Tamil membership. While the latter charge did not appear to be true, based on my own research, it did seem that mostly wealthy Indians, with a high percentage of Ceylonese and Malayalee members, formed the nucleus of the movement. Another critic mentioned that the TFA will only give good parts in its productions to Shiva Family members. Thus, a poor "dark-skinned" girl will not be given a leading role, according to the critic. It was true that working-class and so-called low-caste, dark-skinned Tamils (not that these categories match) are not featured prominently in the TFA; however, many Ceylonese of supposedly high-caste status (Vellalars, a landowning caste) have dark complexions yet find roles in TFA productions. What was important was the way that critics of the TFA and Shiva Family perceived them to be upper class and elitist. This label, as perceived by many among the working-class Indians, discouraged wider membership and participation within the movement, whether or not the organization wished it so. Still, many Indian families would send their children for instruction without joining the Shiva Family, and sure enough, those children were rarely featured dancers of the TFA at the time of my research. The TFA does, on the other hand, attempt to provide services to the urban poor through its Temple of Service, and it also wishes to be more involved in the Brickfields community. As one devotee put it: "Swamiji wants us to address the poor, and no place is better for us than Brickfields, with its many problems." Aside from offering medical services, the TFA tries to reach out to the Indian community through public programs and festivals. The most significant of these occurs during Navarathri.

Navarathri, as mentioned, is a festival celebrated across the whole spectrum of class and status among the Indians in Malaysia. This festival honors Sakti, the energy of the universe, for nine nights. For the first three

nights, Durga, the goddess of strength and valor, is worshipped. On the second three nights, *pujas* toward Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and loving kindness, are performed. This is followed by three nights of *pujas* for Sarasvati, the goddess of wisdom, learning, and the arts. Finally, on the tenth day, Vijayadasami, the celebration of victory, having successfully completed the festival, takes place. On this day, it is considered auspicious to begin lessons in music, dance, or any other art form. During the festival, according to custom, Hindus should perform some penance, such as fasting, meditation, or other austerities. At many temples, especially in squatter or rural areas in Malaysia, firewalking is commonly practiced at the culmination of the festival.

Like Thaipusam and Deepavali, Navarathri is celebrated on a grand scale. All of the temples (especially the Sakti ones), are usually packed with worshippers during this time. Most Hindus will, at a minimum, practice a vegetarian diet for the prescribed period. Commonly, classical Indian dance (*bharata natyam*) will be prepared every night in major temples.

During Navarathri, the TFA becomes the focal point for celebrations in Brickfields. The TFA is open to the public for nine nights, and on the tenth day (Vijayadasami), many parents sign up their children for music and dance lessons. Every night, the TFA offers to the public free performances by all of the students and members. Each performance begins with short prayers—an invocation to the goddess. On the stage itself, an image of the goddess made of papier-mâché or clay is decorated and garlanded. Off to the right of the stage, an elaborate Kollu (doll display) represents different aspects of femininity as personified by Hindu representations of the goddess.

At this time, the TFA becomes an "open house" for the local Indian community: free dance and music performances, food, and literature are offered to the public. I found that even those who are not receptive to the Shiva Family might attend the TFA at this time for the opportunity to witness the festivities. The TFA, for its part, assumes a role of cultural leadership, providing a forum for the enactment of Indian culture for the community. As all students are given the chance to perform, their parents and families will attend, and perhaps be favorably inclined toward the institution. Unlike the "cross-cultural" productions that the TFA stages, Navarathri celebrations are directed at the Indian community and attempt to provide an orthodox Hindu persona for the organization. This, in turn, enhances the organization's status in the eyes of the Indian community.

For the less than wealthy Indians in Brickfields, the opportunity to see high-quality, but free, entertainment (not to mention the food), draws in hundreds every night of the festival. All of this, I was told, makes the tenth day all the more successful, as enrollments in lessons grow with each year.

Among the core Shiva Family devotees, *sadhana* (spiritual discipline) is practiced during the festival. Most will fast and give up a certain amount of sleep as they engage in meditation or prayer. Every year, Swami Shantanand will "challenge" the Shiva Family members in some way during Navarathri. In 1994, the challenge offered was described to me by the Rajasinghams, members of the Shiva Family whom we met earlier in the chapter. Shantanand felt that the collective uttering of a mantra 1.5 million times would have beneficial effects on the "devotees, the nation and world." For nine days, without break, the devotees were to chant a sacred verse from 5:00 a.m. to 1:00 a.m. They were to alternate, but each healthy member of the Shiva Family was expected to chant for about four hours a day. This year the vow had an added significance; it was the re-creation of an ancient ten-day Vedic fire sacrifice. The Homam (fire sacrifice) invoked ancient Vedic culture within the main temple of the TFA. The significance of the *sankalpa* (vow) taken by the Shiva Family was explained in *Hansa*, the magazine of the TFA.

> In ancient times, a man could, under the guidance of his preceptor or guru, propitiate the Divine through making oblations into a carefully prepared fire. . . . A homa kundam, or the fire pit, is traditionally in the shape of a triangle, square or circle. The triangle represents Siva, Siva-Sakti, and Sakti, or in more impersonal, physical terms, Being, Being-Becoming, and Becoming. These can also be seen as the Inert, the Changing, and the Manifestation. . . . In ancient days, this form of prayer was symbolic of man's yearning for union with the Divine. . . . Even so, *under the guidance of a preceptor* versed in the multi-layered subtleties of the Vedas, this inspiring form of prayer can be performed in our present day. (Dec 94/Feb 95, 55, emphasis added)

While the Shiva Family appeals to educated elites with neo-Hindu themes and the appeal of ecumenism, the nostalgia for "Vedic times" also shows a deep desire on the part of the members to locate their religiosity within an imagined tradition. Furthermore, the rite, apparently very rare, requires the true "preceptor" for it work. Thus faith in Shantanand is instilled and expressed through the collective prayer.

As the dances were taking place in the auditorium, devotees sat in circles around *homa kundam* (clay fire pits) in the main temple. The lights were off in the main hall. Four or five fires burned. In the semidarkness, the devotees chanted a verse in Sanskrit, in unison, and almost in a low hum. Occasionally, someone in each group of four or so would add some grains of wheat to the fire or ladled onto it oil or ghee to maintain the flames. The senior dancers in the TFA, like all Shiva Family members, were actively involved in the ritual. They appeared to be highly energized by it. Throughout the ten days and nights, the performances and prayers had an aura of joyous energy. This, in turn, impressed many who were visiting the TFA for the first time.[50] One of the principal dancers told me that the combination of his fasting, the devotion of the dance, and the *homam* ritual had over the ten-day period left him in a state of "ecstatic" exhaustion. Its efficacy can be seen in some of the other testimonials given in the same issue of *Hansa*.

> We have been with Swamiji for more than 20 years now reciting mantras . . . [and] that has made my mind calmer. . . . I am able to look at my thoughts and not be disturbed by them. And this homam has given me the chance to realise this more and more. In ancient times, and it is even so now, this ritual was performed only by *seers and saints*. We are very much blessed . . . because *this is a lifetime opportunity* which cannot be fulfilled individually but relatively easily collectively and in a very short time. For me, I experienced a feeling of love towards all. (Emphasis added)

Another reported:

> While performing the homam, I focused on what is good and appropriate for us and the institution. I have noticed an increase in solidarity and cooperation, and we are probably on the clearer path towards becoming effective instruments for the Temple of Fine Arts. The homam has helped us psychologically—there is better understanding and the possibility of increased integration is much higher. . . . The homam is *the most ancient ritual associated with rishis* and sages who congregated in holy shrines to propitiate the gods through the fire. It is identified with all our major ceremonial rites: birth, marriage, and death. *It is life itself!* (Emphasis added)

The next two experienced what could be described as a "magical" epiphany-like effect.

I understand my life more now. Staring at that fire, I could actually see what was going on in my life! That's kind of enlightening!

Having chanted the mantra so many days, it would still ring in my head even while I was at work. The vibrations are very powerful, and throughout the day, I felt a fantastic surge of energy whenever I remembered the chant. We have set out to clear the haze (in Kuala Lumpur's air quality) and within two days, it rained heavily.

Clearly, the ritual had successfully integrated many elements into one ten-day performance. A repeated theme here and in the verbal accounts given to me was that they, the Shiva Family members, felt blessed to have a *rishi* or "preceptor" advanced enough to realize this rare ritual. Thus, the experience was one of *bhakti* to the guru and acknowledgment of his enlightened status. Being among the select few "given the once in a lifetime" blessing also reinscribes an elite, or "elect," identity among Shiva Family members. Their position and special status were on display to the nonmembers, who were at the TFA for the Navarathri celebrations.

The invocation of Vedic authority, as imagined in the ritual, also elevated the participants and perhaps impressed the visiting nonmembers. Also, the enacted rituals gave the Shiva Family members a sense of continuity with ancient traditions. Hence, an elevated sense of cultural authenticity inspired by an experience of diasporic displacement was inscribed through the journey to the sources of Hinduism—that is, the time of "*ancient rishis and sages.*" This "ancient" wellspring of "tradition" also supplies miraculous energy—both to the charged individual and to the organization, society, and cosmos itself. This then links the ritual to the karmic path of religiosity, best realized through selfless service. As each individual performs the mantra, fulfilling an individual dharma (correct action performed selflessly), the solidarity born out of collective dharmic action soon produces a realization of Dharma, the harmonic convergence of forces in balance. This semantic movement is entirely consistent with the teachings of Vivekananda, Sivananda, and the like. As seen in these examples, and in the collective impressions of my informants, the individual, as an instrument of the group (Shiva Family), can contribute to a larger, cosmic harmony (Dharma). Individual agency (dharma), among the subordinate elite, existing in middleness, is reconstituted, albeit through the submission to a "higher" transcendental law (Dharma) produced through collective ritual.

Later, when telling of the *homam* and chanting to my landlady, a critic of the "cult" nature of the Shiva Family, she told me "how lucky" the members were to "learn ancient mantras" and perform the *homam.* She seemed rather envious. Similarly, when describing the ritual to a person in Brickfields of low economic and ritual status, the individual said, "That is the Samiyar (swami or ascetic) way, and it is good, but it is not for us Indians." By this, I took it to mean that the predominantly middle-class Shiva Family performed rituals meant for higher-status members only, too far removed from the prayers of common Indians or working-class Tamils. As indicated in different ways throughout the book, the signifier "Indian" within the nationalist imaginary invokes both working-class stereotypes and notions of cultural backwardness to Islamic modernists. Invoking the Vedic rite seemed to have carried symbolic capital in the eyes of nonparticipating Indians. Also, the implied negation of working-class Indian identity suggested by the "Samiyar way" comment, and by my analysis of the desire for transcendental surmounting of the ethnic signifier, simultaneously inscribes an "authentic" Indian identity—one that derives from the wellsprings of "the most ancient." More immediately, however, the *homam* had produced a sense of *communitas* and dedication to the organization. In this, fundamentally, its efficacy was seen.

SPIRITUAL COMMODITIES

The dilemma of the Temple of Fine Arts could be succinctly described as a tension between art as a spiritual expression and the fiscal requirements of the organization, as well as the economic needs of its members. While the Shiva Family is rooted in the neo-Hindu domain, as well as claiming links to Vedic pasts (discussed earlier), the Temple of Fine Arts and its many related businesses must sell their product, which, paradoxically, is "spirituality." To explore this issue, we will consider how the TFA characterizes dance.

> For Swami Shantanand, every note in every song, every step in every dance is dedicated with love to the Divine symbolically and emotionally residing in the audience. And for every student of the Temple of Fine Arts, this is the fundamental lesson he or she seeks to learn. (*Hansa* Dec 94/Feb 95, 52)

While the dancers themselves subscribe to this philosophy, and reinforce it through their Shiva Family participation, many are aware of the tensions between the "sacred" art form and the need to present a professional product for a discerning public. This, some fear, will compromise the spirit of the art as market forces change the character of performances. For one thing, *bharata natyam* is not performed exclusively in temples; now the concert hall or dance auditorium has become the venue for it. Tickets are sold, or in the case of the TFA donations are collected, when "invitations" are distributed. Dancers and dance productions are reviewed in the newspapers. Advertising also plays a large role in promoting classical dance. These changes, which could be characterized as the "professionalization" of the arts, are of central concern to TFA members.

Aside from spiritual message embodied in TFA productions, the devotional activities of the Shiva Family create a sense of sacrality that differentiates them from other "professional" dance groups.[51] Consider the comments of one of its dancers.

> While in other places the atmosphere is of the classroom type, here at TFA one gets a strange sense of peace. For me The Temple is a gateway—I cross into another world and I feel liberated. Moreover the place has that presence of Swamiji who appears to be always spinning a mandala of energy. . . . All of that has drawn me closer and closer to the institution. (*Hansa* 1988:57)

The presence of the charismatic Shantanand seems to make the TFA altogether different—dance and religious identity are inseparable. Trips to India, seen as pilgrimages, also instill a "spiritual" identity in the TFA and its dancers. For example, in 1996, the TFA went on an Ardhana to Bharat Mata (pilgrimage to Mother India). This trip involved stops in various temples, the most significant being at the Nataraja Temple in Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu. This thousand-year-old temple, dedicated to Shiva in the "cosmic dance," is considered one of the most sacred Saivite shrines in India. The TFA dancers performed a dance offering in the temple. One of the principal dancers described to me the "harmony and miraculous smoothness" with which the tour-pilgrimage had gone. He described how a four-bus caravan filled with TFA dancers and Shiva Family members had traveled from temple to temple, without miscue. The same dancer explained that the troupe had become closer and more committed to the spiritual essence of dance as a result of the pilgrimage.

The significance of the dance pilgrimage was explained in another TFA-produced magazine. This excerpt is from an essay entitled "A Dancer's Pilgrimage."

> For every student of the Temple of Fine Arts, this love offering to India is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to reaffirm *her inborn desire* to offer her heart and soul to the Divine through dance . . . [for] she would have gone through intensive training with a hundred and twenty others on the dance floor. Under the loving guidance of her dance teachers, she would have explored the many hidden possibilities of her self, perhaps realising in a flash that she can achieve more with her self than she ever dreamed of.
>
> She also would have learned that being a dancer at the Temple of Fine Arts is more than just learning mathematical precision in rhythm and dance steps but also includes the development of virtues of helpfulness and teamwork in an environment of devotion and love for all that is good and beautiful . . .
>
> And during her sojourn here, she will discover for herself, it she possesses a deep sensitivity for the subtler things, the *Soul of India* in the most ordinary of events. And when such a discovery occurs, it can only be experienced, and not described. . . .
>
> At Chidambaram, while dancing for the Divine Dancer, perhaps she will experience an interminable moment of sweet, uncontrollable, overwhelming, heart-bursting joy. Then she will know without a doubt that Lord Nataraja is pleased with her offering of love, and has filled her heart to the brim with love in return. . . .
>
> Then she will know full well that *her journey to perfection* has already begun. (*Annalakshmi Magazine*, February–April, 1996, emphasis added)

The pilgrimage, while romantically imagining an India of unparalleled spirituality, also instills sacredness into the dance. Dance itself is a pilgrimage to the inner depths of selfhood—a soul with "hidden possibilities." Through dance, a "deep sensitivity for the subtler things" will be uncovered. This self, once discovered, will reveal an inner identity, which is somehow linked to the ineffable "Soul of India." Religious identity is reconstituted through dance—a performance by and for the "Divine Dancer" in all people. But, ironically, the "journey to perfection" is a tour that costs much, provides business for Hamsa-Vahini, and must be marketed for it to be successful. That is, its transgression of spirit generates, through its negation, the excess pleasure or "bursting joy" of spiritual surrender. In the "mathematical" mastery and "precision" of dance, the jour-

ney to the inner depths has begun—a journey of becoming, as Heidegger says, " 'what' it already was" (1996:17).

I am inspired here by Žižek's discussion of Hegel's analysis of "subject/spirit." That which becomes sublime arises out of the sublimation of contingency and radical impossibility, and thus it is itself radical negativity: "When Hegel praises the speculative truth of the vulgar materialist thesis of phrenology, 'The Spirit is a Bone', his point is . . . [that] there is a spirit (subject) only in so far as there is some bone (some inert material, non-spiritual remainder/leftover) that resists its spiritual sublation—appropriation—mediation" (2000:28–29). In this sense, the repeated transgression of the spirit by the material, is the very condition that produces the radical negativity of the sacred. Just as Hegel states that "*Self-consciousness attains its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness*" (1999:19, emphasis added), so, too, the spirit can only realize itself through the "bone," the corporeal (indeed transient), material, and contingent source of being. Read as Marx might, the material source of value must remain misrecognized as spirit for the social to exist. While following this line of inquiry can take one to the "unhappy (alienated) consciousness" of Hegel or the "tyranny" or the Good, and the guilty conscience, of Nietzsche, I am not suggesting a compulsive or guilty conscience in the case of the spiritual aspirant here, but rather, the related converse, the pleasures of mastery obtained through the fantasy of "perfect" physical self-mastery and transcendental play manifested in the dance of Nataraja, itself an iconographic image embodying the very paradox that Hegel outlines. In Nataraja, the cycles of birth, death, and destruction, which are the mindless destructive ferocity of life, are represented in the image itself: the god stands balancing on the body of a demonic being, encircled by flames and holding an image of creation (an ethereal drum or signifier of sound) in the right hand and the flame of destruction in the left hand. Only in this horrifying, yet sublime, image can the spirit be seen in its true essence, as the radical negativity of the bone. Again, Žižek suggests that "this very incongruity between the 'spirit' and 'bone' is the 'Spirit', its radical negativity" (2000:30). What is sublime about Nataraja is not his specific form as Siva but his relationship *within*, not outside, the cosmic dance of time. Realizing this incongruity of deity and life/death, in turn, following the logic outlined by Žižek, is the source of the sublime (that which was sublimated) and the essence of Hegel's "Spirit."[52]



Fig. 23. Lord Shiva as Nataraja

SUBRAMANIAM

The paradox is felt acutely by Subramaniam, one of the TFA's assistant directors, who himself is a teacher and dancer in the institution. Subramaniam is thirty years of age. He earned a bachelor's degree in New Zealand in sociology. After this he returned to Malaysia and enrolled for a master's degree in sociology at the University of Malaya. But while in New Zealand, he found that Tamils there were drawn toward their cultural traditions, and he himself rediscovered his "Hindu roots." He told me that his search for Indian culture "ultimately changed [his] life." After reading Hindu philosophy in New Zealand, he saw classical dance in a new light.

After his return, he became "enveloped by Swamiji's love," and found himself actively involved in the TFA. After many years of dancing and teaching—and many pilgrimages to India—he has observed that the

"revival" of interest in classical Indian arts, and of religion in general, is linked to the recent embourgeoisment of Malaysian society. Thus the commodification of tradition also brings with it the paradoxical need for sacred arts to become "professional" if they are to survive in a competitive market.

Subramaniam feels that the secularization of classical culture in postmedieval Europe made "sacred arts into commodities." This contrasts, he feels, with the Indian tradition, in which dance, music, and art are inextricably linked with temple worship. But, Subramaniam finds the fine arts in Malaysia and India "at a crossroads": in order to survive and achieve "excellence," marketing is required. Patronage is not as it was—one must compete with others who are also selling their skills. He said that in multicultural and capitalist-driven Malaysia there are "unique parameters for the evolution of classical Indian dance." Now, the *bharat natyam* recital is often a "professional performance"—tickets are sold, and large auditoriums are rented. This change, though inevitable, presents "serious challenges to an art form, which is rooted in religion and philosophy." Subramaniam is concerned that while the aesthetic may be retained the "*essential spirit*" may erode as dance is commodified. In the spirit of Hegel, he is wary of the contingent source of the "essential spirit," generative, in turn, of a desire to find balance through submission to a guru who will transcend the duality of the material and spiritual. Yet he remains wary of the perpetual transgression (commercialism) that allows for the production of the sacred.

From his unique position in the TFA, Subramaniam can study this "academic interest" firsthand. At the same time, he is deeply committed to the Shiva Family and a personal quest for spiritual meaning through dance. Additionally, he is facing this dilemma in his own life. He wishes to devote all of his time to dance, composing, and other spiritual pursuits (meditation and literature) but faces the daily reality of supporting himself financially. Although concerned about the commercialization of art and the financial pressures he himself must succumb to, he says that "Swamiji will help us *strike a correct balance.*" Freed from the "prison-house of reason," *bhakti* resolves any doubts that Shiva Family members might entertain regarding this issue. Shortly after I spoke with Subramaniam, the TFA filmed a commercial for Cathay Pacific Airlines at the Batu Caves, as well its annual Deepavali advertisement for Dunhill cigarettes. The latter adver-

tisement is particularly paradoxical in that the Shiva Family espouses clean living and certainly does not condone smoking.

To conclude, we see that the Shiva Family and TFA have many dimensions. The TFA problematizes the boundaries of ethnic identity as they blur cultural genres through their cross-cultural productions. Also, the TFA and related businesses have created a transnational network in which an "imagined India," constructed as a sacred motherland, is consumed through pilgrimage, the arts, and devotion to a "Rishi" drawn from the ancient waters of Vedanta. These practices, we have also seen, carry symbolic capital, thus furthering greater self-esteem among Shiva Family members and perceptions of eliteness in the eyes of nonmember, working-class Tamils.

The TFA is also significant as the first Malaysian-born Hindu-based organization that has spread its wings to other countries—and ironically, to India. This "backward" transnationalism is situated within the subtle TFA rhetoric, which reinscribes Indian Hindu identity into the Malaysian nationalist narrative, as was exemplified in the *Ramayana* production. Thus, the TFA is reconstructing an "Indian sphere of influence" in Southeast Asia. Though identifying strongly with Malaysia, it exposes the ideological limits the Islamic modernist rhetoric of the government through a counterdiscourse, made more acceptable as it is "hidden" within the text of the dance drama. This "strategy" suggests consciousness of the economic and ideological terrain on which the TFA must operate.

Last, the TFA and Shiva Family are inspired by a charismatic guru who instills faith in his followers. While the TFA provides a venue for the enactment of an identity in which self-esteem, status, and religiosity are elevated, the need to find a personal savior, Rishi, and saint is also fulfilled through surrender to the enigmatic swami, who "mirrors the minds around him" (see Kakar 1991). This act of submission is also indicative of an ambivalent subject, though masked in the spirit of ecumenism. We see, for example, in the tension between the sacred and secular, as Subramaniam explained, a paradox in which the "authentic" depths of selfhood required a degree of capital (to engage in the training and travel necessary). Members of the Indian elite, who certainly feel the traumatic wound of the anti-Indian stigma, still collaborate within the reproduction of the system that produces their class privilege *and* symptom. This is the very condition of contradiction that leads to submission and surrender—to the

guru, who will "strike the correct balance" and alleviate the "mindless oscillation" that Hegel identified within the divided and "unhappy consciousness." This submission, like the Lacanian law, however, is still compulsive, as it must negate the guilt of repeated transgression (materialism). That, as Žižek (1989) reminds us, is why it takes fetishistic hold as ideology.

CONCLUSION

The ecumenical appeal of neo-Hindu movements, as noted, is historically rooted in the derivative discourse that was born out of an ambivalence and ambiguity of identity among elites within colonial India (Chatterjee 1993). In Malaysia, the ambiguous elite identity of the English-educated Indians, initially transplanted in colonial times, was fractured further as lines of political power were redrawn after Malaysian independence and exacerbated by Malay Islamic ideologies that buttressed legislation aimed at ethnic preferences for Malays in jobs, education, loans, and so on. While critiquing materialism and modernity (Westernization) and religious dogmatism (Islam), many educated Hindus have turned to ashram-based or neo-Hindu movements. These movements seem to offer ideologies that are perceived as rational and ecumenical. That is, while critiquing materialism and the state's version of Islamic modernism, they are also creating their own modernist and materially dependent productions of the spiritual. Spiritual aspirants in these movements see in their religion a model for "harmony and assimilation" within a multicultural nation—albeit on Hinduism's "tolerant" terms. While this enhances status identity, and a sense of difference, vis-à-vis the working-class Indians, we have also seen the importance of a transcendent mysticism, *bhakti*, and the "power" of gurus in their rational ecumenism. It is also clear that a highly romanticized image of India is invoked within the elite Tamil diaspora in Malaysia. This, and the export of "sages" from it, envelops the devotee with wonderment and love. This experience is a potent combination, especially when considering the ongoing political and cultural marginalization of Malaysian Tamils, which, as suggested here, produces psychological displacements (e.g., Islam as inauthentic to Malays, working-class Indians as less spiritually advanced, and an authentic and purified Hinduism).

While most neo-Hindu activities and beliefs appear to be totally nonpo-

litical and philanthropic, there is a subtle negation of Malay Islamic nationalism within the religious rhetoric of these movements. The reinscription of Sanskritic or Indic elements within the Malaysian national identity was seen throughout this chapter but most dramatically through the TFA's artistic productions and purported common spiritual "Asian" denominators among the three "races" in Malaysia. Much of the symbolic political critique, however, is not necessarily a conscious motive, as faith and the search for enlightenment are the foremost concerns behind social service, worship, and the fine arts. Indeed, the partial recognition, in a Marxist vein, of the social sources of the symbolic order, one in which elite Hindus have been complicit in the reproduction of their class privilege, might be the source of fetishistic attachment to the spiritually transcendent. In this case, the continued misrecognition of the symbolic, rather than a conscious "strategic" form of ecumenism, would be expected.

In the case of the Temple of Fine Arts, it is especially clear that the performance narratives aim to construct a Malaysian national identity—one with a far greater Hindu presence. Devotee activists seem to agree that they were inspired to act in direct response to a perceived intrusion of Malay Islamic nationalism. To this extent, all Hindu revivalism in recent years has political significance. Moreover, we have seen that the neo-Hindu activists are partially aware of the political and cultural significance of their efforts. Not only are former elites reacting to an erosion of their social status in modern Malaysia, but we have seen that such activities also aim to provide "leadership" or "uplift" for the Indian community as a whole. This, whether through various charitable activities or critical commentary on undesirable social practices among Indians, assumes with it a responsibility of cultural leadership within the Tamil community. This reinscription of hierarchy, I have suggested, following a phenomenological reading of Freud, represents a desire to transcend the symbolic order in which Indian is an ambivalent identity for the subjects discussed here (both Malay and Indian). The search for the spiritual reveals (as a symptom) a divided subject, while also creating a metonymic representation of the Malay Muslim as the source of recognition for the elite Hindus' spiritual superiority. In this transference, the Hindus too are subjects of Malay desire, and thus their negation is also fetishistic. The source of one's identity, in the presence of the Other, as Hegel suggests, "is a struggle against

an inner enemy, *against whom any victory is defeat*" (1999:36). That is why I have suggested that "ecumenical" transcendence of the symbolic order remains a symptom of a divided subject. Both Malays and Indians are involved in the negation of one kind of Indianness and the uncanny resurrection of another. Ecumenism still submits to a transcendental and timeless "Soul of India."

CHAPTER SIX

MAKING DISTINCTIONS

"We Had Become the Laughingstock of Other Races"

There was a crab seller with three baskets of live crabs. A customer approached the seller, noticing that the first of the baskets was upright and covered by a lid, whereas the second basket was facedown, and the third basket was faceup, without a lid. On asking why the baskets were arranged in this way, the seller replied: "The first basket is full of Malay crabs. I put the lid on top so that they do not escape by climbing on each other's backs. The second basket is full of Chinese crabs. It must be upside down because these crabs would simply push the lid off and help each other escape." The customer then asked, "But why do you leave the third basket open? Won't the crabs escape easily?" The seller replied: "No, these are Indian crabs. If one of them tries to escape, the others will pull him right back down."
—popular Malaysian joke

This chapter focuses on the reproduction of status divisions *within* the Tamil population, particularly as exacerbated by the position of "Indians" in the nationalist imaginary of Islamic modernism. I first describe the sociocultural reproduction of status distinctions, beginning with residential and consumption patterns. I then focus on the cultivation of the performing arts, specifically attending to the importance of classical dance. Following this, I turn to the focal social activity of temple worship, discuss competing or multiple meanings within it, and analyze the uncertainties of hierarchy that are manifest in the practice of *bhakti* (devotion). I then argue, following a brief discussion of a working-class Indian enclave, that

spirit mediums produce uncanny feelings among higher-status Hindus, given the latter's own practices of *bhakti*. I conclude with a lengthy case study of a spirit medium who challenges the hierarchical logic of orthodox Hinduism in Malaysia. But in her negation of the orthodox, I show that she too submits to an ethnic and religious identity that cannot surmount "Indianness" and its dialectical relationship to Malay Islamic modernism.

MARKS OF DISTINCTION

There are several ways in which high-status Indians distinguish themselves from the Tamil working class. As we have seen, many elite Indians are embarrassed by their ascribed ethnic association with working-class Indians. That is not to say that they are all consciously elitist, as many I knew were dedicated to social "uplift," regardless of caste or class. It is nevertheless clear that the production of social identity is bound together with the socialization into and consumption of certain observable patterns of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984).

While some working-class Tamils, even some formerly from estates, have managed to succeed in small business ventures (e.g., restaurants, print shops, and sundries shops), the majority of middle- and upper-class Indians have pursued higher education. Most from the latter category come from professional families (e.g., engineers or managers in civil service, law, and medicine). Even today, one finds a high concentration of Indians in the legal profession, academia, medicine, and veterinary science. Families with economic resources will usually send their children overseas to study. These Tamils (often Ceylonese) and other non-Tamil Indians (Punjabis and Malayalees mostly) will pursue educations in the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States, or India. Working-class Tamils can rarely provide such an education for their children unless they gain admittance to local universities, owing to financial considerations. First and foremost, elite status is reproduced through education abroad, which in turn leads to higher-paying and more prestigious occupations.

Fluency in English also carries cultural and economic capital in spite of the government's efforts to promote the usage of Malay. In fact, those Indians who are lucky enough to study at the local universities, but do not spend time abroad, tend to achieve less fluency in English. This is increasingly so due to the emphasis on Malay as the medium of instruction.

Therefore, there is greater prestige in attending a British, Australian, or American school than in attending a Malaysian university. Presumably, the level of English competence will be higher abroad. As was mentioned in an earlier case study, upper-class Indians generally express disdain for Malay, preferring to speak English.[1] Indeed, those who speak fluent English are able to find employment in more respected companies, private colleges, hospitals, and so on. For example, a physician in Bangsar, an area with a sizable upper-class Indian population, will command greater respect and attract a larger clientele if he or she possesses a comfortable command of English. This fluency does not result solely from foreign study; rather, English often becomes the first language of upper-class households. Children are encouraged to speak English at home, they are sent to English-medium schools, and reading is encouraged in the household. To attend an elite British university (such as Oxford, Cambridge, or the University of London) one must first score extremely high on the A-levels exam. While upper-class Indians account for a rather small percentage of the population, they always form a high proportion of these select few who gain admission to such schools. This has a lot to do with the household environment in these families, which, perhaps for generations, have identified strongly with English education. Some middle-class Tamils are unable to read or write Tamil as a result of their English-oriented educations. Pious Hindus, however, see value in teaching Tamil to their children so that they will be exposed to their religious heritage.

Magazines and journals devoted to religious education are available, being produced by different ashrams, large temples, and independent publishers. Usually, these contain a mixture of Tamil and English articles covering theological and philosophical questions. These materials appeal to educated Hindus seeking a more "intellectual" religious perspective. Articles devoted to comparative religion are also frequently seen. Hindu Renaissance themes of religious unity under a Vedantic umbrella are ubiquitous. Sometimes articles criticize contemporary Tamil cultural practices, thus using popular magazines as a forum for reform. Practices such as mediumship, blood sacrifice, and "excessive ritualism" are often singled out for attack—a key point I will return to at the end of the chapter. Tamil and Hollywood movies also receive a share of criticism. In this manner, the target audience is clearly the English-educated Hindus, who tend to look down on Tamil cinema and popular culture.

The Ramakrishna Mission, Sai Baba Seva, Divine Life Society, and other ashram-based neo-Hindu organizations publish a number of journals and magazines. These pan-Hindu organizations present brahminical Hinduism in a manner that seems rational and "scientific" to educated Hindus. Within Malaysia, major *agamic* temples will also produce commemorative volumes after major renovations or special celebrations. These "souvenirs" will present explanations and apologetics for orthodox ritual traditions. Local magazines such as *Shakti*[2] will also present an orthodox perspective but with a decidedly Tamil emphasis (Willford 1998).[3]

Among many of the English educated from the middle and upper classes, there is a preference for foreign journalism. *Time*, *Asiaweek*,[4] and *Newsweek* are very popular. Entrepreneurs and academics like to read the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and the *Economist*. Those from the higher-status Indian communities prefer either the Hindu magazines or Western ones over the local Tamil magazines and newspapers.[5] The Tamil newspapers tend to emphasize MIC politics and have large sections devoted to gossip and reviews from the Tamil film industry in Madras. Both are objects of derision for the high-status Indians, particularly the Ceylonese (who have been greatly excluded by the MIC as well). I was told that the Tamil papers would not survive financially without the film gossip and sexy pictures of movie stars. Moreover, both of the main Tamil papers are purported to be owned and run by factions within the MIC.[6] Other local Tamil magazines directed toward the working class feature a more tabloid-oriented format. Bizarre happenings[7] and romantic short stories predominate. Like their American counterpart, the *National Inquirer*, educated Indians are embarrassed by them and shy away from purchasing them openly.

There are many other ways in which status difference is underscored besides education, language use, and choice of reading materials. Choices of music, clothes, and hairstyles are also visible markers of social background. I was told by middle-class Tamils that it is obvious when estate Tamils are visiting the city, as their clothes are a dead giveaway. Furthermore, urban working-class Tamils continue to wear garish clothes by middle-class standards, the difference being that on the estate such clothing would be traditional (bright sarees or Punjabi dresses); however, in the cities, the working-class Tamils were said to wear "loud" and colorful, Westernized clothing.

Like clothing, hairstyles reflect status. Working-class males will often

wear their hair in a manner reminiscent of Tamil film stars. Also, as all Tamil film heroes have mustaches, almost all working-class Indian males also wear a mustache. Similarly, women from the estates and the working-class Tamil communities were often identified by their hair fashions. Estate women would wear their hair in the traditional braided style. They would also use coconut oil, thus making their black hair shiny and oily in appearance. While this is unfashionable in urban areas, working-class women do not have the expensive salon cuts that professional Indian women can afford. In general, a neat and stylish short haircut is a mark of education and sophistication for a Tamil woman, whereas working-class women often try to emulate the styles of Tamil film heroines.

Tensions could be sensed between the traditionally elite groups and the entrepreneurs who were claiming higher status through economic achievement. In particular, members of the petit bourgeoisie associated with the MIC were seen to be climbing the financial ladder through their political patronage; but, I was also told that these people were basically "uncultured," and even worse, "gangsters" and "porriky boys" (rascals or playboys). One Tamil lecturer bluntly told me that such men were all Chakaliyars (a low-status *jati*) lacking in "intellectual capacity."

In addition to owning a prestigious car, owning a house is a great marker of status. While most middle-class and lower-middle-class families can afford a "terrace house" (attached condominiums) or a flat, only the upper middle class and rich can afford a detached home with a yard. With the cost of housing increasing tremendously in Kuala Lumpur in recent years, even the young professional family begins by purchasing a terrace, or "link," house.[8] The question of choosing a neighborhood becomes a central concern.

Certain parts of Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya have long been associated with the English-educated elites of all three races. As Indians comprised a large percentage of this category within the colonial infrastructure, they purchased properties and built homes in some of the more prestigious areas of town. Damansara, Bangsar, and parts of Petaling Jaya were developed as wealthy townships in or near Kuala Lumpur. Better roads, shops, schools, and services were established in these areas. Also, careful planning of these suburbs provided plenty of greenery and hilly tracts, which were pleasantly cooler than the more congested urban parts of town. Wealthy and middle-class Indians who could afford to live in such

an area found themselves forming elite Indian enclaves. Bangsar, for example, became an area with a high percentage of Ceylonese Tamils. They built their own temple and formed various religious and cultural organizations. Today, Bangsar is one of the most cosmopolitan and Westernized parts of the city, attracting the largest group of expatriates. The Ceylonese presence is still strong, however, as successive generations have inherited now highly valuable properties. One finds the largest concentration of English-speaking and wealthy Indians here.

To live in Bangsar, therefore, automatically carries with it assumed sophistication. To buy into the area today is almost unimaginable even to middle-class Indians. Thus to own property there carries tremendous economic and symbolic capital. This affluent neighborhood adjoins the mostly working-class Brickfields. Some lower-status Tamils expressed to me a strong desire to someday live in Bangsar. But, I also met some who felt that the area was "snooty." Though both areas have a strong Indian presence, only Brickfields signifies "Indians" in the minds of Malaysians. This is due to the cultural distancing that elite Indians exhibit from their working-class counterparts.

"FAIR AND LOVELY"

Thus far, the categories of distinction highlighted have been either material or cultural. A much more dubious mark of status among Tamils is skin color. Within Malaysia, all three of the main ethnic groups associate fair skin with beauty. Some among the Chinese, for example, having the generally lightest complexion of the three races, see their color as a sign of racial superiority.[9] Similarly, Malays equate light skin with high status, believing that peasants and villagers are darker than blue-blooded Malays. Among both groups, intermarriage with Indians is frowned on, to a great extent, due to skin color. It is feared that having Indian blood will "darken" the family lineage. Among Indians, more broadly categorized, Tamils generally possess a darker complexion. While Malays admire Hindi film stars[10] and so-called North Indian looks, they are not attracted to Tamil actors or to so-called Dravidian features and skin color. While Chinese will avoid direct sunlight, Malays will resort to skin-whitening cremes to ensure a fair complexion. The preference for light skin is also propagated through television advertisements and movies. In the entertainment

industry, even among newsreaders on television, having a dark complexion is considered a serious professional handicap.[11] In contemporary Malaysia, black is not beautiful. Rather, it is associated with working-class Tamils and their "backward" culture.[12]

Ironically, color consciousness is perhaps strongest among Tamils. The relative "fairness" of Tamil women is a topic of great interest. Many Tamil women are obsessed about their color and go to great lengths trying to lighten their skin. The Indian movies (both Hindi and Tamil) usually feature very light-skinned heroines.

To the Tamil male, a "fair" wife is a "trophy." In fact, the color of the wife's skin may be one of the central factors affecting marriage choice. Matrimonial inquiries usually include questions about skin color. Upper- and middle-class Indian men will possibly face criticism and even, more rarely, rejection of their prospective brides from parents if they choose to marry a "dark" girl. I have also heard higher-status males joke about *karpais* (black girls), suggesting that they will fall in love with any man who is kind to them.

The obsession with fair skin is also seen in the media. Not only are all the faces seen in entertainment and news generally fair, but a relentless advertising campaign for Fair and Lovely skin-whitening cream is seen during all Tamil movies and shows, including radio broadcasts. Even the *Nanban* newspaper carries a daily advertisement for the cream on its front page. I asked a Tamil college lecturer friend why a protest campaign is not carried out against this product, which, I suggested, only strengthens the stigma attached to being dark. He agreed and then recalled how his friends had always teased him because of his attraction to "darker women." He added, "the Europeans put this into our minds when they ruled over us."[13] From time to time, however, one hears voices critical of color consciousness. The following letter to *The Star* newspaper, entitled, "So What if I'm Not Fair in the Face," is worth reproducing, as it encapsulates the stigma of color.

> As far as I can remember, the colour of a newborn has been the main concern of Indian parents. It has also become the central point of my life. It has made me the person I am today. . . . I didn't know how much all this bothered me but eventually when I sat next to a fair person, I would draw my hand away because I didn't want anyone to comment on my colour.

Then it was time for me to put myself in the marriage market. Though the colour of my complexion had bothered me for half my life, I was not prepared for the shock I was to receive.

Complexion with a capital "C" seemed to be the greatest asset one could possess. I never knew how much the complexion of a girl mattered to a would-be suitor. Being rather shy, I depended on my family members to find my Mr. Right.

The first question from the prospective groom's family would not be about the girl's character or manners but: "Is the girl fair?" I have met many Indian men over the years and funnily enough, it doesn't matter if *they* are dark as ebony themselves; the girls they want as wives must be fair.

The proposals I have had over the years did not come to anything simply for one reason—the color of my complexion. The irony is that other ethnic groups seem to think I'm attractive. They refuse to believe that I can't meet Mr. Right because of my colour.

I used to feel hurt and embarrassed every time a proposal came and went. It always took me awhile to get over the experience. My parents even resorted to telling the prospective grooms' families that their daughter was dark even before they came to see me to save me the embarrassment of another rejection.

Even then, some would come anyway and then have the audacity to comment on my colour. You see, I hold a good job and that tempted them enough to come and see me.

I have now changed my mind about marrying an Indian man and I don't think my parents mind too much.

I'm sure there are many others who share my predicament. A friend once told me that her friendship over the telephone with a guy came to an abrupt end when he wanted to know how dark she was.

So to all the Indian men out there, I hope you are reading this. Over the years I've come to actually understand your point of view on this. You marry a fair girl, you get fair children and you don't have to worry about finding good matches for your dark-skinned daughters. So, good luck to all of you.

—*Night Star* (*The Star* 7/4/95)

Fairness is a factor in determining marriage choice. Still, many Tamil men, while preferring a fair wife, are not able to obtain one. This makes it doubly important to achieve wealth and education. That is, in order to attract the trophy wife, one must become the elite of the elite. Moreover, as the letter suggests, if one possesses a darker complexion, one must compensate for it by having other high-status attributes. On the whole, there-

fore, color consciousness increases the capacity (through competitive acquisition of distinctions) for elite groups to reproduce their status.

I have already suggested how higher-status Indians, such as the Ceylonese, Chettiars, Malayalees, and Brahmins, have placed importance upon certain emblems and practices to enhance their individual and communal status identity. Two areas where this is manifested publicly are in the patronage and practice of the fine arts and in religious, and in particular temple, worship.

DANCING FOR LORD NATARAJA

We have already seen how the Temple of Fine Arts provides a leadership role in the preservation and innovation of the sacred classical dance of India. As has been noted, the middle- and upper-class Indians are better able to afford training in classical dance and music. *Bharata natyam* and *carnatic* (South Indian classical music) vocal and instrumental music are supported by the well-to-do segments of the Indian community. In particular, females are encouraged to participate in classical performing arts, as achieving competence in these complex traditions is a definitive sign of being cultured. This in turn makes one more desirable as a wife, presumably well versed in the traditional arts and, perhaps implicitly, well disciplined for the domestic arts and duties of a traditional Tamil wife.[14] The observance of such traditions, however, is only possible for a certain segment of the Tamil community.

Learning the classical Indian arts begins at an early age. Lessons must be provided. A suitable school with an instructor of some renown, such as those at the Temple of Fine Arts, or a smaller institution must be selected. Years of disciplined study must be undertaken before the young performer presents a formal dance recital for the public. For *bharata natyam* students this is known as the *salangai puja.*

The *salangai puja* is the culmination of years of sacrifice and hard work for the teacher, student, and parents. It is a public event sometimes attracting hundreds of people. The more people that attend, the more prestige the event brings to the parents of the performing student. If the performance is a great success, the student might be encouraged to continue training until ready to perform the *arengetram*—a public performance demonstrating mastery of classical dance. Reaching this stage requires

many years of effort and earns for the dancer the highest distinction as an exponent of *bharata natyam*. While the latter is reserved for only the finest dancers, the *salangai puja* is not uncommon among the daughters of middle- and upper-class Tamils in Malaysia (Willford 1998).

The event is not only an opportunity for a family to display its moral and financial worth, but also one of the best "advertisements" for a daughter as a potential bride. Though this performance usually occurs before the onset of sexual maturity, interest can be generated by a successful performance, which, after all, showcases grace and beauty as well as a person groomed in "tradition" and piety. In essence, the training in classical dance, with all its discipline and submission to the teacher, is a way for high-status females to learn their gender roles. Having performed at this level is an added bonus on the future bride's marital resume. This is not to imply that the young dancer has this in mind when undertaking the difficult training. First of all, talent and genuine love of the art form are necessary conditions for achieving competence as an exponent of the highly expressive dance. Second, at this age, bringing pride to parents and siblings is much more motivating than thoughts of a future husband would be. Nevertheless, the financial standing of a family as well as its cultural capital are on display through the public performance, and as such, this contributes to the reproduction of the artistic tradition and to the family's continued high status. The patronage of the performing arts, in general, offers an opportunity for community interaction, in addition to being a reassertion of social and cultural identity and a display of refinement (Willford 1998).

This discussion does not intend to suggest a homogeneous elite South Indian culture being articulated by certain influential organizations or individuals. It is true that the TFA, as well in the case of the performance just discussed, attracts a fairly large clientele of well-to-do Indians, most of whom are searching for a sophisticated and refined yet somehow traditional cultural identity. Still, variation occurs within this elite grouping. For instance, the TFA is deemed too experimental and multicultural by purists of *bharata natyam*, while the former might complain of the "stagnancy" of traditionalists. But it would be difficult to correlate class and status with artistic liberalism or traditionalism. Similarly, there are high-status Indians who belittle temple worship, preferring to practice Hinduism within the more "intellectual" climate of an ashram. At the same time, there are those who argue that *agamic* (orthodox) temple worship is

an indispensable part of being a proper Tamil. Having said this, it also follows that there are many who, while being of high status in terms of education, wealth, family background, and so on, feel a greater or lesser affinity with religion and tradition. These individuals, perhaps, identify with a "cutting-edge" culture of liberals, avant-garde artists, intellectuals, and others who feel dislocated by the strictures of tradition.[15]

There are also individuals who completely reject tradition in favor of a "Westernized" worldview. Many elite Indians dress in Western clothes, speak with English or American accents, and consume Western literature, music, and films. I noticed this trend more among Tamil or Malayalee Christians, but, to a lesser degree, there are also Hindus[16] who have "de-Indianized" themselves. Invariably, these Indians are from the upper or middle class; and most often they express negative views about Indian culture.

While Malays are strongly discouraged from frequenting clubs that serve alcohol and encourage fraternizing between sexes,[17] and even face legal sanctions from the Shariah (Islamic) court if caught breaking any Islamic tenet, Indians and Chinese are freer to indulge in "Western" nightlife. Without cultural inhibitions, there are many Indians, from both sexes, who behave more like their MTV-generation counterparts in the West than their pious and more orthodox fellow "Indians." Sometimes this behavior is exaggerated, offering a gross caricature of Western decadence. The following excerpts from a longer essay were written for me by a twenty-year-old Ceylonese Tamil female student about to leave for the United States to complete her bachelor's degree.[18] She captures some of the cultural ambiguity she faces within her own family:

> My eldest brother, Anna, is one charming fellow. He has many friends, meets many people constantly, and is generally outgoing. His personality, to me, is something to be admired. He could be classified as a yuppie, being successful and all that, though he abhors the term. But I would not say he was all that culturally rooted. He has his own beliefs and practices, but to a large extent, he is receptive to many ways of thinking, as his friends are from different races. He is therefore not rigid in his concept of his culture, as to be blind to other ones will not allow him to be tolerant and get along with people of different cultures. Even his wife is Chinese, of "peranakan" [mixed] descent.
>
> My sister, in contrast, is a generally reserved individual. She has lived

by all the rules of our culture, never went against her parents' wishes, and is even married to the man of their choice. She never has had many friends as she is hardly outgoing. She is more conservative when it comes to culture, and is rigid in that sense. She is perhaps the most "Ceylonese" amongst all of us. . . .

It is through the television that I became acquainted with American ideals of individualism. I learned that parents were the enemy, and that we will never see eye to eye, that they were always wrong, and that I could set the record straight by telling them what was right. I left my sense of culture which defined a girl as subordinate to her parents, and accepting all they said. I became impertinent.

It was also through the television, and Mills & Boons (romance novels), that I had the romantic ideal of having a dashing lover. What happened to arranged marriages and chastity? Through the radio I was hooked on English songs and music, sad to say I own numerous CDs, but none of them in Tamil. . . .

I attended the prayers for my grand-uncle who had passed away a few weeks ago. There were many members of the Ceylonese community gathered. About three of them only were of his generation. I observed them, and realized that their children knew less than they did of their culture, and their children in turn knew even less. This will be the trend.

Perhaps what I am feeling now is *a sense of nativism*, or an effort to revert to, or revive the traditional ways, as I do feel overwhelmed by all cultures except my own. The realization that I will be going abroad and spending a considerable time there has heightened my awareness that I will be seen as different, and so maybe I should know why I am different.

I cannot claim to be something I am not, which is a *culturally sound* Ceylonese girl. But maybe it is something I do not even want to be. But it is sad, that a culture you can call your own is being replaced by something foreign. But perhaps this is necessary as we are not in Sri Lanka anymore. And Malaysia is a *melting pot of cultures*, including that of the West.

The author of this essay is certainly expressing an ambiguity of cultural identity. On the one hand, she admires her Westernized brother and resents female subordination in "traditional" Ceylonese culture. At the same time, she sees her own "Western" ways with a bit of self-mockery when she discusses her "impertinence." Furthermore, she is suspicious of her tastes, recognizing how her "American ideals" partly result from the consumption of American television, CDs, books, and so on. Though she

feels dislocated from her "Ceylonese" heritage, she senses a feeling of loss and fears that her immersion in the West will further distance her from her mother's and sister's worldview. In another section she discusses how Tamil temple practices have become more "ritualistic than spiritual"; but then she also suggests that "it is this [Hindu rituals] that makes up the bond with culture with which we identify, as it is unique to the Tamils, of which we are a part." On the whole, this individual is certainly ambiguous and perhaps, ambivalent about her Tamil identity and toward the forces of modernity that have produced this dilemma. She is unable to justify the cultural worth of her Ceylonese traditions yet feels somehow compelled to lament their loss—their very absence becomes the site of the longing for "nativism." Heidegger suggests that "in the *malaise of anxiety*, we often try to shatter the vacant stillness with *compulsive talk only proves the presence of the nothing*" (1993:101). While her turn to tradition (or being "culturally sound") is incomplete or incipient (who knows what the diasporic condition of living in the United States later produced), the displacement effect behind her temporary fixation on Ceylonese Tamil identity parallels the ambivalent ethnic fetishism we have observed within other elite Indians.

What is also significant, perhaps, is that the heavily Malay Islamic character of the Malaysian nationalist ideology seems not to figure greatly in the negotiation of her identity. As an English-educated member of the Ceylonese middle class, there is never any question of identifying with the Malay modernist vision presently articulated by the government. Nevertheless, the notion of Malaysia as a "melting pot" suggests an implicit, and, perhaps, semiconscious, rejection of "culturally sound" discourses of ethnic types. In that sense, too, the recognition of Malaysia's complex ethnic history, and a simultaneous sense of "nativism" experienced as loss to what is foreign, speaks to the displacement effects of the Malaysian nationalist ideology. The paradox of the impossibility of cultural soundness, given the reality of the melting pot, produces the desire to fixate upon the "native," in order to silence, in Heidegger's language, the "malaise of anxiety" that such partial recognition produces.

TEMPLE WORSHIP: "A CHILD GOING TO KINDERGARTEN"

The relationship between social identity and temple worship among Malaysian Tamils is important to consider (see Mearns 1995). I will

emphasize some aspects of temple worship that relate to the potentially uncanny effects of contested hierarchy. In particular, the seemingly contradictory intellectual, devotional, and "magical" aspects of temple practice will reveal status distinctions, as well as a significant theological overlap between different status groups. It is, perhaps, in temple worship where the different "levels" of Hinduism, as discussed in earlier chapters, are intertwined, yet ambiguously so.

After attending over one hundred *pujas* in over fifty temples in Malaysia, I propose an abstraction of the forms and meanings involved in temple worship. This is intended to highlight the status distinctions, as well as the blurring of exegetical differences within Tamil Saivite Hinduism. Temple worship, according to many Hindu theologians, progresses in stages. While I will not scale the heights of Hindu philosophy, a few general principles are relevant here.

In orthodox Hinduism, God is ultimately formless, pervading all that is and is not. Therefore in a Vedantic, or nondualistic, understanding of Hinduism, there is nothing that is not God. Likewise, in Tamil Saivism (Saiva Siddhanta), a Supreme Lord known as Siva is alone real. But the manifest creation, with humanity as the highest, most-realized expression of that, does not have full "awareness" of this fundamental unity. Thus, temples are places where God resides (*koyil* or *kovil* in Tamil) for the benefit of humanity. It is a holy place where the Lord is manifested in divine forms. The human being is *atma* or *pasu* (soul); however, the unenlightened individual cannot conceive and worship a formless deity, nor can he or she identify the divine force within due to the power of *maya*, the illusory force in nature. This impels humans to seek pleasures within the illusory realm producing karma, which in turn entraps one further in illusion. Temple worship helps focus the mind on the Supreme Being through a series of rituals. It is believed that though God is everywhere the Supreme Being is especially manifested in the consecrated deities found in temples. As one *kurukal* (priest-guru) put it: "Milk is present in the body of the cow, but we can only receive it by way of its teats . . . [so] the blessings of the Lord are best obtained through the worship of deities done in a proper manner." Another influential Malaysian Hindu religious teacher writes:

> God is present Everywhere and in Everything. He is thus Omnipresent. You should therefore be able to worship Him Anywhere and at Anytime. This concept is easy to declare. However, it is not easy to practice. It is

> not easy because of the Negative Vibrations known as MAYA (such as attachment towards spouse, children, relatives, possessions and problems that are caused by our material needs) that is present everywhere. These negative vibrations prevent you from worshipping God in All Places and at All Times. You, therefore need a special place to worship God. That place is the TEMPLE. . . . God's grace which is present all over the universe is most readily obtained in Temples. Just like the heat in the sun's rays are concentrated by a magnifying glass, the Grace of God is concentrated by Murthis (forms of God) installed in Temples. Another benefit from visiting Temples is that it allows you to associate with other souls that are far more spiritually advanced, thus purifying your soul and setting it on the correct path. (Sivasri 1993, 12–14)

The practice of ritual worship is supposed to bring the devotee closer to a realization of the "formless," perhaps ironically, through the devotion to deities who possess highly anthropomorphic forms. These forms enable the devotee to conceptualize the deity in ways that aid the devotee in *bhakti.* Temple worship is indispensable, as it, like meditation, disciplines and focuses the mind on God. This progression, and the ritual practices entailed in it (*puja*), however, is not a coherent set of beliefs shared by all Hindus. Even in the words of an exponent of Hinduism, we see the hard to reconcile notion that God is "omnipresent," yet somehow more "concentrated" in Temple icons, which are deemed to carry power (Sakti). Put into the Saiva Siddhanta framework, one can say that God is both transcendent and immanent. But status differences, as well as the ambiguous nature of *bhakti*, reveal alternative interpretations.

Dr. S. M. Ponniah, another scholar of Hinduism in Malaysia, writes:

> The primary purpose of temple worship is "total surrender" of man to God. Every Hindu goes to a temple in order to surrender himself, after sacrificing or renouncing his worldly attachments; gains "darsan" or a vision of God; seeks his grace and guidance for his onward journey towards spiritual advancement, which will end in his attainment of "moksha" (emancipation).
>
> The very structure of the Hindu Temple reflects the philosophic basis of Hindu worship. (Ponniah 1994)

This position accepts the necessity of temple worship as a kind of disciplining process in which the devotee advances spiritually toward enlightenment through a set of orthodox rituals. The temple form and its rituals comprise a set of "lesson plans." That is to say, one must first progress

from "kindergarten" in order to achieve eventual wisdom. Like meditating on a mandala or repeating a sacred mantra, the meaning is only understood through repetition.

The Hindu temple is structured conceptually to represent the symbolic body of God. The *gopuram* (gate tower) is where the devotee is supposed to enter the temple. This is said to be the "feet" of the Divine pointed upward (as if the deity were lying on its back). Prostration by the devotee here symbolizes how the "lowest" part of the Divine (feet) towers over the highest part of the devotee (head) (see Mearns 1995:158–59). As one enters the temple, one first pays homage to Lord Vinayagar (Ganesha) before prostrating oneself before the main deity (Murugan, Siva, or a form of Sakti), unless the temple itself is dedicated to that deity. If the temple has a pathway around the temple, the devotee should first circumambulate the temple (*pradakshina*) clockwise (some say at least three times, depending on the size of the temple). In the elaborate structures in South India, the circumambulatory route brings the devotee closer and closer to the "womb" or sanctum of the temple (*molasthanam*), which is crowned by the towering *vimanam*. Malaysia's temples, being much smaller, can only represent this pilgrimage process symbolically through a series of smaller shrines, which gradually draw the devotee closer to the realm of the sacred. Although called the womb, the *molasthanam* is representative of the highest part of the Divine manifestation, the head. Upon reaching the sanctum sanctorum, the devotees are supposed to have cleansed themselves mentally, gradually shedding their thoughts of the mundane world. A priest performs the *puja*, which consists of sacred chants of praise (*mantirams*), presentation of food and floral offerings (*naiveytiam*), and the waving of the flame (*arati*).[19] After this, the priest will distribute the now-consecrated *prasadam* to the devotees.

Just as the temple represents the divine body, a spiritual journey within the devotee is also supposed to have occurred. Mearns elucidates.

> In entering the temple, one is entering the divine body in order to better enter one's own body and there find the universal divine. Thus, the body itself becomes conceptually a temple of subtle thresholds which must be accorded its own due respect in order to permit the *transcendence of its own limits*. (1995:158, emphasis added)

There is, however, indifference to this more orthodox interpretation. When observing temple rituals in Malaysia, it is clear that the orthodox



Fig. 24. *Arati* and *puja* in a plantation temple

rules for ritual, as well as their philosophical underpinning, are not widely known or practiced. The correct sequence of prayer is often not adhered to, especially in smaller, low-status temples lacking Brahmin priests. Sometimes devotees prostrate themselves before "lesser deities" in violation of the orthodox view that only the particular deity housed in the *molasthanam* should receive this honor. Probably the most common complaint from critics of temple worship is that the *archenai* system, in which a standard fee is charged for each prayer, is becoming more of a "transaction" than an act of devotion. I was told that most devotees act as if "buying the ticket was enough to receive the Lord's blessings." Moreover, the same critics believed that the worshippers simply wanted "material things," or "health and prosperity," rather than seeking spiritual realization. Other critics complained that the rituals and stone images were becoming "ends in themselves" rather than a "means to an end." Many who were drawn to ashrams and yoga societies held this view of temple worship. I also heard

that the priests in temples were not spiritually advanced, seeking profits through the rituals they performed on others' behalf.

There is also the question of status. One the one hand, critics of temple worship agree with a certain segment of the orthodox, with both tending to view the temple rituals as a kindergarten along the path of spiritual evolution. Those who believe that temple worship is important, yet understand it in abstract, philosophical terms, are usually well-educated, middle-class members of the Tamil community. Their exegetical framework for ritual practices carries the banner of orthodoxy as a marker of piety and learning, as well as spiritual advancement. Temple practice is deemed necessary as it imparts Hindu philosophy in the most conducive manner to the "less-advanced" masses.

It follows that those who are the patrons of this tradition are accorded respect as guardians of Hindu dharma (righteousness). This respect can be earned in a variety of ways. First, the Hindu well versed in rituals and their meanings may write in the local Hindu magazines discussed earlier. But only a few prominent individuals seem to represent orthodox Hinduism in Malaysia in this manner. More commonly, respect is garnered by those who sponsor special rituals (*ubayam*) during festivals. In particular, the consecration ritual of a new temple, or new shrine within a temple, known as the *kumabhishekam*, affords an opportunity for a family to become a benefactor or patron of either the ritual or a part of the temple's construction. This can be very prestigious in a large and well-attended temple. The family name may be inscribed on a plaque inside the temple, or at the very least the souvenir program for the event will mention who the *ubayakaren* (sponsor) is.[20] It is also clear, as mentioned earlier, that certain temples are associated with the *agamic* orthodoxy while others are viewed as *nonagamic*. Therefore, another way in which differences between high- and low-status temples are maintained is through the patronage of *agamic* rituals. Strong financial patronage is required in order to enact costly rituals, maintain an elaborate structure, and employ Brahmin priests. Being a board member of a prestigious *agamic* temple is another way to achieve distinction from others in the Tamil community.

One woman from a very prominent Tamil family explained to me that while she objected to the way that temple worship had become "empty ritualism" for most, she still attended occasionally because she understands "the symbolism in temple worship" in a manner that does not conflict with



Fig. 25. The Kandasamy temple in Brickfields. This Ceylonese-managed temple is popular among middle-class Hindus.

her "philosophical leanings." She added that much of the present-day ignorance of temple goers is "an extension" of "old notions that temples are places where the whole social life of the town centers." She then explained that Malaysian temples were, for the most part, a "social hall for observing the opposite sex." I heard this from others as well. Among the more traditional families it is true that young women would only see and be seen by young men in the controlled atmosphere of the temple. But it was also apparent that this "social hall" atmosphere was more pronounced in large temples, where large crowds enabled discreet meetings or eye contact.[21] While not opposed to temple worship in its ideal form, this informant is also claiming to have a proper understanding of the rituals, thus distancing herself from other worshippers, who, in her words, "have no idea of the meaning behind" the rituals. The same individual attends a number of ashrams, both in Malaysia and in India, where, now in her middle age, she makes annual pilgrimages. In contrast, she explained that her husband, a somewhat high-ranking former government officer,

finds temple worship in Malaysia "ridiculous" and embarrassing. He distances himself entirely from the tradition, preferring an exclusively philosophical approach to Hinduism. The couple now make pilgrimages to temples and ashrams in India, particularly those associated with the lives of saints and philosophers.

Those with philosophical leanings, as seen in this example, might completely lose interest in temple worship, preferring to follow another path. This might involve being active in an ashram-based movement or perhaps rejecting organized religion altogether. On the other hand, there are many who are involved in ashrams, yet are still active temple goers. Both the orthodox defenders of the tradition and the philosophes claim a "higher" understanding. To the Vedantist, for example, temple worship is a kindergarten for weaker minds not ready for a deeper understanding. To the Saiva Siddhantist, temple rituals slowly enlighten the devotee to a higher wisdom. It is, however, also true that while one finds some working- and middle-class Tamils who are seriously attempting to understand Saiva Siddhanta philosophy (as witnessed by the proliferation of religious magazines and a growing number of classes being offered in Hindu theology at various temples), the ashrams are the more exclusive domain of the elite. Some of this ambiguity and contention is captured in this appraisal by a Malaysian Hindu scholar representing the more orthodox Saiva Siddhanta tradition.

> There is now an urgent need for Hindus in Malaysia to close ranks; correct the growing misconceptions; arrest the apprehensions and to narrow the differences that now exist between "traditional" Hindus and "modern" Hindus: "urban Hindus" and "rural Hindus"; "English-educated Hindus and "Tamil-educated Hindus"; the "well-to-do Hindus" and not so well-to-do Hindus—who as a result of their inherent individuality—are ill-equipped to confront or combat the new international forces that are emerging, as the 21st century approaches. . . .
>
> A disturbing trend among our "modernists" and the "English-educated" is their movement away from temples and temple-worship, towards new, Hindu-based Sangams and Sabahs, Manrams and Missions, where they gather on week-ends to sing bajans, to pray, to listen to learned discourses on Hindu religion and philosophy, thereby *distancing themselves from traditional temple worship*. They do so, because they find it a meaningless experience: they are often completely lost. They are unable to share in the religious experience, as they do not understand what is going on. They find no intellectual satisfaction. Their

> preference for an "intellectual" identity instead of an "emotional" identity is understandable. They find the study of texts, the bajans and the intellectual discourses and discussions, more meaningful. They are more at home, with English than with their mother tongue. They rather [sic] devote their time to social and cultural activities, than "*join the crowds*" in temples! (Ponniah 1994:62–63, emphasis added)

The author is certainly arguing that temple rituals play a leading role in guiding the devotee to a deeper understanding. At the same time, it is apparent that the schisms within the Tamil community are his overriding concern. This shows an awareness of the conscious process by which different Hindus identify and/or distance themselves from other Hindus. Moreover, the sometimes contradictory and/or "complementary" aspects of neo-Hindu organizations reveal an ambiguity over what really is the "highest" level of interpretation. Temples may be a kindergarten, but are they more than that?

The exegetical ambiguity of temple worship is summarized by Mearns.

> At the highest level of exegetical interpretation, then, Melaka [a town in Malaysia] Hindus may apparently contradict themselves and other Hindus and deny that the temple is in any special way unique in its relation to the divine. Such interpreters come close to denying the very sacredness of this space by identifying it with the universal space where the divine is all-pervasive. At this level, all space becomes sacred and it is only illusion (maya) which prevents the ignorant from realising this. (1995:159)

In other words, either by identifying with the Vedantic, nondualistic view, where God is universal, or by adopting the temple as a heuristic or "mnemonic" device to aid the devotee in his or her inward journey, the sacred status of the temple (and the necessity of ritual purity) is called into question. But the real ambiguity is located within the *bhakti* tradition, in which God is worshipped as an immanent presence. Once again, Mearns explains.

> The deity at the centre of the temple is not merely the "representation" of divine power—it is that power focused and concentrated by correct ritual performance. In order to ensure that the power is retained, ritual is required regularly. . . . A neglected deity is a potent and dangerous force which may seek out those who have ceased to perform their duty. It will exact vengeance. (1995:161)

This interpretation of the "immanent" deity is a far cry from the orthodox views suggested earlier; but it is the "concentrated" powers (Sakti) in temples that ultimately explain their sacredness and appeal to devotees. In a sense, the power that is immanent to the temple is partially recognized as produced through the iteration of ritual. Just as Lacan argues that there can be no "spirit" without the "letter," read in Marxist terms, the spirit is the alienated essence of human (ritual) labor. In this *bhakti* problematic, the *agamic*-non-*agamic* distinction is especially important.

Bhakti is devotion to a personal and immanent god. In its Vedantic or Saiva Siddhantic ideal, the goal of *bhakti* is absorption—either total unity with the deity—in which all awareness of individuality is lost—or the devotee is to enjoy eternal and blissful adoration of the deity. But, as indicated earlier, the belief that the deity is immanent in the specific shrine, and concentrated within its iconic image, means that adoration of the deity through *pujas* is required to maintain the deity's presence. A failure to serve the god in this manner may produce anger in the deity. In that sense, temple worship can involve placating a powerful, and potentially dangerous presence. This interpretation, as discussed in chapter 4, is usually associated with "village shrines" (Whitehead 1921). Placating a powerful and dangerous deity can even involve blood sacrifices. Also, spirit possession is commonly seen in such temples. But, as discussed earlier, only low-status temples continue these practices in Malaysia. Still, there are many Tamils who hold contradictory beliefs simultaneously in dialectical tension.

The adorning of the image (*alangaram*), the receiving of *prasadam*, and the performance of *agamic* rituals all demonstrate a concern with receiving a tangible blessing from God. Thus, even orthodox ritualism, while clearly distancing itself from propitiation rites seen in low-status shrines, is not a mere training ground for the devotee, as has been implied. Rather, the elaborate rituals, as seen from the perspective of *bhakti*, are indicative of an ambiguous interpretation.[22]

According to Hart (1979), *agamic* rituals are designed to preserve the purity of a shrine. He argues that in traditional Hindu practice, temple rituals were aimed at preserving an orthodox social hierarchy, achieved, in part, by an avoidance of the pollutions that excessive *bhakti* could bring within a shrine. These "dangerous powers" included the wrath of angry

spirits, possession trances, and, perhaps most important, a challenge to priestly and caste-ordained statuses through direct contact with the divine. The medium, mystic, or ecstatic *bhakta* could, in effect, negate the social order by circumventing it.[23] This theme of symbolic resistance was discussed earlier in the context of the Adi Puram and Thaipusam rituals.

Now, if we consider what Mearns has suggested, which is also supported by my own observations and discussions with devotees, we see an interesting paradox in the present-day *agamic* ritual. Concerns over purity and ritual accuracy demonstrate an acknowledgment of powerful forces that can affect human affairs. This belief, as discussed earlier, is usually associated with the village tradition. As both Hart and McDaniel (1989) suggest, the *agamic* rituals are designed to enhance social status through their complexity and philosophical underpinning (e.g., Means's "intellectualist viewpoint"), yet, at the same time, they are concerned with the control of potentially dangerous forces. This suggests, in turn, recognition of an immanent, and indeed corporeal, manifestation of "danger" and its control by the apparently not quite transcendent "spirit." While the latter point seems theologically contradictory, it does help us understand the dialectical tension between the poles of this contradiction that drives the fantasy of spiritual hierarchy (e.g., "lower" and "higher" forms of religion) and its social corollary, status distinction.

Unlike the ideal-type *agamic* temple, in which *bhakti* is actually discouraged (Hart 1978), urban Malaysian temples, especially the larger and more ornate ones, encourage *bhakti*. As mentioned, the "immanent" deity is sought by a devotee seeking a meaningful religious experience. But, at the same time, a magical, almost talismanlike effect of temple worship is also clearly sought by devotees. The *prasadam*, *archenai*, and "powers" of the icon (*shakti*) show that many plainly seek more than devotion. Rather, the powers associated with these substances reflect a shared concern (with lower-status devotees) with controlling sacred powers for instrumental aims. This is another reason why *agamic* principles must be strictly observed in higher-status shrines. The orthodox rituals serve as markers of distinction, distancing the practices from the propitiation rites seen in lower-status shrines.

In sum, we see that temple worship is another area where cultural practices reproduce status distinctions within the Tamil community. The orthodox position clearly suggests hierarchies of interpretation; however,

the ambiguity of practice and belief, if anything, fuels a greater need for *agamic* purity in order to negate ambiguity through the inscription of hierarchy. That is to suggest that the practice of *agamic* worship is designed to mitigate against the so-called impurities that might result from *bhakti*. This demonstrates a belief, contrary to the "intellectual" interpretations,[24] in immanent and concentrated powers within shrines. Tamils from different class backgrounds seem to share this view.[25] It is important to bear this in mind when we consider the "impure" deities that possess dangerous powers in lower-status forms of Tamil ritual. The practice and stigma of Tamil spirit mediumship, as we will shortly see, allow us to illustrate the uncanny dimension within the spiritual that fuels social and psychic distancing. Moreover, given Malaysia's state-driven and historically constituted ethnosymbolic ordering, and the stigma that attaches to Indians, we can understand the exacerbating social conditions that drive fantasies of distinction and difference within the Tamil community. Prior to entertaining the notion of dangerous spirits, however, it is important to reiterate the stigmas that are attached to working-class Tamils and to consider the reproduction of these stereotypes within the urban Indian enclave.

INDIANS IN THE EYES OF NON-INDIANS

There are many derisive cultural and social stereotypes about Tamils. "Indians" are often at the receiving end of racist epitaphs describing them as hot-tempered, lazy, dirty, and dishonest people. The men are sometimes said to be drunkards, wife beaters, and braggarts caring little for their fellow Indians. On numerous occasions, for example, while riding to Brickfields (an Indian enclave) in a taxi, the non-Indian drivers would warn me about Indians. One Malay driver told me that he would not even drive in an Indian area after a certain point in the evening because of the alleged dangers of intoxicated men fighting in the streets! The same driver tried to convince me, with all sincerity, to move to a Malay neighborhood for my own safety. In turn, Indians perceive themselves as the victims of "racism" fomented by the government, the police, and "extremist" elements within the Malay community.

Malaysian Chinese, I was told, teach their children obedience by telling them that if they are naughty the "Indian man" will take them away. One Chinese college student explained to me the origins of an anti-Indian bias.

> Personally, in my Chinese upbringing, I have been taught from childhood to distrust members of the Indian race. Indians are commonly believed to most Chinese families to be thieves and cheats. Logically, this does not make very much sense. This belief probably came into existence when some past ancestor got cheated by an Indian, and that distrust has been carried forward . . . as with many origins of prejudice. . . . However unfair this kind of judgment may be, it is still in practice and does affect the upbringing of many children.

On the other side of the coin, Indians sometimes stereotype the Chinese as "greedy" racists and the Malays as "lazy" and "insecure" racists. Malay stereotypes of the overly assertive and discourteous Chinese, themselves appropriated colonial discourses, are also picked up by Tamils. Once again, colonial racial discourses continue to haunt the social interactions between the three main ethnic groups.

Non-Indian students also carried negative ethnic stereotypes about Indians. In carrying out an open-ended survey of over fifty college students, the majority being Chinese, the Indians were characterized almost without exception as being the "poor estate workers." Some were sympathetic to historic injustices; however, most simply stated that Tamils were a "poor" race. Moreover, the understanding of Tamil religion and culture by non-Tamil students was clearly influenced by the stereotypes popularized by images of Thaipusam and, to some extent, Tamil movies.[26]

Khoo Kay Kim, a Malaysian historian, explains anti-Indian sentiments.

> Politics apart, Malay attitudes towards the Indians have been shaped by a number of other factors which are largely related to the general behavior of the Indians, their occupations, their economic status, ethos, and even the colour of their skin. For example, the Malays (and indeed the Chinese, too) have formed certain unfavourable impressions about the Indians, who have often been seen to over-indulge themselves in the consumption of intoxicating drinks, especially toddy but often samsu as well. Until quite recent times, in many towns Indians could be seen frequently arguing noisily in toddy shops or staggering along the road in drunken stupor. . . .
>
> The larger proportion of the Indians in this country were employed to do menial jobs; they were gardeners, school caretakers, road sweepers, garbage collectors, and grass cutters. Because of their poverty and the colour of their skin, there has long prevailed the opinion that socially the Indians belong to the lowest strata of the Malaysian society. (Khoo 1993:278–79)

The stereotypes, in short, are not simply residual from earlier colonial discourses but are also based on stereotypical interpretations of contemporary Tamil cultural and social practices. These practices are most visible in urban ethnic enclaves. These "Little Indias" are where the marks of Indianness are reproduced.

LITTLE INDIAS AS COMMUNITY SPACE

Affluent Tamils, as discussed earlier, tend to live in areas removed (if only slightly) from urban Indian enclaves. So-called Little Indias are less important for them to maintain a sense of continuous social and cultural identity. I have suggested that professional Tamils compartmentalize (Singer 1972) their Indian identity in limited yet focalized performances and venues, and in doing so, they distinguish themselves from the majority of Tamils. Being inhibited by structural and cultural factors from other avenues of social status, affiliation, and personal identification, the working-class Tamil habitus creates and is created by certain tastes and dispositions. The Indian community space produces an ethnic haven—that is, a social space for marginalized Indians within the dominant power structures of Malaysian society—which assures and asserts "boundary maintenance" (Barth 1969) against Malay Islamic nationalist ideologies. But at the same time, this becomes the locus for the production of stereotypes about Indians. Thus I am not suggesting a functionalist or pluralist account of the ethnic enclave within a multiethnic society. Rather, the very Barthian notion of "boundaries" suggests an oppositional production of ethnic identities. This in turn suggests the dialectical construction of all ethnic discourses. At the same time, the valuation of a group within the labeling process is greatly determined by the structuring power of class and status. As such, the notion of ethnic enclaves serving the interests of "boundary maintenance" proves inadequate due to the power differential between ethnic groupings in most societies (Erikson 1993; Munasinghe 2001; Santiago-Irizarry 2001).

In what follows, I describe some of the common social practices seen in urban Indian areas. These observations were mostly recorded in Brickfields, a large Indian enclave in Kuala Lumpur.[27]

In Malaysian cities, the socially demarcation of space between the three main ethnic communities is indicated by visual, aural, and even olfactory

sensations. Entering into Indian space, the pedestrian is made aware of its ethnic orientation by the sounds of Tamil songs blasting from shop houses and the smells of pungent Indian curries and quite often burning incense. The unmistakable scent of jasmine flowers is also only found on streets catering to a large Tamil clientele. The familiar sounds, sights, and smells make the Tamil shopper feel at home. In addition to making the Tamil feel comfortable, the Indian ambiance also asserts an Indian cultural space. Put simply, Tamils do not feel marginalized there.

While there are numerous Indian neighborhoods in and around Kuala Lumpur, these never retain an Indian ambiance without a series of businesses providing essential Indian goods and services. An Indian enclave must thrive to survive, given the cost of real estate in Kuala Lumpur. Indian petty traders are easily bought out, forced to relocate or change careers. The government's assistance for Malay entrepreneurs also adds competition within the urban real estate and business markets. Also, the greater economic success of Chinese-owned companies and small businesses constantly threatens to change the ethnic composition of many sections of town. As a result of these pressures, only a few Little Indias are still economically viable. Even these last few face certain transformation.

Indian enclaves offer a variety of goods essential for the reproduction of cultural practices. Foodstuffs and spices, gold jewelry, clothes, newspapers, prayer items, and flowers are some of the items commonly sought by Indians. Hairdressers, tailors, restaurant owners, priests, astrologers, and *paanwallas* (betel nut preparers) provide some of the valued services to an Indian clientele.

Economic success is enhanced, in most cases, by the proximate location of a number of businesses providing different products and services to the Tamils. Those Tamils living outside the enclaves will shop in the Indian space only if they can buy a variety of desired goods. The proximity of these shops, temples, and restaurants allows the visitor to accomplish many things in a short period of time. This is especially important for the working-class Tamils, who cannot afford the luxury of traveling by car to different locations to shop. The concentration of all desired Indian goods brings a steady group of shoppers. Also, those who live in the Indian enclave support and/or operate businesses there.

Equally important to shopping for provisions are the social interactions that take place in Tamil cultural spaces. Tamils who congregate in Little

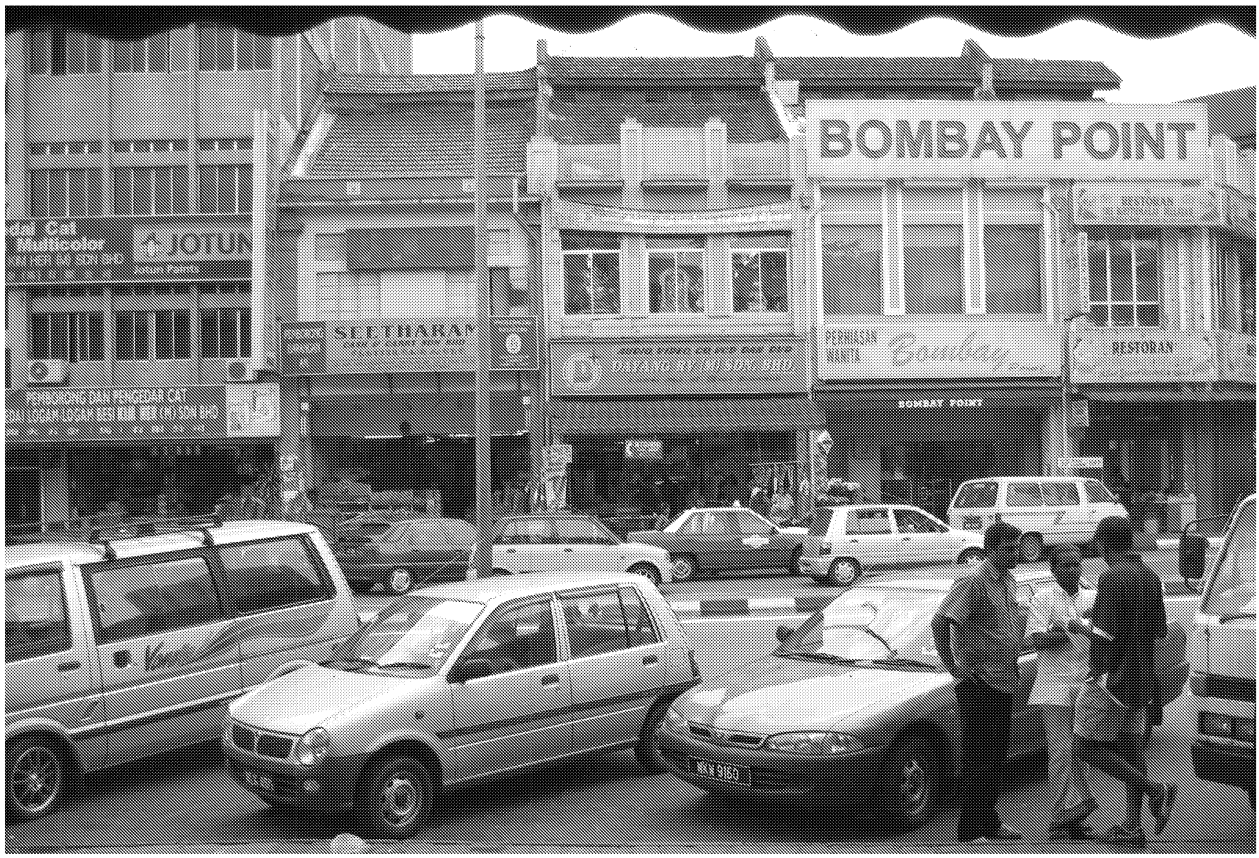


Fig. 26. Indian restaurants and provision shops in Brickfields

Indias do so, in part, in order to speak and hear Tamil. Shops proudly display their signs in Tamil and conduct business with other Tamils in their mother tongue. Even those youthful Indians that grew up mastering Malay in school at the expense of Tamil will often make an effort to speak a unique Tamil-Malay-English mixture while socializing in Indian space. For the working-class men and women, the various "banana-leaf"[28] restaurants serving *roti chanai* (fried bread and dal), *mee goreng* (fried noodles with Indian spices), and *dosai* (rice and dal pancakes) and tea stalls are places for conversation, gossip, and hearing the hit Indian film tunes played over the radio. This is not to say that all the customers are Indians, as many Chinese and Malays also patronize the Indian eateries. Little Indias will prosper if they can attract non-Indians eager to experience a bit of Indian food and ambiance. But this does not mean that such spaces are homogeneous; rather, there is much stratification and variation within an Indian enclave.

Taking Brickfields during the mid-1990s as my example, one finds an organization of space that reflected the economic and social disparity within the Tamil community. Along the Klang riverbank were rows of shanty homes. Many very poor Indians lived as squatters in this part of Brickfields. At this time, a large influx of both legal and illegal Indonesian and Bangladeshi laborers moved into this area, joining the urban Indian poor. Walking toward the business district along Jalan Tun Sambanthan[29] one encountered the smells of various foods frying in oil, as the sidewalks and even part of the roads are utilized by sidewalk eating stalls. On the northeast side of Brickfields, there was a street dominated by Chinese restaurants, stalls, and hotels. This was also a "red-light" district, as most of the hotels were actually brothels. These hotels were heavily patronized throughout the afternoon and evening, their clientele comprising mostly of working-class Indians.[30] Surrounding this "seedy" street to the north and south are churches; legitimate housing, including some fine old bungalows and government quarters; temples; and schools. Along Jalan Scott, formerly known as Little Jaffna because of its high concentration of Ceylonese Tamils (most have now left), one found many businesses, "government quarters" from colonial times, and a large, beautifully ornate "Kandasamy" temple (another name of Murugan) under renovation. The temple, managed and patronized by Ceylonese Tamils for over one hundred years, towers over the river and would be visible throughout much of the area if it were not dwarfed by a high-rise condominium project adjacent to it. Nevertheless, this part of Brickfields was clearly quite different from the squalor seen less than a quarter mile away.

Closer to the red-light district, there were numerous shrines for the "lesser deities" in Tamil Hinduism (e.g., Munniandy and Kaliamman). Crumbling, hundred-year-old barracklike housing was still occupied by the working class of Brickfields.[31] Along Jalan Berhala are a number of bungalows, apartments, and churches. Also, there is an old, large, and well-patronized Buddhist temple,[32] as well as the Temple of Fine Arts. This is the cultural and spiritual center of Brickfields. Nearer to Jalan Tun Sambanthan, the main road, there is also an Indian dance and music academy, as well as the Vivekananda Ashram, both managed by Ceylonese Tamils. This, the central part of Brickfields, is oriented toward religion and the arts.

While most of the wealthy Indians have left the area for greener pas-

tures, the remaining members of the Brickfields elite live in closer proximity to the "spiritual" side, on or around Jalan Berhala, while the working-class and urban poor are scattered about.[33] As a whole, the area has a working-class reputation and atmosphere. But for the businesses to survive, they must offer the range of goods that a wider cross section of the Tamil community desires.

The Indian shophouses can be roughly divided into four categories: textile shops selling material, as well as sarees and "Punjabi suits" (a dress that originated in northern India and Pakistan); music and film shops specializing in videotapes and audiotapes (and more recently DVDs, CDs, and VCDs); provision shops carrying all the necessary ingredients and utensils for Indian cooking; and bookshops carrying Tamil literature, usually religious, as well as the assorted items necessary for home *pujas*.[34] There is significant overlap, however, between the kinds of shops listed here. For example, many provision shops also sell prayer items and cassette tapes. Similarly, a clothing shop may also sell kitchen utensils and brass oil lamps. Nevertheless, these are the much sought after items that create an Indian customer base. In many instances, the business proprietors would live above the shop in rooms built into the structure, hence the name shophouse.

Restaurants and jewelry shops (*kedai emas*, or "gold shops") are also ubiquitous in Indian areas. I already mentioned how Indian restaurants are social venues for the local residents in addition to being one of the principal draws for nonresidents. Even tourists are directed to Brickfields for banana-leaf meals. Malays are also quite fond of Indian banana-leaf meals, although they prefer nonvegetarian over vegetarian fare. As such, Indian Muslim shops are popular and assuredly *halal* (in accordance with Islamic dietary laws). Different Tamil restaurateurs in Brickfields expressed pride to me at the apparent appeal of their cuisine across ethnic boundaries. Some had a regular clientele of businessmen and school employees from the neighborhood. Eating out is a daily affair for most Malaysians, as they do not eat cold, home-packed lunches. Eating leftovers is also generally frowned on in Malaysia's tropical climate. I also became a regular at certain family-run restaurants. There was a communal and unbusinesslike atmosphere in these places.

In the case of jewelry shops, ownership was quite often in Chinese hands despite the predominantly Tamil customer base. These shops,

which were heavily guarded by armed sentries, sold and purchased pawned gold items. Aside from the importance of gold in planning Indian engagements and weddings (the buying of the *tali*[35] is a major event), it is also a major sign of status among nonprofessional Indians. While professionals find too much gold "garish," working-class Tamils often wear great amounts of gold jewelry in the form of rings and chains. It is tacitly understood among the working class that not wearing gold indicates hardship and poverty. Therefore, in a clear-cut case of conspicuous consumption, Tamils (especially women) compete to show the amount of gold that they own. The gold shops have even been criticized by social reformers as contributing to the economic ruin of Tamils. On the other hand, some women buy gold believing that it is a good investment. Indeed, during hard times, the gold shops allow families to pawn their gold for much-needed cash. Still, many professional Indians criticize the Tamil obsession with gold.

The Indian shophouse is more than just a business—it also an important conduit of cultural identity. Perhaps the music/video shops are the most significant in this sense. Here, and in the cinemas, Tamils consume the popular culture of the Madras film industry. The young and old congregate to hear and see the latest film hits. Since there is a lack of Tamil radio airplay in Malaysia, these shops also act as "radio stations" for the top hits. Music shops provide a venue for socializing among enthusiasts of Tamil songs. Young men often stand in groups "hanging out," practicing dance steps, swaying to the songs, and crooning the odd mixture of rap, funk, disco, rock, and classical music in the *carnatic* (South Indian) and *hindustani* (North Indian) style, which is emerging in contemporary film music. A great deal of flirtation between young men and women can also be observed in the shops. It is said that the behavior seen in these shops simply mirrors the flirtatious behavior seen in today's Tamil films. Some caution their children, especially their daughters, against "idling their time away" in shops and cinemas. On the whole, the music/video shops are patronized by the urban working class. The professionals may also visit these shops; however, their tastes may lean toward classical Indian music. Many high-status Indians also prefer to shop for Western popular music in upper-class shopping malls (recall the Ceylonese student's comments earlier in this chapter).

Almost all of the Tamil music and videos originate in India. While there

are a number of Tamil pop musicians in Malaysia, they rarely find success recording their own material.[36] Rather, the Malaysian artists usually imitate the Indian stars, performing hit songs and even borrowing the choreography seen in the movies in which the songs are performed (Willford 1998). This is especially apparent when duets are performed. The Tamil song and film industry (the two are one and the same) is dominated by a few composers, who write the songs for hundreds of films each year.[37] In addition to music shops, cinemas are popular meeting grounds. Tamil films draw large crowds of exclusively Tamil audiences.[38] Women and girls will wear their best sarees and Punjabi suits to the cinema. Boys and men will also wear their finest shirts and pants and in many cases will wear their hair in a style reminiscent of their favorite cinema idols.

The impression created by Tamil films on their audiences in Malaysia is undeniable. As was mentioned in the third chapter, even religious songs and dances seen in rituals accompanying important Hindu festivals often originate in Tamil films. Even trances seem to follow stylized sequences seen in Tamil films. Also mentioned earlier was the great concern about the influence these movies have on the younger generation of Tamils. Violence and "pornographic" content are often said to make the films popular among the youth. Rape and violent solutions to problems are commonly seen (as they are in Hollywood and Hong Kong films). Many critics, mostly from the middle and upper classes, see today's Tamil cinema as undermining "traditional values." They cite the increase in crime, violence, rape, and suicide among the working-class and poor Malaysian Tamils as evidence of the deleterious effects of Tamil films. They also produce statistics suggesting that poor families spend a great deal of their incomes watching Tamil films in the cinema and/or on videocassettes. To the critics, the assertion of Tamil identity through films is, in reality, the "opium" of the Tamil masses. In response, the supporters of Tamil movies, mostly upwardly mobile yet formerly working-class Indians, say that the films are often portraying harsh realities (e.g., domestic violence, gangsterism, and oppression of the poor and women) in order to highlight moral issues. There is also the response (again mirroring similar debates in other countries) that films are simply "fantasy." These defenders of celluloid say that the critics insult the intelligence of viewers when they suggest that their minds and morals are so weak as to be swayed by entertainment. This, they maintain, is another example of an elitist, patronizing attitude toward the

majority of Tamils by a select group of self-appointed guardians of proper "Tamil culture."[39]

In a somewhat more serious controversy, the MIC president, Samy Vellu, was reported to have said that he could "bottle the water Rajanikanth [a film hero] washed his feet in" for Tamils in Malaysia. The leader was chiding Tamils for their overindulgence in Tamil movies and their hero worship of film stars. Some saw it as a great insult to the Tamil community because the foot is considered particularly unclean in Indian culture.[40] Still, there is some truth in his jest that some Tamils tend to worship their film icons as if they are deities. There is reportedly a shrine for Kushboo, a popular actress, in Ipoh, Malaysia. I also saw a Tamil-operated bus with a minishrine for MGR (a late Tamil Nadu film star turned politician), complete with a fresh garlands and incense. In Tamil Nadu, film stars certainly have a cultlike status.[41] Nevertheless, some felt that the MIC leader was expressing contempt for his constituency, the working-class Tamils.[42] One man told me, "*If this is what he thinks of us, it is no wonder that nothing has been done for the Tamils.*"

"A LOT OF EVIL GOES ON DOWN THERE"

Thus far I have argued that the distance between high- and low-status Tamils was exacerbated by colonial labor discourses and recent political and economic changes and is reproduced through contemporary social and cultural practices. It is in Little India that the stereotypes of Tamils are produced and/or perceived to exist. Indeed, the title of this section comes from a warning I received from an Indian university student about conducting research in Brickfields and other working-class Indian enclaves.

A number of tangible social problems exist in many Indian enclaves. As was discussed earlier, there are many urban poor, including squatters and the homeless. Like any urban area with substantial poverty, there are the associated problems of depression, suicide, crime, prostitution, alcoholism, and violence (both domestic and criminal). While not wanting to reify the racial discourses that are already oppressive, I will recount some of the stigmatizing social practices found, or assumed to be found, in Indian enclaves such as Brickfields.

Alcoholism is one of the biggest stigmas attached to Indians in Malaysia. Brickfields is somewhat notorious for being a place where

drunks can be found on the side of the road sleeping off the effects of the previous night. As mentioned, taxi drivers might even be reluctant to drive to certain parts of Brickfields at night, fearing "rowdy Indians" who have had too much to drink. While this negative stereotype, in truth, is a problem among only a small segment of the Indian population, there are some bars and nightclubs that have their share of brawls. There is also a toddy (palm wine) stall adjacent to the Temple of Fine Arts. While nobody associated with that institution ever patronizes that stall, the proprietor, after passing away, was prayed for by Swami Shantanand. A friend from the TFA told me that the swami had explained to TFA members that God is revealed in humble and surprising ways. The stall is still under operation. On any afternoon a group of men sit together enjoying the intoxicating drink from coffee cups. Residents of Brickfields avoid the toddy stall at night, fearing that drunks will cause trouble. During the day, however, the atmosphere is friendly and peaceful. It is a meeting ground for a group of regular customers and friends.

I was warned that it was "dangerous" to stand at the taxi stand late at night. Drunk Indians, I was told, might want to pick a fight. While I was never threatened and only witnessed street fighting once, I was either escorted or watched from afar by concerned friends. Many Indians told me that the drunkard stereotype was greatly exaggerated.

Another negative stereotype concerns destructive competition between Tamils as a hindrance to their upward mobility. The joke that opens this chapter distills the way that this competitiveness is seen in the eyes of both Indians and non-Indians. While certainly not always true, there does seem to be an insecurity over wealth and status that drives working-class Tamils toward acts of conspicuous consumption, conformity, and jealousy.

I mentioned how the amount of gold a woman wears signifies her wealth. Therefore, the conspicuous consumption of gold is a reflection of status insecurities (also see Supernor 1983). Other signs of status are purchased by working class men in areas such as Brickfields. Owning a car is a sign of success. Members of the working class (office workers, taxi drivers, petty traders, barbers, etc.) are not able to afford the luxury cars that their middle-class counterparts can. But with some difficulty and sacrifice, they might be able to finance a car. Even modest cars command great respect among members of the working class, who were used to traveling by bus. Tamil men in Brickfields will often fix up their old cars to a gleam-

ing shine with added hubcaps, custom steering wheels, spoilers, and upholstery.

Conspicuous consumption of prestige items adds to an already marked financial strain on the working class. Aside from cars and gold, pagers and cellular phones (which are costly in Malaysia) are proudly displayed by many in Brickfields.

Whether entirely true or not, there is a perception that the competitive urge to conform and keep pace with others is another reason why the working-class Tamils are unable to raise their standard of living. As the opening "crab" joke suggests, this stereotype is part of the discourse of Indianness associated with working-class Indian enclaves. All of this suggests that their marginalization, both economically and socially, contributes to a profound sense of insecurity, which in turn generates the conforming and competitive behavior that further stigmatizes the community. Moreover, this discourse motivates the elite Indians to distance themselves through the various distinctions discussed earlier. The stigma or "evil" associated with Indian space, which I have suggested is due in great part to very real insecurities, is also reflected in unorthodox religious behavior. In the following section I explore how spirit mediums are able to utilize this environment while also being a product of it. We see how an "illegitimate" form of Hinduism concerns and, perhaps, hauntingly taunts those professing the "highest" exegetical understandings in the religion. This highlights the ambivalence and uncanny of identification on both ends of the orthodox-unorthodox, higher-status and lower-status continuum. I suggest that the lack of ideological closure or certainty of status contributes to the distancing behavior described in this chapter. That is, anxieties over status contribute to the lack of unity and fissures seen within the Tamil communities.

SPIRIT MEDIUMS AND THEIR MILIEU

The financial and social insecurities felt by many Tamils in working-class areas are believed by critics to result in a culture of competitiveness and conformity. A so-called culture of poverty (Jeyakumar 1993), with its concomitant lack of self-esteem, is witnessed through inward-directed criticism the Tamils themselves offer about their community. One college-educated, mixed Tamil-Malayalee woman put it rather bluntly to me.

> The Tamils are the worst race. . . . *I mean the Klings.* You have chosen the *worst of all people* to study. When I was studying at UM [the University of Malaya] the Tamil students used to make fun of me because I wanted to be different. I joined drama class and had lots of Chinese friends, and for that they made me feel weird.

While she went on to condemn "the Tamils" further, it is clear that she is referring to the conforming behavior of working-class Tamils ("Klings") as opposed to the elite, more Westernized Indians. Working-class Tamils also critique their own community in varying degrees. I often heard complaints from Tamils about the status of their community. One shopkeeper would ask me why his people were "so superstitious" (visiting astrologers, mediums, and gurus) and "foolish" with their finances (buying unnecessary luxury items such as cars, gold, and cell phones). Another young man complained bitterly about the Tamil love affair with films, as well as their embrace of "gangsterism" and "corrupt MIC leaders." Yet another, possessing a college degree, spoke to me of Tamil "cultural defects." One encounter was as memorable as it was depressing for me. An elderly Tamil woman approached me on the street in Brickfields and asked me to come to her flat to see her daughter. She explained to me that her daughter was "very pretty" and "*just like your wife*" (she had seen me with my wife before); but, she claimed, "there are *no good Indian men left*. . . . They are all very naughty." When I protested this pronouncement, she, quite desperately, pleaded for me to find another "Englishman" to marry her daughter! Her desperation was such that she could trust a complete stranger from another country to find a husband for her daughter. Perhaps it was not so much an indictment of Indian men as it was a financially desperate situation for her family—the assumption being that Englishmen are wealthy.

From a purely economic standpoint, the cost of rent and real estate in Kuala Lumpur has made it difficult for ethnic enclaves to survive the pressures of capitalist development. As mentioned in chapter 4, Brickfields is being transformed into a business corridor adjacent to downtown. Luxury apartments have sprung up during the last ten years. The "KL Sentral" rapid transit and railway station was under construction, promising to be the main transportation artery for the metropolis and nation.[43] Accordingly, luxury hotels and shops were slated for construction, and many have since been built. Old shophouses and hundred-year-old terrace houses have been slated for demolition. The hundreds of Indian squatters (for-

merly thousands) have been or are being displaced as new projects continually tear away the fabric of the old community.

That Tamil enclaves are "dying" and insecurities run high among Tamils is perhaps indicated by an alarming suicide rate. Between 1990 and 1993, 1,700 Indians were reported to have committed suicide. In comparison, suicides among Malays and Chinese were only 343 and 568, respectively, during the same period (*The Sun Megazine* 7/16/95). While this is not to say that Malaysian Indians are a community with a death wish, there is a clear sense of crisis and fear among the working class and poor. This statistic is all the more frightening when one considers that the total Indian population is significantly lower than that of the Malays and Chinese. Perhaps it should be noted, however, that suicide is a common passive-aggressive theme in Tamil cinema when other avenues for vengeance have been exhausted.[44]

The tangible insecurities over status, finances, marriage choices, and keeping pace with others are magnified by the negative stereotypes of Indians. The indignities faced by Tamils under colonial racial discourses have not been mitigated much under present political and cultural policies, and anxieties experienced by the powerless are perhaps also indicated by the increasing popularity of Tamil spirit mediums.

Spirit mediums are growing in popularity in the urban working-class areas. While this tradition originates in the villages of Tamil Nadu and was commonly seen on the estates, the urban areas are now witnessing more mediumship activity. This is probably for two main reasons: the arrival of mediums looking for work in urban areas after the closure of many estates left them without clients; and the insecurities associated with marriage, financial, and other worries that lead many to search for supernatural assistance. Spirit mediums are able to "empower" their clients by giving them a sense of agency and coherence in their lives that may be lacking given their socioeconomic and cultural marginalization.

There are a number of spirit mediums in Brickfields. Some specialize in giving lottery numbers to their clients. Others give advice on personal problems, including, but not limited to, health, marital abuse and infidelity, missing persons, and mental illness. Still others help people who are possessed by evil spirits known as *jinns*.[45] Those who become spirit mediums are usually of low social status, with little or no formal education, and generally are poor. Through their spiritual activity they are able to gain some

respect from others. Additionally, the mediums receive payment through gifts received or, in some cases, through nominal fees charged for their services. Those believed to be "powerful" by reputation are able to survive through their practice. On the other hand, there are some who give limited advice and services (lottery numbers or fortune-telling) who can be seen sitting on the roadside dressed in ragged clothing. I often saw these mediums accept odd jobs from businesses (disposing of trash, unloading trucks, etc.). Sometimes higher-status Indians would speak disparagingly about mediums, calling some frauds and criticizing others as demonic or evil. This was especially true within publications devoted to Hindu reform. Still, many believed that the mediums were indeed powerful, even if they themselves would be unlikely to turn to one for assistance. Occasionally higher-status Indians sought the services of mediums, but for the most part their clientele came from the working class. There is an analogous relationship between the growing popularity of spirit mediums and the increasing amount of vow taking witnessed at Thaipusam. They are similar in that both primarily involve the working class and, perhaps most importantly, both the penitents and the clients of spirit mediums are seeking some tangible empowerment through divine intervention. They differ in that Thaipusam is clearly a collective as well as a private expression, whereas spirit mediums attend to private needs. The collective assertion, as argued earlier, is also understandable as an assertion against, or negation of, the ethnosymbolic order. That is, the political dimension of spiritual ecstasy was considered. In contrast, the instrumental nature of spiritual power is more pronounced in the medium-client transaction. Nevertheless, the connection between ethnosymbolic power, that is, Malay Islamic nationalism, and class/status hierarchies suggests a relationship between mediumship and the political. One can, for example, see the politics of consciousness itself being dramatized (and symptomized) in the uncertain and ambivalent expressions of mediums, as well as among those who patronize and/or recoil from them (Morris 2000; Nabokov 2000). This can be seen in a case study of a spirit medium in Brickfields.

"THE WAY OF PRAYERS"

I entered Valli's world through the recommendation of an employee at a Tamil bookstore who told me that she knew a "woman who was a god."

Naturally intrigued, I agreed to follow her to the woman's flat after work one evening. Valli (whom we briefly met in chapter 4 while discussing Adi Puram) lived in a three-bedroom flat above the main road in Brickfields. Entering her place, I was immediately struck by the size of the shrine in her living room. One whole wall had been converted into an altar with color pictures of the Hindu deities. While Siva and Sakti were prominent, there were also shrines for other gods, and surprisingly, for Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism. Later I was to discover that the Guru Nanak shrine was out of respect for her principle disciple's religious background. Along another wall a plastic vine was strung. Strewn within it were a number of plastic birds, lizards, and troll-like creatures. Another shrine for Kali was illuminated by a bright red light in another corner. Outside the window, on top of a tin storm drain, were scattered grains of leftover rice. These were left for the rats and birds to eat. Otherwise, the house appeared to be clean and freshly painted. The overall impression was one of ordered eccentricity.

Valli greeted me warmly and promptly served tea and snacks. She told me that it was no accident that I had visited that night, explaining that she would be performing "special" *puja* that evening. Sharing her flat with her was a close disciple together with her fourteen-year-old son and a twenty-seven-year-old niece. Valli described herself as thirty-five but still a "beautiful lady." She said that she had inherited a "power" from her mother, adding that all the women in her family "had the Amman" (possession by the mother goddess, Sakti). To me, however, she seemed quite normal, articulate, and talkative. Her disciple, whom she simply called Akkah (older sister), warned me that I would witness a complete transformation of Valli's personality when she became possessed by Kaliamman (the goddess as Kali).

That night was Ikyam—the festival of the full moon, when it is believed by Tamils, so I was told, that the *nagas* (snakes) mate. According to Valli, it is considered auspicious to perform *pujas* to Kaliamman at this time; in particular, it is believed to be a good time for unmarried women to ask Amman for a husband. That night the woman from the bookshop and her friend, Valli's niece, were to perform the Ikyam ritual. Prior to the ritual, two small banana trees inside clay pots were purchased. The two women, together with Valli and her disciple-friend, bathed. Valli seemed concerned that rules of purity in the living room shrine be strictly observed. In

addition to bathing, the two women put on yellow sarees, the color used during festivals by pilgrims performing a vow. They also untied their hair and removed all bodily adornments. Valli put on a black or dark blue saree with gold trim and a yellow-gold blouse underneath. Prior to this, *margossa* leaves were draped from the altar in order to keep "evil spirits away." Various Indian sweet dishes were also prepared and placed before the shrine together with apples, oranges, and star fruits.

Prior to the ritual, Valli went into her room for about ten minutes of quiet prayer. She emerged and asked her niece to bring the cassette stereo with the "Amman songs." The niece joked and said that she was "Amman's DJ." This title seemed appropriate, as the niece played a cassette of Amman and Sakti songs derived from Tamil films.[46] With electronic instruments backing, the devotional songs grew more intense and percussive as repetitive chants in praise to the goddess were sung by a high-pitched female vocalist. Valli seemed to be deep in concentration for about ten minutes. Suddenly, she began to breathe in and exhale deep and slow breaths. The breaths became slightly faster and produced a blowing in and out sound from her mouth. She was in deep trance. Akkah nudged me, smiled, and said, "That is not Valli."

Valli (or Kaliamman?) rose, rocked her head back, laughed, and took a cup of milk that had been offered at the altar and poured it over her head (*pal abhishekham*). She then took the remainder and drank it, spilling it from the sides of her mouth. In a deliberate manner, she wiped her lips with her arm and laughed eerily. In this act she (as the goddess) was indicating acceptance of the milk offering. Otherwise self-anointing with and consumption of the deity's food would be sacrilege. "Kaliamman" spoke in Tamil only, in contrast with Valli, who mixed Tamil with English. She directed the bookstore clerk and her niece to prostrate themselves before her. Then she instructed the two young women to each tie a *tali* string around the banana tree. After tying the *tali*, both were told to take the *parang* (machete) and cut the tree. Both in turn forcefully hacked their respective banana trees in half with the sharp blade. After completing this, they prostrated themselves again before Valli and received the blessings of the goddess. Valli placed her right hand on their downward-facing heads and held it steady for about thirty seconds as she imparted the blessing.

Another ritual was to be performed at the conclusion of the previous one. This one was a "Agni Homa" for Akkah. Akkah had explained to me

earlier that evening that she had accepted Valli as her guru after suffering much in her life. She told me how she came from a wealthy Punjabi family and had been married to a doctor. About ten years earlier her husband had fallen ill and eventually died. She lost her house and much of her savings trying to raise her son. After her son was a bit older, she had resumed her career as a schoolteacher. After suffering much, she eventually came to meet Valli. She explained to me that all her suffering had begun after an incident in her shrine room. While praying, a snake had entered the room, terrifying her. A snake catcher was called, and the snake was disposed of. Shortly thereafter her husband had fallen ill and died. Later, after telling her sad story to Valli, she was told that she suffered because she had rejected her. Valli explained that the snake had actually been her, the goddess, in the form of a serpent. She claimed not to have believed the medium's proclamation at first. But later she came to realize that Valli knew much about her life, especially during her possession trances. Akkah also told me, with apparent sincerity, that her life had vastly improved since accepting Valli as her guru. She added that she knew it sounded "unbelievable" but insisted that she spoke the truth. The fact that she had moved into Valli's flat[47] and continued to patronize her with utmost devotion demonstrated a conviction, or perhaps homoerotic desire, on her part. In return for conducting *pujas*, Valli was given clothes, bangles, jewelry, and other "offerings." Valli claimed that she never accepts gifts if the *puja* is "not accepted" by the goddess.

The Agni Homa (fire sacrifice to Agni, Lord of Fire), Akkah explained, "was rarely done and quite dangerous if done improperly." Valli had constructed a small, cross-shaped brick fire pit in her living room (the flooring was tiled). This pit was positioned before the living room altar. On it, Valli drew sandalwood Saivite markings (the *tripendi*, three horizontal lines). A number of camphor cubes were placed into the pit and lit. Immediately, a bright flame issued forth. Valli carefully added camphor cubes to maintain the flame. Once the fire was regulated, she began to ladle ghee (clarified butter) into the flames. She motioned Akkah to sit across from her as she continued to feed the flames with the ghee. Speaking little, the entranced Valli instructed her disciple to pour seven handfuls of grain into the fire. She then blessed Akkah in the same manner described earlier. After completing this ritual for her, Valli invited all of us present in the room (the niece, her friend, Akkah's son), myself included, to throw seven handfuls



Fig. 27. Valli performing a *puja*

of grain into the flame. One by one, each offered the grain to Agni. When it came to be my turn, my seventh handful produced a loud popping sound in the fire. The sound startled me, but even more startling than the sound of grains popping was Valli's reaction. Valli cried out and fell back on the floor behind her. As she lay there on the floor, tears appeared in her eyes. Akkah and the others looked concerned. After a few minutes, Valli was lovingly "revived" by her disciple. After regaining normal consciousness, Valli explained that Amman had left her body at that exact moment.

Valli and Akkah told me that I was very "lucky" to have come that particular evening because they had waited several years to agree to do this "dangerous" ritual. I was slightly surprised myself to see a spirit medium

perform a ritual usually associated with brahminical priestly orthodoxy. The Agni Homa described in the Vedas, however, involves the memorization of complex Sanskrit verses. This ritual, in its pure form, had long since become rare. Lesser versions of the ritual are still staged in various temples by Brahmin priests. Also, recall in chapter 5 that the Siva Family had conducted its own version of the Agni Homa under its swami's inspiration. However it is performed, this ritual invokes the Vedas and ancient authenticity, simplicity, and religious purity in the imagination of Hindus. Thus it seemed unusual for a spirit medium, who in many ways ignores orthodox Hindu authority, to feel uniquely qualified to conduct this admittedly dangerous ritual. All in all, this orthodox discursive positioning by Valli, along with her earlier attention to details of purity and authority, suggested to me that this was an individual who had an ambiguous relationship with conventional Hinduism. Luckily, I had made a good impression as an earnest "seeker" and was asked to "come back anytime." Psychoanalytically speaking, and to implicate me deeper in her story, she recognized herself as an authentic medium in the countertransference of my desire as a seeker.

A few days later I again visited Valli. I found her then, and in subsequent visits during the next six months, to be more than willing to tell me stories from her childhood and adult life. I could scarcely stop her from pouring out her life history,[48] punctuated by certain "supernatural" events inflected by Tamil Hindu mythology and folklore. On that second visit, after hearing many stories in the afternoon, another ritual for Akkah was to be completed. By the evening, I had been nicknamed "Nagindrin" because I had arrived into their house on the night of the *naga* mating (full moon). But my nickname was soon to change after the evening ritual.

Valli had a smaller and fiercer-looking Kali altar. This Kali is bathed in a red light, is given meat offerings (as opposed to the milk and fruit offered before the main altar described earlier), and possessed a sharp brass trident to the right of the deity's image. Valli's niece dutifully played the devotional songs as her aunt gradually became more entranced. The smell of incense was strong, and smoke quickly enveloped us as we waited for the ritual to begin. Akkah kept feeding cubes of camphor to a flame emanating from a brass tray on the floor. Valli once again fell into trance with a slight rocking motion to the music and deliberate breathing through the mouth. This time, however, she held her foot in the camphor flame for what

seemed to be a long time (perhaps twenty seconds). She then grasped the trident and placed it in the flame. After it became blackened by smoke, she inserted the trident into a plate of mutton curry and rice. She then sat down and devoured the food offering with both hands. After taking the meal, the possessed Valli distributed a handful of rice to each of us, which we were to accept as *prasadam* (sanctified food). She then cut some limes and covered the open sides with *kunkumum* (red ochre powder). Finally, she called each one of us to accept Kali's blessings. Again, she summoned me last, having me stand before her for many minutes. She placed her hand on my forehead as if she were going to place the *kunkumum* on my forehead (the mark of Kali's blessing). But in contrast to the way she blessed the others, she held her hand for a long time in silence. I thought that she was trying to "initiate" me as a disciple and even faintly imagined a surge of energy entering me at that moment. While still in trance, Valli told Akkah that I possessed "Krishna's power." She did not address me directly, speaking to her disciple, who in turn told me that I should come the following day for more "prayers." I was instructed to bring twenty-five limes with me the following day.

I came prepared with the limes, and after the same ritual-invoked trance befell Valli my *puja* began. Valli began cutting limes and covering them with *kunkumum* (a substitution for blood sacrifice). She would prepare each lime and proceed to throw it into the camphor flame. Twice she had me lean forward while she circled my head with a lime three times in a clockwise direction. She then said that I could now ask anything from the goddess. To her surprise, I answered that there was nothing that I wanted to ask of Kaliamman. To my surprise, she then prophesied that I would "*go the prayers way*" without the Amman's help. She then explained that I had been "charmed" by Krishna when first visiting a Hindu temple as a teenager (I had told her earlier that my interest in Hinduism began after visiting a temple in my hometown, Sacramento, when I was fourteen). This "charm" was not necessarily a bad thing; rather, she described it as a spiritual inclination toward Krishna. But, she added, "Krishna's power" was very strong in me and would eventually lead me to turn back from my worldly commitments and desires unless she, as Amman, intervened.

Valli suggested that I purge Krishna's hold on me through another *puja*. She instructed me to collect the following items for the ritual: a framed "photo" (picture) of Krishna, three fruits (she suggested grapes, oranges,

and apples), a *mala* (jasmine-flower garland), eleven limes, one packet of incense, ten cubes of camphor, one packet of *kunkumum*, three *manjals* (turmeric roots), and six glass bangles. Her exactitude inflected orthodoxy and priestly knowledge. She assured me that Krishna's *puja* was very "powerful and dangerous." But she added that only "Amman's power" was strong enough to "fight the god." Other markers of orthodoxy included the adherence to vegetarian food offerings and her announcement that she would not eat meat on the day of my ritual. Also, she informed me that I would have to be shirtless and wear a *veshti* (white sarong) during this ritual—a practice usually reserved for the strictest of *agamic* temples.

The ritual itself lasted about an hour. After her trance had commenced, Valli cut the limes and placed them before the image of Krishna. She arranged the *mala* around the picture and offered the fruit and incense together with a silver cup of milk. Following this, she placed a sandalwood and *kunkumum pottu* (third eye) on the deity's face.

Even before these common acts of worship, Valli had burned the camphor cubes in her brick fire pit. She had then asked me to remove my shirt and pants and tie the *veshti* around my waist. In another brahminical convention, she asked me to perform the *arati* before the Krishna image, after which she tied a yellow *tali* (which she had prepared with turmeric powder) around my neck and instructed me not to remove it for three days. Then, in an act reminiscent of marriage rites, I was told to circumambulate the fire and makeshift Krishna shrine nine times while holding a small flickering clay lamp filled with ghee. After completing this, Valli had me sit before her. She sprinkled holy water on my head, placed a *mala* around my neck, smeared *kunkumum* on my forehead, and finally handed me a blossomed lotus flower together with some fruits, a packet of *kunkumum*, and assorted flower buds. She instructed me to take the Krishna photo home and place the flowers and fruits before it.

Valli fell out of trance after completing the ritual. She stood up, her body stiffened, and she fell backward into the arms of Akkah, who was prepared to catch her. After returning to "normal consciousness," she warned me that I must faithfully perform *puja* to the Krishna photo now that the god's "power" inhabited the image. By propitiating the deity, she explained, I could keep him happy and use his power to protect my household; however, if I failed to perform the *puja* regularly, Krishna would bring ruin to my domestic life. She also added that I should never let anyone pray to this

photo except myself. For her part, Valli appeared to be exhausted, claiming that the battle between Amman and Krishna had been intense but that Amman had prevailed in convincing Krishna to let me live my life.

I have to confess to enjoying the ritual and commentary. The others in the household said, much to my surprise, that my back had "vibrated" during the prayers. They consoled me after the ceremony, saying that it looked as if I were suffering as the cosmological battle was being waged between deities in the living room. I, perhaps inappropriately, said that I felt "pretty good" (indeed, I was fascinated by the drama). Valli then interjected, "you can't bluff with me."

Unraveling my apparent Faustian tryst with Krishna suggests an ambiguous and contested relationship between Valli and Hindu orthodoxy, while also positioning the Indological orientation of the anthropologist. The following interpretation cannot be separated from the asymmetrical yet dialogic nature of our interactions. Still, I suggest that we can learn about Valli's marginal relationship with brahminical Hinduism through her manipulation of symbols with me. But at the same time, she is aware that her authority with me (as eager anthropologist searching for "authentic" mediums) is different than it would be with a more orthodox Hindu.

Valli's "battle" with Krishna reveals her ambivalence with this deity. While Valli does possess a portrait of the infant Krishna, which hangs on her wall, it is not part of her prayer shrine. Yet after encountering my alleged Krishna power, she embarks on a theological interpretation that brings the god into her cosmological realm and eventually onto her prayer shrine, as we will soon see.

Krishna is worshipped primarily by Vaishnavites,[49] and in Malaysia this would be limited to high-status groups such as Malayalees and Tamil Brahmins. For this reason, the Hare Krishna movement in Malaysia is respected but rather small in comparison with numerous Saivite-based organizations. It is not surprising, however, that Valli associates me with Krishna after our first couple of meetings (no arrogance implied!). Prior to her rituals, Valli and I had spent a few hours getting to know one another. I had explained my interest in Hinduism, and in her mind I imagined myself seeming to possess a considerable amount of "book-learned" Hinduism. Though she was literate in Tamil and understood spoken English, she had not read many of the canonical texts of Hinduism. Making this

into a virtue, she would tell me that she was never taught how to perform effective rituals but somehow "miraculously" knew exactly what to do and when to do it. Also, she "knew how to help the people" through a divine intuition. While asserting the superiority of the "divine gift" over book-learned religion and the orthodox proprieties suggested by it, she was impressed to find a *velaikaran* (white man) who took "her" religion seriously enough to make personal sacrifices[50] in order to study it firsthand. Not only was she impressed, I imagined, but I believed her response to me revealed a reverence for Hindu propriety, while simultaneously generating the battle within in an effort to assert her superior spiritual power, as gifted by the goddess. This ambiguity, in turn, is born out of the social marginality of her life experiences in modern Malaysia. But first back to the imagery of Krishna in Valli's world.

When attributing Krishna power to me, Valli is locating me within the brahminical tradition. But her disdain for orthodoxy, born out of her low position in the Hindu social hierarchy, was more ambivalent than either of us anticipated. Rather, my position as the American "Brahmin" (and therefore somewhat innocent of orthodox disdain for the practitioners of "lower forms" of religion) provided a unique intersection of knowledges and discourses. Through the space of opportunity created between ethnographer and informant, a dialogic[51] knowledge was for some time constructed through our interactions. That is, Valli was to discover a new "reverence" (although partial and ambivalent) for Hindu orthodoxy through the opportunities her association with a Tamil-speaking "Englishman" provided. It goes without saying that had I actually been an Indian Brahmin or other high-status Hindu such interactions would have been unlikely.

Valli, though often ridiculing Brahmins, swamis, and vegetarians, expressed an interest in visiting temples and ashrams, as well as in attending cultural functions usually associated with the higher-status groups. Clearly, Valli wished to appear "legitimate" in her knowledge of Tamil and Hinduism as my informant, while also wishing to attend such functions through my legitimacy as foreign researcher. In this negation of social (and spiritual) marginality, the desire for recognition—both mine and from clients/disciples—reveals a doubling of self and desire for singularity, or a fixing of self and Other that transcends (in fantasy,

but actually suspends) their dialectical tension. This, it will be recalled, is what Lacan refers to when he writes that "desire is a metonymy" (1977:175). The moment of negation and self-certainty cannot surmount, indeed provokes, the uncanny effect of recognition, in which the source of one's being is revealed as both transcendent and contingent. Valli cannot surmount this paradox. That is, the surmounted Other, the source of her own recognition, is simultaneously a form of self-annihilation in the mimetic appropriation of orthodox forms. Moreover, in that desire for an impossible transcendence, a transgressive, indeed, *corporeal, reality* drives the fantasy behind the fetish point of fixation, as we will see shortly.

During the course of my research, I would often come and go at Valli's house. She knew I was spending a great deal of time at the Temple of Fine Arts, Ramakrishna Mission, and other places patronized by higher-status Indians. She would sometimes resent my freedom of movement between this and the world she occupied. She also believed, in my judgment, in the superiority of her powers over the wealthier, and generally higher-status, religious organizations with their imagined orthodoxies and romanticized images of Hinduism. In frustration with me over my apparent disloyalty to her as my principal informant (in her mind), she would sometimes call me the Kannan (the amorous, "eyeing" Krishna). When excusing myself to attend a function at the TFA or elsewhere, she would often ask, with a hint of accusation, whether I was going to "eye the Gopis" (Krishna's beautiful mistresses). Sometimes she added that I would one day marry a pretty, fair-skinned "Brahmin girl." At other times she would ridicule Brahmin[52] men as "womanish." "Men should act like men," she would tell me, perhaps also commenting on the androgynous appearance of Krishna in popular art. She leveled her most angry comments at Brahmin priests in the temples, telling me that when she "saw their greedy faces" she "wanted to kill them." But killing them was not enough, she would joke with a crazed expression; she wanted to "cook their balls and eat them." Here she was assuming (in parody) the angry and blood-lustful aspect of Kali against the vanities of "proud" men and, perhaps, also revealing the transgressive erotic desires that are provoked in and by the negation of womanish men.

The hostile challenge to brahminical authority also extended, at other times, to men in general. She would sometimes suggest Amman's crush-

ing defeat of "Indian men." On more than one occasion she said that she tried not to walk the streets in Brickfields because when she saw an Indian man's face she would become angry and feel the "Amman power" coming into her. She told me that in her own life she had experienced rather unsatisfactory relationships with Tamil men. First, in her family, her brothers were "weak," succumbing to alcoholism, debt, and letting their wives "tell them what to do"; in her own romantic relationships, she had come to prefer dating Chinese men because they treated her "as a lady."

Still through, and perhaps in spite of, our conversations, she harbored an incomplete reverence for "book-learned" Hinduism. In particular, she seemed drawn to the thoughts of neo-Hindu ascetics such as Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Sivanananda. Their ascetic "purity," and especially their *bhakti*, impressed her. While certainly not learned in their writings, she would spend the afternoons reading their condensed works in the local Hindu magazines, which I regularly purchased and often left for her perusal. She told me that I had awakened an interest in her in the *samiyar* (ascetic) way. The "battle with Krishna" had decisively moved her toward a serious yet skeptical interest in more prestigious forms of Hinduism. Looking beyond the face value of this, however, her desire to appear "authentic" and recognizable to me—the countertransference of my desire—must also be considered.

For a period of about two months, Valli accompanied me on visits to ashrams, temples, and religious societies. Within *agamic* temples, she would perform the *archenai* (songs of praise) in the "proper" manner, buying a ticket like everyone else and accepting the *prasadam* (sanctified offerings) from the *pusari* (priest). It was meant to demonstrate to me her legitimate knowledge, but it was also more; it was an opportunity for her to explore her religion as it is practiced by those she most resents. It was as if she was reevaluating her ambivalence toward orthodox religion by temporarily separating the act of worship from her resentment of Brahmins. She also visited the Divine Life Society, an ashram run by a swami and *brahmacharis* (renouncer monks training to be swamis). The swami in charge was overseas at the time, but a young *brahmachari* granted us an interview. While I sought information on the organization, Valli spoke bravely of her "praying way" to the young monk. He listened patiently as she told of the many who seek her help, both financially and spiritually. She pleaded with him, explaining that she could not support so many people, as she was

only "a praying lady" of limited financial resources, and finally asked him if she could refer people to the welfare and medical services offered by the ashram. The monk gently smiled and assured her that she could always tell people to come to the ashram for assistance. After leaving the ashram, Valli repeatedly praised the young monk for his "gentleness" and "humbleness." At that time, it did not bother her that the ashram was patronized almost exclusively by Ceylonese and other high-status Indians.

We also visited the Temple of Fine Arts and the Hare Krishna Temple, both during the Krishna Jayanthi (birthday) festival. At the TFA, Valli was given the opportunity to perform the *abhisheckham* (anointing of the god) at their *puja* for Krishna. She seemed thrilled and appeared to take the act very seriously. Later, however, she confessed to me that she was very nervous, and with hands shaking had almost dropped the ladle of sacred water standing in front of "those kind of Indians." At the Hare Krishna Temple, she was impressed with the intensity of the *bhakti*, as well as the temple's apparent lack of caste-based discrimination. Valli even said that she had not had opportunities to visit "places like these" before.

After these events, Valli began to discuss performing another *puja* to Krishna in her house. She told me that I needed to do so in order to receive his full blessings, but, more important, she explained that since I had taken the picture of Krishna from her house after the first ritual a kind of spiritual void on her shrine had been created. That is, the god would be unhappy having been invoked in a shrine room and thereafter not being honored and worshipped there. In a ritual similar to the one described earlier, Krishna was reinstalled on her altar (I had purchased another portrait of the god). Valli loved the picture and seemed to have changed her attitude somewhat to one less confrontational with the deity.

I began to wonder about my influence on Valli after these events. While not my conscious intention, it was obvious that my research had sparked an interest in her, as well as providing an opportunity for her to see how the other side prays. It was also hard to know how many of her efforts were intended to impress me,[53] rather than reflecting a spiritual longing on her part, or how the contradictory desires fueled one another in dialectical tension. Aside from her attending temples and ashrams, we discussed Hindu theology. I explained as best I could what Hindu leaders in Malaysia were teaching about the "Oneness of God" when she asked for my exegesis. She also read Indian as well as other local neo-Hindu apologists in the afore-

mentioned magazines. She agreed in principal with their nondualistic philosophy and claimed to share in that knowledge directly. That is the reason, she explained, why she feeds crumbs to the ants, birds, and rats—for they are all part of God. On the other hand, she counseled her clients utilizing an animated cosmos in which very real spirits, gods, and demons played havoc with human lives. The inner battle between these contradictory theologies was consistent with the themes discussed earlier this chapter—that is, between the transcendent and immanent nature of God. Only in Valli this contradiction was far more tense, reflecting not only alternative visions but the stark contrasts between her social marginality and her insights drawn from the rich ambiguities of Hinduism—as well as a desire to "locate" and be "located" within the discourses of the ethnographer (Marcus 1995). When I asked her directly how she explained her contradictory beliefs, she told me that the "gods are real, and must be respected." She warned me not to mock the Hindu gods and goddesses. Akkah also confirmed that as a Sikh she had entertained earlier doubts but now saw that the "Indian way" (i.e., Tamil-Hindu way) of praying brought the "best results." Valli added, however, that there is "only one God."

The apparent ease with which she accepts the ambiguities of her theological positions belies a deeper anxiety within Valli. She would often mention her fears of being swept away in the "*samiyar* way" (living monastically). Valli flatly stated that she "didn't want to meditate," preferring to enjoy her life. She poked fun at vegetarians and swamis and added that she was young still and wanted to enjoy "meat and sex." In fact, she boasted that men found her desirable and that she wished to marry one day. But as mentioned earlier, she also felt compelled to observe "rules of purity" during rituals. Also, she was increasingly busy with a steady stream of new clients "with so many problems" that demanded her attention and unique powers. Thus she was often required by her own beliefs to act "clean." She told me that she "can't go sleeping with men because I am a praying lady." Yet she resented the goddess's hold on her, often despairing over her lack of freedom to "enjoy life" as a young and somewhat free-spirited woman. Indeed, she transgressed her lifestyle as a praying lady in her ongoing affair with a married Chinese man. So while resisting brahminical models, she finds herself entrapped within discourses of purity and the guilty conscience they generate. The inner tensions mounting from this ambivalence of religious identity were witnessed in her public

persona, which oftentimes posited the superiority of Amman's power over orthodox religiosity.[54]

Aside from her many comments, three incidents clearly demonstrated her disdain for orthodoxy. On one occasion, we visited a large and ornate Siva temple managed by a Ceylonese board. This impressive structure (one of the largest in the country) adheres to orthodox rules and is renowned for its solemn and sanctified atmosphere. Valli found the structure to be breathtaking. She prayed quietly and sat in a meditative mood. After a while she told me that she imagined India to be like this. Her emotions were subdued. After leaving the temple, she motioned me to walk along a grassy path toward a small stream. She pointed out a Hindu crematorium along the riverbank, warning me not to look at the burning corpse smoldering on a funeral pyre. At the base of the riverbank was a small shrine for the demigod Muniandy. Valli prayed before this makeshift shrine with far more intensity than she had displayed before the image of Lord Siva. She began to rock slightly, breathing heavily with eyes bulging—as if she were going to fall into her possession trance. Suddenly a man appeared from behind the shrine, startling Valli back to normal consciousness. The man, a middle-aged Tamil living in a squatter house near the shrine, joined her in salutation before the deity. Later, while returning to Brickfields, I asked her why that shrine had captivated her more than the Shiva temple; she said that she has no control when Amman wants to come into her being.

On another occasion, Valli was invited to perform a *puja* in a wealthy Indian family's house. This somewhat unusual occurrence (most of her clients were working class) had brought her into a family shrine room where she was asked to request Amman's intervention in their lives. She told me, however, that when she reached the shrine room, she knew that it was arranged improperly and that the family had not "prayed in the right way." It was not anything obvious to a casual observer, she claimed, but was a kind of intuition she felt while in the room. While not wanting to frighten her clients, she claimed to have told Akkah (who was assisting her at the time) that a disaster would soon strike the family because of their lack of proper devotion to the gods. Soon thereafter, she insisted, with Akkah's corroborating assent, the house had burned down in a devastating fire.

In both of these incidents, Valli has the goddess's power *outside* the authority of orthodoxy. One can also surmise that her behavior displays

her ambivalence toward and resistance to ideologies of hierarchy and purity, which place her in a very low status. A third incident more clearly demonstrates her challenge to spiritual authority.

Valli liked hearing devotional singing (*bhajans*) within temples. But she also easily slipped into trance or wept openly on hearing the emotionally charged, lyrical, and intense rhythms. One temple that attracted a particularly large group of devotees for *bhajans* was a Lakshmi-Narayan (Vaishnava) temple in Kuala Lumpur. Every evening at six, *bhajans* and *puja* were performed for Lord Krishna. The devotees who attended this devotional service were generally middle class. Malayalees, North Indians, and some Tamil Brahmins would attend. Very few working-class Indians felt comfortable in this temple. Nevertheless, Valli enjoyed hearing the songs and seeing what in her words was the "most beautiful Krishna" she had ever seen. Indeed, it was very lifelike and had a compassionate expression on its face. The radiantly decorated deity stood with his beloved consort, Radha, in an intimate show of humanity. Only his slightly blue skin betrayed his human side, reminding the devotee that Krishna, in reality, is Lord Vishnu, the Sustainer of the Universe.

Entering the sanctum, the devotees were separated by gender, with males on the right and females on the left. After half an hour of meditation, followed by an *arati puja*, a tabla player began to play and was soon joined by a harmonium player, who led the congregation into the first *bhajan*. Valli, deeply moved by song, swayed as she joined the chorus. On one occasion she quickly left the hall after ten minutes of singing. She later told me that she felt the "Amman entering her" and did not want to lose control in front of so many people. On another day, she did in fact lose herself completely during the singing. She fell into trance, stood up, and danced around the temple, much to the surprise of the other devotees. It is not uncommon to see this behavior during a festival, or even during a *puja* in a low-status temple (recall from chapter 3); however, this was rarely seen in a high-status temple, particularly during a Krishna *puja*.

During her dramatic display in front of many onlookers, she began to dance in imitation of classical dance steps. She was symbolically letting the wealthier devotees know that she did not have to pay lots of money, perform a *salangai puja*, or be from an elite family to perform classical dance. Her actual movements, of course, were not skilled or in any way classical. But Valli claimed otherwise, declaring that she had, in fact,

danced flawlessly in a manner only a trained dancer could. She reiterated to me that she, under normal consciousness, could not have performed like a "master" dancer.

Valli's trance had attracted much concerned attention from other devotees. She seemed to bask in the glow of their attention. An elderly gentleman tried to calm her down, and Valli seemed to slouch into his arms. Others rushed to see as he placed her down on her back. The man asked others to make space around her. He seemed genuinely concerned for her welfare. To my surprise, a few of the onlookers touched her feet, a gesture unthinkable, considering her low status. Yet some of the high-status devotees were unsure enough as to whether this possession was "authentic" or not to be moved to pay her respect usually reserved for a swami, parents, or icon of a deity. As was the case with her dancing, she later claimed with a boast that "all were frightened of her" because she had clearly manifested "Amman's power."

As in her battle with Krishna, her possession in the temple revealed her ambivalent relationship with Hindu orthodoxy. While she tried to sing the devotional songs with high-status Hindus in a manner consistent with orthodoxy, her emotions had gripped her. What was it she was expressing through her trance? Was it anger? Resentment? Her spiritual power? Probably all of the above. What is significant, however, is that for all her ambivalence she ultimately believed that her power was freely given from the goddess to her. There is thus no need for brahminical conventions regarding status and purity when approaching the sacred. Valli was asserting her spiritual authority over those who, in her mind, considered themselves to be among the more advanced spiritual aspirants in Hinduism. Furthermore, the fact that some, though clearly not all, considered the possibility that her possession was authentic, and not staged, or worse, demonic, clearly demonstrated how ambiguous the *bhakti* tradition is concerning the immanent and transcendent aspects of God. Valli was able to utilize this ambiguity to achieve brief moments of status empowerment through the anxious recognition she received from normally higher-status Hindus. At the same time, this enactment was simultaneously transgressive of proper decorum and marked her as low status. Moreover, that she is possessed by the very thing she negates, the presumed spiritual ascendancy of higher-status Hindus, suggests a submission on Valli's part to a symbolic order that fuels her desperate strategy of "mastery"—a sur-

mounting of hierarchy that ultimately subjects Valli to the reason of hierarchy. Her moment of empowerment, however brief and subversive, is also a moment of mimicry (of orthodoxy) and an evacuation of self in the act of possession (Morris 2000; Cannell 1999; Nabokov 2000). But such a strategy would only be utilized by someone in a position of extreme social marginalization. Valli's childhood and adult life shed further light on her less than harmonious relationship with Hindu orthodoxy.

Valli grew up in the Tamil estate town of Selim River, today about two hours' drive north of Kuala Lumpur. This area is known for its Tamil poverty as a result of estate closures and the buying out and consolidating of lands by multinationals. Automation and a greater emphasis on oil palm have sent many rubber tappers searching for work in towns and cities. Valli's brother, a security guard in Penang, confirmed her description of Selim River as a place where the Tamils "are left with a very bad circumstance and no proper water and electricity—only the temples are left untouched." Still, Valli spoke with a nostalgia for the rural lifestyle of the estate, with its surrounding jungle, often contrasting it to the "busy" life in the city. Though poor, her childhood had been full of enchantment and mystery. She told me that the "power" runs in her family. As a child she would see her mother become possessed by Amman and eventually earn a reputation on their estate. Her mother, she said, would drink chicken blood after performing animal sacrifices during *pujas* for her clients, a practice that Valli no longer approved of.

Valli explained that at an early age she knew she differed from others. While her friends loved to gossip in the village, she preferred to roam the jungle, climbing trees and catching small animals. On one occasion, she claimed to have caught, dismembered, and cooked a small bird while playing in the forest near her home. This sort of behavior, very unbecoming of a Tamil girl, distanced her from other children. Valli said that she grew weary of the world and knew early on that she desired a life "in the forest, with the birds and monkeys." Her social alienation reached an early pinnacle at the age of nine when she was being chased by some other children. When she ran into the thick forest to hide, her foot became caught in a hole. As she became frightened, the power came to her for the first time. With the Amman inside of her, she was able to free herself from the foothold.[55] From that time onward she began to see manifestations of her powers. Aside from feeling the goddess's presence, her dreams "always

came true"; she possessed an elaborate knowledge of rituals, which came to her without learning. Like her mother, she had inherited the powers.[56] This belief that powers ran in the family extended to a tale of her grandparents.

Valli's grandparents were from India. One day they were traveling by foot to another village in search of employment. They stopped to pray under a tree because there was no temple there. While praying, her grandfather had a vision instructing him to go to Madras. On arrival in Madras he was offered employment in Malaya as a rubber tapper by the British. Through prayer, Valli maintained, a desperate situation had been averted by the Lord. After arriving in Malaya they were employed on an estate in Selim River, where her parents were also born. Her grandfather, she also claimed, knew exactly when he was to die. The day before, he asked his wife to "cook nicely and wear a nice saree" because he would die the next day. Similarly, he asked his children to sing and dance for him, after which he enjoyed a fine meal and said good-bye to his family. While they did not believe him, in obedience they complied with his wishes. To their shock, after completing his good-byes, he lay down "and closed his eyes for good."

As mentioned, Valli's mother was unusual. Her blood sacrifices had earned fear and some respect from other Tamil laborers. But as a priestess of this variety, she was also avoided by others. As her daughter, Valli must have been somewhat isolated from other children due to this. Her father, on the other hand, did not have special powers. But he was a strict man who "never let anyone come to visit us in the house." He also only allowed the children to play outside with others for a short while every day. One can only imagine what impact this had on Valli's ability to make lasting friends.

After the relative freedom of early childhood, Valli's responsibilities mounted after her father passed away when she was a teen. She was forced to leave school, which she greatly enjoyed, and work to help support the family. Her brothers, she said, were "weak" and did not do much to help the family or themselves. One brother became an alcoholic while another drifted from one job to another. It was up to her, the unmarried daughter (her two elder sisters had started families of their own), to support the family.

Valli worked as an office assistant in the Malaysian army. While this was

a good job, she faced racial jokes and sexual innuendo. From these experiences, she concluded, the "*Indians will all be dead*" in Malaysia in a matter of ten years! She also grew wary of men. After leaving the army, she moved to Kuala Lumpur, where she found a clerical job within an American company. For many years she worked in the company, making friends with American workers, Malays, and a few Chinese. Indians, she claimed, were jealous of her popularity and success within the company. On the whole, however, she enjoyed these years.

Her social marginality within the Tamil community increased as she remained unmarried. A Tamil woman who is unmarried after the age of twenty-five is unlikely ever to do so. Moreover, being unmarried is a stigma, especially among working-class Tamils. She also found herself increasingly consumed with other people's problems (other family members and clients seeking her advice). As her "practice" picked up, she no longer had the time or energy to work full time. Indeed, she bitterly complained that her powers were almost a curse now, forcing her to always open her house to clients and people seeking a place to rest for the night.

Perhaps her childhood, spent in relative poverty and social isolation, had made her empathic toward others. While I knew her, Valli's house was always occupied by people with serious problems. She would let them sleep over, eat, and drink her tea without charge. There were four elderly widows who frequented her flat, sometimes at the same time. These women had no place to turn for help, and Valli, to her credit, would offer them her hospitality. Valli complained from time to time about her lack of freedom but said she felt pity for the widows, all of whom had suffered from family neglect and financial ruin. Aside from her pity, Valli also realized that she had no choice but to help the poor who turned to her. After all, she reasoned, her reputation as a "holy woman" depended on her good reputation. By turning hardship cases away, she would have jeopardized her business by appearing fraudulent to her clients. On only two occasions did I witness her losing her temper with "guests." Once a widow and fellow medium became abusive and cursed Valli's niece. On another occasion, a woman and her four-year-old daughter stayed with her for over a month. Valli's anger slowly grew as this woman was clearly taking advantage of her. She finally threw the woman out after she found out that she was "entertaining male clients" at night while she left her daughter with Valli.

Sometimes Valli would host other mediums, who would visit in search of her trade secrets or simply for a place to rest. Valli would always make it a point to evaluate their spiritual powers while also pitying them. She would tell me stories about their lives that explained their predicaments, suggesting that their search for spiritual powers was related to their suffering in life—an observation she never directly made of herself. Though sometimes resenting her obligation to help such troubled people,[57] she also enjoyed being the more masterful of the marginal, for clearly Valli had talents for communication and insights into human psychology that separated her from some of the others. Still, Valli was a somewhat marginal figure in Brickfields. Being a Kali medium, unmarried, and coming from a low-caste background carries with it stigmas, even among the working class. I was told by one man who saw me talking to Valli that I should avoid her because she was possessed by "a devil," which made her an "evil" woman.

Valli's clients came to her with a variety of problems. Some had marital problems, while others were haunted by demonic beings. I witnessed how effective Valli was in treating her clients. She was a very attentive listener with a keen intuition for people's problems. While in trance she would utilize the information given to her by the client, adding what she read "between the lines." She also possessed some knowledge of Hindu mythology and folklore (much of it derived from Tamil films), which she would use to animate her interpretations. Once a teenage boy came to her after being repeatedly attacked by a *jinn* (demon or genie) while sleeping. The boy even had mysterious cuts and scratches on his back as "evidence" of the malevolent force. He said that he had been to numerous temples and consulted with many priests and other mediums to no avail. Valli, whom he called "a very powerful lady," was able to cure the boy through a combination of counseling and ritual. She did perform a *puja* for him, receiving Amman's power and blessings, after which she gave the boy instructions for keeping the demon at bay. Perhaps equally important, she counseled him on facing his fears. Valli, unlike the priests and other mediums, was able to discover that the boy had been abused by his father, who had since died. The *jinn* had only started to attack him after the father's death. By suggesting a connection between these events, she helped him to face feelings of rage, guilt, and fear. But by also enabling the boy to externalize his fears, the *jinn* could be tamed by the protecting and nurturing Amman.

Furthermore, the talismans she gave him, which included certain prayers and simple rituals, instilled in him confidence and courage. As far as I know, he was free from the demon for many months thereafter. From time to time he returned to ask advice in other areas.

Another client was a very poor young woman whose husband had disappeared, leaving her to raise a baby girl. The woman was taken in by Valli for a couple of weeks while a set of *pujas* was held. This particular woman was very nervous, speaking almost nonstop. She asked me to look at her husband's picture, hoping I had seen him somewhere. Fearing the worst (that he had met with an accident), she implored Valli to help. Valli listened to the woman's incoherent story for a few days before suggesting a ritual. Once again, after performing the possession trance, Valli offered Amman's assurance to the woman that everything would turn out fine. She also counseled her on her marriage. Valli had concluded, with the goddess's help, that the young woman had frightened her husband away by "talking too much." A good wife, she maintained, must let the husband have some peace in the home. I asked Valli how she would help the woman when her husband was nowhere to be seen. She confidently stated that Amman would take care of things. Sure enough, the man returned to the young woman after two weeks. Perhaps it was a lucky guess, but Valli had somehow surmised the situation correctly. More pessimistically, Valli told me that the "man was no good" and might eventually leave the family or get involved in crime. For the time being, however, the young woman, her husband, and her baby daughter seemed to be a perfectly happy family again.

Other clients came with financial problems, alcohol-related problems, and concerns over infidelity. The point I want to make here is that Valli was perceptive in understanding the insecurities faced by working-class and poor Tamils. She, being at the margins of Tamil society, among people who are in turn at the margins of Malaysian society, knew the fears faced by people in similar circumstances. Utilizing cultural resources at her disposal—that is, Hindu folklore and a belief in powers manifested through individuals able to control these powers—she was able to provide narratives that made sense to some and ultimately gave them a feeling of power or mastery in a situation of utmost desperation. In a place like Brickfields, with its many insecurities, the medium functions to embody "dangerous powers" for the benefit of those most in need of divine intervention. As

Gananath Obeyesekere argues (1981), this is one mechanism for status enhancement for the most oppressed, while simultaneously allowing the individual medium to cope with his or her own intrapsychic needs. Utilizing cultural resources allows such individuals to offer therapeutic services to others sharing the same sociocultural milieu (Kakar 1991). But this chapter was about the reproduction of status distinctions and the ascription of space and identity within the Tamil communities. Given our present concerns, what makes Valli's story particularly relevant?

The story of the medium underscores the ambiguous distinctions that Tamils in Malaysia are compelled to make. On the one hand, Valli is challenging brahminical authority by making claims of spiritual power. Her challenges are seen in her erratic public behavior and commentary. At the same time, she also appropriates orthodox ideas and presents them as authenticating devices for her own clients and disciples. Though considered impure within a Hindu caste hierarchy, Valli is quite concerned about matters of purity when conducting rituals. At times, she appears to appreciate conventional Hindu practice, only to reject it when it threatens her self-recognition, that is, the Real of her mirrored or doubled self. The important point is that she, and many of others of low status, do not fully accept their marginality. They resist through a direct experience of power, which is provided through the trance. While Valli may have orthodox leanings from time to time, she prefers to follow the "way of prayers" and the experience of an immanent God who does not care about one's class and status. Earlier in this chapter, I also pointed out a similar problematic in the practice of temple worship. Mediums or *kavadi*-bearers can either be seen as true devotees, "mad" with devotion (McDaniel 1989), or, among the orthodox, as Hindus still in spiritual kindergarten. It is the ambiguity within the system that allows for some maneuvering. Valli, in other words, is hardly the "docile" Tamil, constructed by a state and/or elite Indian discourse, as produced in reaction to a Malay Islamic state discourse; rather, she also is capable of distancing herself from elites and occasionally even garnering their attention. At the same time, we must see her profound desire to challenge orthodoxy in light of the status obsessions within the Tamil community, which, in turn, speaks to the stigma of being "Indian" in Malaysia. I have argued that status insecurities are intimately related to the production and assertion of spiritual distinctions. As the spiritual negates or transcends the stigma of the social order, it, too, assumes a

fetishistic face as it, in futility, attempts, in fantasy, to surmount the intraethnic class and status dialectic. Valli, among others, negates, albeit with necessary ambivalence, the identity that simultaneously possesses her, that is, as the socially contingent source of her identity. Valli's paranoia regarding the demise of Indians in "ten years" correlates to a sociosymbolic order that she desperately seeks to surmount. Yet, as Freud (1997) suggests, the surmounting, too, produces the uncanny of "secret" familiarity.

This chapter has explored the ongoing production of social distinctions within the Malaysian Indian community. I have shown that underlying the processes whereby symbolic capital is reproduced are economic factors that greatly determine the accessibility of status-enhancing practices and attributes. Moreover, it was found that the prevalent negative stereotypes attached to working-class Tamils are reproduced within or attributed to the space of the ethnic enclave, which also is a function of class. Middle-class and wealthy Indians go to great lengths to distance themselves culturally and spatially from these sites of marginality. But religious practices, particularly within the *bhakti* tradition, contain within them a certain ambiguity between so-called high and low forms of Hinduism, thus perhaps exacerbating the need in the minds of elites to distance the "orthodox" from the "nonorthodox." While this apparently further widens social cleavages within the Tamil community, it also provides opportunities for mediums and other low-status devotees to challenge the spiritual supremacy of more orthodox practitioners. Yet, as the chapter concluded with the case of Valli, we see, even in her dramatic reversals or negations of hierarchy, an identity that possesses her that is ambivalently, yet resolutely, Indian. Moreover, Valli's identity crisis, as manifested in her moments of transcendental fantasy, cannot be understood outside of the context of nationalist ideology and the position of Malay Muslims and Hindu Tamils within its symbolic order. In this sense, Valli's case serves to illustrate and theorize the modernist nationalist vision from below.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SACRED MALAYSIA, GREATER INDIA

> It may be that when the Indian writer who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost. . . . The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities. . . . But let me go further. The broken glass is not merely a mirror of nostalgia. It is also, I believe, a useful tool with which to work in the present.
>
> —Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*

This chapter concludes by reflecting on the possibility of ethnic resurgence and an imagined solidarity among Tamils in response to Malay nationalism. I begin by examining the construction of "archaic" Malayness in the service of Islamic modernism. This will be followed by an extended discussion of ethnicity in terms of what exacerbates its potential uncanny hold on the psyche within the postcolonial global modern. Here, I build the case for returning to Freud and Heidegger, in particular, suggesting that the analytical purchase we gain through their conceptions of the uncanny double transcends the particularities of the Malaysian case. But given the historical particularities of Malaysia, the patterns of Tamil and Hindu resurgence, I predict, will continue to be variegated by class and status.

MALAY AUTHENTICITY

We have already witnessed how elite Indians responded to the pro-Malay and pro-Islamic policies that accompanied the NEP. While a significant

absence in this book has been its lack of attention to the Chinese community, Crouch, in a recent study, describes how Malay Islamic modernism affected the Chinese community.

> During the 1970s and 80s, the government and its agencies regularly took action that seemed to disregard and *downgrade aspects of non-Malay culture. Malay culture,* however, was treated as if it were *synonymous with Malaysian culture.* While many of these measures did not have enormous significance in themselves, they were a constant source of irritation that contributed to a massive sense of frustration and alienation among non-Malays. (1996:167)

This sense of Malay and Islamic cultural encroachment was, we have seen, also experienced by the Indian middle class. Recall Mahathir's words: "Hinduism and animism . . . had shaped and controlled the Malay psyche before the coming of Islam" (1986:19, quoted in Khoo 1995:52). The idea that the government must suppress Hinduism as it exists very near the surface of Malay consciousness is certainly imagined by elite Indians to be the fuel behind the negation of things "Indian" and "Hindu." Mahathir, in particular, must "erase" any perceived links between himself and India, even though he only possesses Indian ancestry, not (at least recent) Hindu ancestry. While I am not forwarding the claim that Mahathir's de-Indianization agenda, within the Islamic modernism he has stewarded, can be equated with Islamization as a broader social force, I have suggested that the contours of public debate, urban space, mass-media imagery, and the public vision of Malay and Islamic modernity and tradition bear his profound imprint (Peletz 2002; Kahn 2003).

In crafting a Malay national identity around language and religion, the sometimes thorny question of Indian cultural influence must be dealt with. Even national myths such as that of Mahsuri (discussed in chapter 5), for example, have purported linkages to Hindu myths. Certainly the Malay language shares much with Sanskrit and even Tamil. To imagine Malay identity necessarily entails an Indic element within it. This Indic element, while not a big problem in a Buddhist-majority nation such as Thailand, is problematic in Malaysia precisely because of the contemporary presence of a sizable Indian community. Moreover, the negative stigma attached to Indians as a whole is, by Islamic modernist ideology, the antithesis of Malay Islamic culture. The Hindu Malay period in ancient history is thus not denied but, rather, is a past already surmounted. That is why traces of

it must be erased from contemporary Malay culture. A discourse of "Indianness," which represents Hindus through stereotypical images, helps displace the unease and cultural ambivalence that Malays experience in the repressive wake of Islamic modernism.

Indians are not *bumiputras* in Malaysia. Quite simply, if it were established that ancient Tamil Hindu and Tamil Buddhist colonies existed and were continuous for a substantial period of time (temples date from a continued period of over ten centuries; see Quaritch-Wales 1976), this would perhaps inspire contemporary Hindus to agitate for *bumiputra* status or certainly a larger symbolic representation in the national culture. Most Malays would naturally argue that even if there were ancient Indian colonies in Malaya the inhabitants gradually mixed with local Malay populations, adopting their language and culture, while also introducing Sanskrit, marriage customs, dress, and other aspects of *adat* (local customs). That is, many Malays share Indian ancestry, perhaps, but contemporary Tamils in Malaysia do not share over one thousand years of Malay cultural history. This interpretation is consistent with Mahathir's incorporative definition of a Malay, that is, one who has adopted the Islamic religion and Malay language.

It is precisely this assimilationist definition of Malay *bumiputra* status that worries some Indians and Chinese. They fear that the government's Islamic and Malay-language policies are ultimately aimed at assimilating non-Malays. This fear, I was often told, was the primary cause of non-Malay religious revivalism, though perhaps not consciously (Ackerman and Lee 1988:60). Middle-class Indians, as we saw in the case of the Temple of Fine Arts and Ramakrishna Mission (chapter 5), find ways to imagine a greater India, which now includes Malaysia.

While the purging or erasing of the Hindu Buddhist past may have a political and/or religious motivation, it is also clear that some Hindus in Malaysia are using this phenomenon to fuel their own imaginary of greatly exaggerated Indian pasts in Malaysia. Given the paucity and somewhat poor quality of archaeological findings, it is hard to imagine great Indian colonies and temples to have existed. What is most relevant, however, is how some Indians perceive or suspect a Malay government plot to lay claim to cultural achievements that they believe were produced by their ancestors.

Perhaps ironically, it is the embeddedness of Sanskrit within archaic

Malay culture that ultimately was called on to give an air of legitimacy to the Malay national identity (Kessler 1992). Just as Geertz (1983) was able to demonstrate Sanskritic elements being emphasized in Sukarno's political rhetoric, Kessler suggests that at a time when Mahathir was under fire from all quarters during the mid-1980s, a media campaign was begun that proved, and continues to be, hugely successful.

The first, and perhaps most important, evocative piece of political propaganda was a song set to patriotic images known as the "Lagu Setia" (Loyalty Song). The song debuted in 1987 and was aired daily on the two television stations (at that time) in the nation. Its seductive yet somber melody was performed by a youthful choir and in another version by one of Malaysia's top female vocalists. It became an instant hit, particularly among Malays. The patriotic visual images were equally important as a backdrop to the very hummable melody. Prominent among the images were the modern Parliament House buildings, the *agung* (king) in various poses, citizens of all races observing the National Day Parade, top UMNO politicians, the Malaysian flag, and a mosque (Kessler 1992).

Almost ten years after the song's debut, it is still played daily at the end of the day's broadcast. I noticed that many knew the exact words and could easily join in singing the song. I witnessed openly patriotic displays when I heard the song with Malaysians of various ethnic groups. Kessler suggests that its evocative power derives from the music, images, and, most important, the mood pictures conjured up by its words.

As Kessler suggests, the imagined archaic Malay culture contains a number of Sanskrit[1] and Arabic influences. For centuries, the rajas and sultans have incorporated these foreign influences in order to represent the exemplary center, or galactic polity, from which power is signified (Wolters 1999; Anderson 1972; Tambiah 1976). Over time, their foreign origins were no longer recognized, as they have come to have deeper meaning in Malay language and political thought. Also, as Kessler notes, the words have an almost ambiguous or multivocal nature, which enhances their ability to evoke a wide range of emotions and traditions.

When Proton, the Malaysian national car, was launched during 1986, Mahathir's rapid industrialization policies faced great criticism. When it came time to give the car model names, the company chose words that were believed to evoke a sense of archaic Malay culture. The three most popular models during the 1990s were the Iswara, Wira, and Satria,

respectively. Ironically, perhaps, was the fact that many Indians I knew took great pride in the names—all of which were drawn directly from Sanskrit and even from Hindu Buddhist concepts. A member of the Temple of Fine Arts told me he was even consulted by Proton when it was compiling a list of possible names. As in the case of "Lagu Setia," a highly controversial pet project of the prime minister's was legitimized culturally by the evocative Sanskrit Malay words, carefully chosen to inspire patriotism. Some Tamils complained to me that Malays denied that the words were borrowed from Sanskrit, claiming rather that it was purely a coincidence that the Malay words sounded like Sanskrit words. One Indian woman remarked, "it is funny how *all* the government's highly vaunted concepts, like Rukunegara and Iswara and Wira, come from Sanskrit." What really bothered many Tamils, however, was the perceived anti-Hindu discourse within the government's Islamic modernism, while it simultaneously promoted its "vaunted" concepts with what it perceived as Indicized Malay. The government negated, in other words, the very source of its authenticity, which some Hindus felt was an appropriation of their culture. This Indian sense of being the "source" is formed in the countertransference of Malay desire. That is, the crucible of this desire for return to the source is a desire for recognition as being seen to possess the authentic core. This fantasy of a transcendent Indian source, we have seen, is produced within the Malay-Indian dialectic, just as the Islamic modernist ideology posits an autonomous authentic core premised on a surmounted past that cannot, in reality, be surmounted—hence the fetish effect of the Indian.

Before making some general observations of the government's recent use of the mass media, I wish to underscore Kessler's insightful observation.

> Yet, for all its political brilliance—even, in fact, underlying its political acuity—*Lagu Setia* remains a puzzling and paradoxical creation. That most "traditionalistic" or archaic of Malay political values—the notion of obligatory followership in loyalty essentially to the principle of loyalty itself—was mobilized to help assure the political survival and ascendancy of an altogether untraditionalistic leader devoted to a vision based upon anything but a reverence for the obligatoriness of tradition. But, even as the song was sung invoking a tradition of loyalty, its visual accompaniments on television were largely images of modernity. (1992:155)

The claim being made here is that the government has stolen the thunder from traditionalists (royalty) and Islamist reformers through a brilliant appropriation of archaic symbols, juxtaposed with images of modernity. To return briefly to a theme of previous chapters, History one cannot surmount History two, or that which stands in resistance to the march of History one (Chakrabarty 2000). Yet what we see in the aspiration to fulfill History one—modernity's teleology of progress—is a past retroactively realized. The futurity of its archaic authenticity, the past as past already surmounted, is not merely an instance of resistance to History one but, rather, its necessary historicized figure. Yet the compulsion to return to the past in the objectifying of history as tradition, and the aspiration to futurity that produces this compulsion, reveals a specter that cannot be erased. Neither value nor spirit, following dialectical logic, can be rid of the uncanny partial recognition of contingency. Put simply, the greater the compulsion to adopt an objectifying modernism and a concomitant surmounting of the past, the greater the specter of tradition looms in the imagination as authenticity and legitimacy become less certain and recognizable.

Kessler also points out that the *agung* is even shown riding a motorcycle at the conclusion of "Lagu Setia"! The key point he makes is that in order to be a true Malay (and by extension, Malaysian) one must be absolutely loyal and unwavering in one's devotion to the nation's leaders—hardly a modernist view. This single piece of propaganda, powerful as it turned out to be, was not the only governmental response to its legitimacy crisis. An expanded media campaign was also launched against other critical voices; particularly the "West" has been singularized in the media in an effort to create a common foe that can inspire national unity.

Following on the coattails of "Lagu Setia," another song was launched on national television. "Mesra" (Unity) has replaced the former during the news and prime-time viewing hours. While the former is a slow and evocative piece of music, "Mesra" incorporates a joyous marching melody sung by a fairly large chorale. Here the emphasis is placed on themes of national unity and government accomplishments. Scenes from the National Day Parade are featured. Marchers are shown paying their respects to the *agung* and the prime minister, followed by dancers representing the various ethnic groups in the nation. The military is also seen marching as a giant Malaysian flag is carried in procession. At various points in the video,

happy villagers are shown, followed by a scene of a factory or high-rise building. Mosques are juxtaposed with images of science, technology, and prosperity. The national car, the Proton, is displayed in the video, as are the newly completed Kuala Lumpur Tower[2] and the awesome Petronas Towers. Images of the prime minister are featured throughout the piece. At one minute he is seen with his wife, surrounded by children of all races, and at another touring or inaugurating some high-tech project. The song concludes, as it begins, with the harmonious diversity on display during the National Day Parade.

"Mesra" ran daily on (then) all four of the country's television stations but was featured more prominently on the three that are wholly government owned. The message of the video is fairly clear: national unity and national achievement go hand in hand. At the same time, the prime minister is certainly portrayed as a benevolent statesman and modernizer of the nation. But while he is a modernizer, he is also a gentle leader, committed to Islam and preserving the cultural values of the Malay village. The icons of modernity have been converted into signs of moral, and even spiritual, legitimacy. Modernist vision aside, the exemplary center, as Kessler suggests, is reconstituted with its charisma intact.

Propaganda also comes in other forms. Evening newscasts devote the first ten to fifteen minutes of the broadcast to coverage of the prime minister's day. What he said, what factory or project he visited, what criticism of the West he offered, and so on are given priority over all else. There is no interpretation or analysis of the prime minister's words given by the newscasters; rather, they are taken as newsworthy by their provenance. The opposition can be much maligned, without media analysis, by the prime minister or his junior ministers; however, there is absolutely no forum in which to voice the views of the opposition, with the possible exception of Internet newspapers recently. The front pages of the newspapers are similarly devoted to the activities and views expressed by the prime minister and other high-ranking members of Barisan National. The absolute control over media allows the government to demonize political opponents without rebuttal. Though not as heavy-handed as the patriotic songs and news, even the televised call to prayer contains images of science and modernist Islam while Arabic verses from the Quran are superimposed.[3] Read in this way, even the obligatory call to prayer becomes a subtle critique of "obscurantist" Islam when shown on the television.

Mahathir answered his critics in many ways. First, there were his sometimes polemical statements, which were carried through the media and made more forceful through repetition; second, he dealt with his most vociferous critics in an authoritarian manner, utilizing whatever measures he could under the current legal system. First consider his Islamic opponents. Those in PAS and other anticapitalist and more communally oriented movements were singled out for ridicule by the prime minister. The following passage comes from a book called *The Challenge*, written by Mahathir, but its sentiment is echoed many times in newspapers and television newscasts.

> [O]ne of the saddest ironies of recent times is that Islam, the faith that once made its followers progressive and powerful, is being invoked to promote retrogression which will bring in its wake weakness and eventual collapse. A force of enlightenment, it is being turned into a rationale for narrow-mindedness; an inspiration towards unity, it is being twisted into an instrument of division and destruction. (Quoted in Khoo 1995:37)

The prime minister relentlessly criticizes PAS for its "extremist" and/or "deviationist" teachings. Since the Pusat Islam (National Islamic Center) falls under the jurisdiction of the government, critics of the UMNO's Islamic agenda, such as PAS, find their credibility attacked by the very council designed to uphold Islamic principles in the nation. The Islamic groups are often compared to violent "fundamentalist" groups in other nations and are vilified as potential subverters of national ethnic harmony and economic prosperity. With a great measure of success, the campaign against Islamic groups critical of the government's modernization policies frightens Chinese and Indians about the prospects of life in Malaysia outside the umbrella of Barisan National's protection. While the current political arrangement certainly favors Malays in terms of culture and language, it is presented as the best possible alternative to rule under Islamic "extremists." Indeed, non-Malay support for Barisan National has been pivotal during recent national elections.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this media campaign against Islamic critics of the government concerns their alleged "antimaterialistic" philosophy. Claiming that PAS and various communal groups allied to it wish to reverse the nation's economic success, the media often air commentary on the "spiritual duty" of Muslims to achieve "worldly success."

Talk shows devoted to "progressive" Islam are seen on television, and the International Islamic University (another government-backed project) has attracted a number of respected Islamic intellectuals, who comment in the print and electronic media about the ideals of "true Islam." The good Muslim must not "retreat" from the world. Once again, Mahathir's views are expressed forcefully in *The Challenge.*

> [T]he choice before the upholders of spirituality is not between rejecting and accepting the world and its wealth. The world and its wealth and a myriad social activities will exist irrespective of what philosophies of life and death dominate human minds. The choice before the spiritual group is whether to let greedy materialists own all the wealth of the world and the power that goes with it, or to own that wealth themselves. *If the materialistic group owns that wealth, the spiritual group cannot but face destruction. On the other hand, if the spiritual group owns the wealth, there is some hope that they can still avoid moral decadence.* (Quoted in Khoo 1995:39, emphasis added)

Therefore, the good Muslim, like Marx's "guilty" bougeoisie or Weber's interpretation of this-worldy asceticism, has a moral compulsion to obtain wealth and contribute the prosperity of his or her society lest the *materialist group* (the West and perhaps the Chinese) dominate the resources of the world. The "deviant" or "obscurantist" Islamic groups are thereby aiding the cause of Western materialism and decadence when they criticize the industrial and economic policies of the government. In *The Challenge* and his speeches and interviews, the prime minister repeatedly warns Muslims that they will be subject to recolonization and perpetual Western economic and political domination unless they work hard and achieve the goal of "developed nation status"—the principal aim of Vision 2020.

While such propaganda has served the prime minister well, he also resorted to more authoritarian measures to silence his critics. Stories abound among Mahathir's critics concerning individual members of the opposition, or even members of the High and Supreme Courts, who were critical of the government being removed from office, often based on some public scandal or smear campaign. During a turbulent period in 1987, the prime minister utilized the Internal Security Act (ISA) in order to imprison a number of the most vocal critics in an operation that came to be called Operation Lallang.[4] More recently, in the wake of Anwar Ibrahim's arrest and sacking from government, several of the latter's supporters who dared

organize public demonstrations were arrested and held under the ISA.[5]

Another favorite target of criticism is the West. Mahathir used, and continues to use, the West as a negative mirror by which to create an alternative, unifying identity. Sometimes the opposition to the West is simply called the "East." But at other times he talks of "developing nations," the "Islamic world," "Asia," and the "South" (as opposed to the "North," which is synonymous with the West). The West is presented as homogeneous and monolithic. In doing so, he conjures a leviathan of sorts, bent on controlling the destiny of the East and/or the Islamic world. While the prime minister courts Western investment, and often travels to the United States or Europe in search of trade agreements, he also basks in the glow of opposition to the West's political hegemony over Asia. He argues, almost echoing a version of the dependency/world-systems theory that many Marxists cannot help but agree with, that the West does not want to see developing nations succeed because this is a threat to their control of world markets. Sentiments on the street often echo Mahathir's resentment of Western "conspiracies."[6] It is also noted that the government rhetoric is paradoxical, in that economic policies encourage Western investment, capitalism, and consumerism. It is a nest of ironies: Westernization in the form of modernization must continue with its concomitant consumerism and economic growth. This ensures a perception that the quality of life is improving under the government's economic policies. In the most visible way, the high-rise buildings, grand shopping malls and condominiums, and increasing availability of luxury items (cars, electronic goods, supermarkets, comfortable housing, etc.) are telltale signs of Vision 2020's eventual arrival: a utopia of automation, luxury goods, modern transportation, and so on. The hypermodernity of this vision is reinforced through the effective propaganda campaigns in the media.

In the wake of the propaganda deluge, however, is a warning not to ape the West and its "moral decline." Sensational crimes, as well as statistics of violence in America, are frequently cited in the Malaysian press. Malaysians are told that their government is more restrictive than a Western-style democracy in order to protect "Asian values." On the other hand, there are repeated calls to pay greater heed to Islamic tenets and values, which are seen to be the perfect counterpart of modernity. In this sense, the future-oriented aspirations of modernity produce, in response to the

anxiety that accompanies them, the simultaneous desire for cultural authenticity. To repeat my argument again, modernity in Malaysia is a nationalist, and hence a culturally and historically unique, project, but at the same time the project contains and produces an ideological impulse to silence its contingent and profane nature (capitalism, global investment, Western decadence, cheap labor, etc.). Its specters are partially silenced in the fetish of History two's retroactive authenticity. In Malaysia, this fetish takes ethnoreligious form. As Mahathir says, the "*spiritual group*" must "*own the wealth.*" The former prime minister, perhaps more than most people, partially recognizes the paradox embedded in the ethnonationalist project.

To conclude this section, I wish to remind the reader that while the government has been actively involved in constructing a Malay identity in order to imagine a Malaysian national identity that is modern yet authentic, it retains the support of most Malaysians (including non-Malays) through its accommodation to various ethnic and economic interests. Islam is promoted, no doubt, but the religious freedoms of non-Muslims are guaranteed. The national recognition given to Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian holidays can be seen as token gestures, but these gestures, and the media's use of them, create an impression of fairness and ethnic harmony. With regard to language, Malay has been promoted at the expense of English[7] but not at the expense of Chinese or Tamil. Tamil- and Chinese-medium schools are cited as further evidence of the government's liberal educational and ethnic policies. Even in the sphere of economics, where the NEP created opportunities for Malays at the expense of non-Malays, overall economic growth, however uneven, has allowed non-Malay capitalists to conduct their businesses without much governmental interference. Thus the bourgeois and petit bourgeois, not to mention the rich, have been staunch supporters of Barisan National. In some sense, the government has become more accommodating while tightening its grip on the media and opposition political and religious parties (Crouch 1996). Last, the positive image projected by Vision 2020 suggests, in some peoples' minds, a time when ethnic politics will no longer be necessary, having achieved a "fair" distribution of wealth in the nation. The former prime minister himself spoke of a "bangsa Malaysia" (Malaysian race) in the future that will no longer be separated by ethnic boundaries and interests.

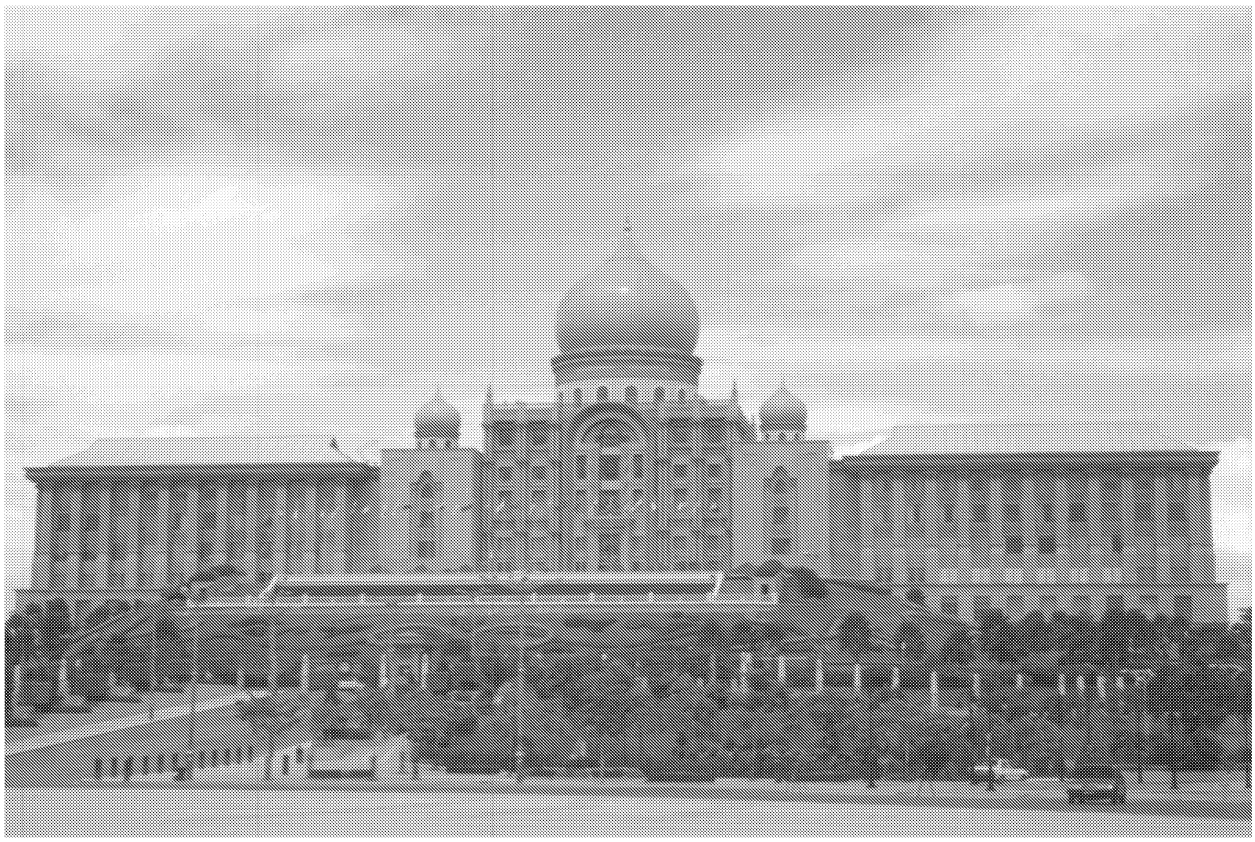


Fig. 28. Putrajaya. The new Parliament building for the Malaysian government.

At least for a while (when the economy was growing fast), such images were tantalizing and perhaps conceivable to many Malaysians. But such assimilationist discourses remain unspecified and posited for a future beyond present realities. Moreover, Chinese and Indian suspicions remain that any future national assimilation will be directed toward an augmented Malay and Islamic identity at the expense of a diminished Chinese or Indian one.

CULTURALISM AND THE QUESTION OF TRANSNATIONAL DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS

There are no monologues of identity. While this assertion can attributed to the early Greek and Indian philosophers, and persists as a central problematic throughout the history of philosophy, anthropologists have come much later to understand that ethnic identities are "boundaries" that are

enacted or imagined in a dialectic among groups. This is especially true when there exists perceived outside threats (Barth 1969). A remaining question, hinted at throughout this study, is whether the increasing intrusiveness of Malay Islamic nationalism is producing a collective Indian imaginary that overrides the deep divisions within the Tamil community. Marshall Sahlins argues that the process of community identification is always a dialectic with "Others."

> Divinities or enemies, ancestors or affines, the Others are in various ways the necessary conditions of a society's existence . . . *no culture is sui generis.* And a more or less self-conscious fabrication of culture in response to imperious outside "pressures" is a normal process—dialectic or schismogenic, perhaps, but not pathogenic. The diversity of human cultures, Lévi-Strauss remarks, "depends less on the isolation of the various groups than on the relations between them." (1993:16, emphasis added)

The contingent quality of culture, and by extension ethnic and cultural identity, assumes dialectical features with other groups. That modern Malay or Indian Hindu identity emerged in a dialectic with colonial intrusions and between one another should be no surprise.[8] Articulations of "difference" from the subordinate position have been the focus of the subaltern school of nationalist history (Chatterjee 1993, 1986; Chakrabarty 2000). This school, in partial agreement with Sahlins,[9] argues that imagined communities cannot exist without a mirroring Other.

The derivative aspect of cultural identity is, on the one hand, an assertion of difference—an opposition between peoples and cultures. On the other hand, elements of culture are assimilated and redefined or "indigenized." In this dual motion, we can see the utility of Homi Bhabha's explicitly dialectical conception of identity as mimicry.

> The *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority. And it is a double vision that is a result of what I've described as the partial representation/recognition of the colonial object. . . . A desire that, through the repetition of *partial presence,* which is the basis of mimicry, articulates those disturbances of cultural, racial, and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority. It is a desire that reverses "in part" the colonial appropriation by now producing a partial vision of the colonizer's presence; a gaze of otherness. (1994:88–89)

The "menace" that Bhabha refers to is the partial recognition or "partial presence" of the Other within the Self. To the colonial master, as in Hegel's master, the recognition of mastery only comes from the contingent recognition afforded by the object of desire, the colonial subject (or Hegel's slave). That is, the metonymic desire for self-recognition, itself a "narcissistic demand of colonial authority," produces the simultaneous uncanny of likeness in the figure of the split or double. The gaze that is productive of recognition is also evidence of likeness or the menace born out of this counterappropriation and desire by the subordinate party. In this transferential doubling or "mimicry," the "*disturbances of cultural, racial, and historical difference*" produce the obsessive iteration of difference as hierarchy. Bhabha refers to this recognition (and repetition) compulsion as the compulsive hierarchical iteration of "almost the same but not quite" (89). The "almost" is the suspension point of ideology, as it must be sustained in order for hierarchy to work in the imaginary of self and Other. The inner enemy, the presence of the Other within as the contingent source of self-recognition, cannot, as we recall Hegel once again, be ultimately defeated, as any victory against this Other is simultaneously a defeat of the Self. From the dialectical conception of mimicry, therefore, there is no authentic core to Being that can possibly be retrieved and thus, by extension, no hermetic cultures or identities sui generis. This is equally true for colonial masters and the colonized, who negate the ethnoracial gaze yet also find recognition in the dialectic. In this sense, the spiritual domain, posited as a site of difference and autonomy, remains decidedly "unhappy" as corporeal subjection and hierarchy continue unabated by fantasies of transcendence. In the transferential relationship of the dialectic, neither the master or slave, the colonizer or colonized, can surmount the other without experiencing the uncanny effect of the Other's *partial presence.*

THE ETHNIC UNCANNY

In Heidegger, the way we experience being in the world, or what he calls the *ontic* or conscious experience (*existentiell*), silences, distorts, and covers up the *ontological* basis of Being—that is, what the nature of Being is or how beings are constituted by Being. This ontic way of knowing sometimes experiences itself as a "lack" or a vague sense of "inauthenticity." The "loss" or partial awareness of that ontological nearness—that is, the

ultimately contingent nature of Being or its lack of any foundation—allows for certainty and self-knowing, but one, like Hegel's self-certainty in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977:104–19) that is haunted by the phantom of its double—profound uncertainty.

In *Being and Time* (1996), he distinguishes between *ontological* and *ontic* ways of Being. Being in the world (*Da-Sein*), involves the temporal, historical, political, and cultural ensnarement of Being within contingency. But Being's partial recognition of this, its contingent origins, provides *angst* (anxiety) as a means of achieving authenticity or the ontological recognition of Being as contingency. But, in an attempt to silence this voice or partial recognition, Being is *ontically* "ensnared" or "entrapped" by the notions of Being that, ironically, attempt to surmount contingency and posit the autonomy, singularity, and transcendence of the temporally contingent nature of Being. The task of a philosophy of Being, for Heidegger, therefore, is to strip away or "destructure" the ontically ensnared Being by revealing the contingency of its categories of awareness. The more, that is, that humans think of themselves as knowing subjects who master the world around them, the more they are beholden to and "enframed" in an ontic objectification of the world that silences awareness of Being's contingency and its dependency on the Other. Objectified forms of knowledge—such as exemplified in technocratic reason, in which the human, as knowing subject masters the world, and in so doing, becomes framed by the illusion of mastery, or, in the case of excessive identification[10] of the subject with a particular ethnic or cultural form—reveal the uncanny double that is silenced in the metonymic singularity of fetishized thinking.

The subject's entry into language and reason, and becoming ontically self-certain, is haunted by the specter of its contingency, the nothing out of which it arose, and the ultimate nothing that is its ultimate return. The knowledge of death and temporality, being the ultimate horizon out of which the subject flees into the mindless ensnarement of the ontic, presents both the risk of fetishistic attachment to an idea of Being (the ontic) and the possibility for "authentic" recognition of Being's necessary contingency (being conscious, albeit necessarily ontically, of the ontological basis of Being).

Turning to Freud, the mastery of self is always already marked by a terrible absence, the recognition of contingency in one's primary identification with the mother. In this dissolution of the incipient self's

narcissistic fantasy, one has the beginnings of self-consciousness and the subject's entry into language as the "great cultural achievement" (Freud 1961:14). That is, the introjection of society begins when the young subject plays the game of *fort* and *da* (there and here)[11] and thereby attempts to master the first great crisis of its life, that is, surmounting its primary narcissistic attachment to the mother. Awareness of self-differentiation, and ultimately self-consciousness and certainty, is produced out of this lack.

This game, this entry into the symbolic realm of self-certainty and mastery, ushers into the young subject the double that ultimately haunts it. There are, I suggest, two *automatons* that arise: the fear of the surmounted narcissistic or animistic self's return in uncontrollable ways, and the *automaton that is* the double of conscience and conditioned reason. That is, living as the living dead—living in the compulsive silencing of that which one lacks through the painful pleasure's repetition, that which Heidegger called the "they self," the ontically certain yet ontologically most distant. In both instances, angst seems to accompany such repetitions of identity affirmation.

The Freudian uncanny, in other words, is not simply a repressed wish but, more precisely, the unwelcome return of the double—the reminder that the edifice of reason, morality, and certainty is little more than a game of *fort-da* forged in recognition of the mother's absence.

In Freud's seminal essay "The Uncanny" (1997) we learn that the "automaton" is a double or shadow of one's own self, forged in relation to the Other, and that this is the source of its uncanny nature. The double arouses the fear, in its recurrence, in that it marks the "*uncanny harbinger of death*" (1997:211, emphasis added). In its fantastic ubiquity, the double reminds the subject of the ego's contingent source.

Another double, that of the conscience, is revealed as the subject's superego (1997:211). The narcissistic self is punished, or censored, by this master, this socialized self that extinguishes its surmounted double with merciless vengeance. This is the double that is overcome as the subject's past, the displaced or "*surmounted*," yet, "*secretly familiar*" (222–26) figure, as it is never overcome, for to do so would be to annihilate the self.[12] Analogously, the backward or surmounted in the ethnic politics of national belonging is a critical theme of this study, as the stigma of the ethnic stereotype becomes a figure to surmount in the certainty of the spirit. Specifically, the ego-ideal cannot be obeyed fully, as the Other (double)

cannot be fully extinguished, which, in turn, redoubles the superego's efforts to censor and silence its offending double.[13] According to Freud, "the double has become *a thing of terror*" (212, emphasis added) because it reveals that the surmounted self is fragile after all. The ego-ideal is plagued by the return of its surmounted double, its (secret present, displaced as) past. In turn, the superego is impossible to satisfy, and therefore the conscience acts like Chagall's avenging angels, an automaton of demanding morality against life itself. The gist of the uncanny to Freud has to do with the eroding face of reason that the return of the double produces. Within the transferential relationships among individuals and groups in Malaysia I have argued that the disavowal or surmounting of the Other can produce uncanny doublings, which, in turn, fuel overidentification with the ego-ideal or, in Heidegger's words, "ensnare" the subject.

Heidegger, unlike Freud, did not believe that reason could supersede and surmount the phantasms of the uncanny double.[14] Being is always already mediated by the horizons of temporality—no claim to authenticity is free from its historic horizon, its futural orientation (and aspiration), and its constructed past, as a displaced present (and symptom of the futural desire). All pasts are futural in orientation because we understand Being or achieve self-certainty in the recognition of the "they"—the (processual or unfolding) source of self-recognition. The desire to surmount and thus conceal this contingent or empty origin is not wholly possible because traces of the ontological source of Being announce themselves in the ways we experience the world.

Estranging or displacing (or surmounting) pasts allows the ontically ensnared Being to perceive itself as a knowing subject (reflecting on what one was). But the double inherent in this desire to overcome contingency produces anxiety. This is because what is ontically nearest is "ontologically farthest." Fleeing from it, the awareness of contingency and specifically, of death, the ontic becomes a fixated-on form of Being that covers up its true nature and ultimate horizon. But the double brings angst. The more the knowing subject believes it has mastered the world, the more it is ensnared by it in the form of the "they self"—society's logics, science, morality, opinions, and so on. Here the parallel with Freud's superego becomes clear.

As Freud might suggest, the more we heed the master's voice (as superego), the more we realize the impossibility of fully heeding it (and believ-

ing in its ultimate value) and hence the compulsive redoubling of efforts to obey its command—almost as the feared automaton—and yet fearing all the while what loss is signified, as yet another automaton, the double of the surmounted Being.

But for Heidegger, the mindless or idle chatter of the "they" or "falling prey" to the objectifying and silencing modes of ontic ensnarement is unsettled by the angst it provokes in us that we are wasting our time, living inauthentically. Heidegger's logic reminds one of Buddhist, or even Hindu dialectical reason. That is, the attachment to the "I," or reason, is socially and symbolically mediated, hence contingent and ultimately ephemeral. The "world can offer nothing" (1996:174), and angst rekindles a reckoning with the inauthentic identification with the double that is the "they self." As in the Freudian uncanny, however, the ensnared subject, for the most part, attempts to silence this voice of angst and continue its illusory existence. That is, for some, there is a possibility for an epistemic revelation brought on by angst. Religion, many would argue, affords this possible unmasking of contingent worlds in certain moments of reflection, ritual disorder, and awareness. But others would point to the fleeing of the ontological, through religion, and to the certain assuaging of angst through "truths." In that sense, from Heidegger's perspective, religion can be a fleeing from Being or a calling to authentic life, depending on the moment at hand. "Real angst is rare," he explains, and "falling prey" to publicness and the mindless chatter that blocks out the unease of Being is the norm.

My usage of Heidegger's and Freud's notion of the uncanny as the double has centered on the silencing of the contingent and transferential dimensions of identity. This, I argue, has become exacerbated as ethnicity became inscribed into the political order in Malaysia.

We have seen how the construction of a modern, yet "archaic" Malay identity produced a simultaneous distancing and appropriating of Indic cultural elements. Within the state media, Indians signify everything that is antithetical to modernity defined in Malay terms. Yet this belies a strong undercurrent of partially recognized, and the *partial presence* (a double) of, Indian culture. Moreover, the elite Indian response to Malay modernism, with its distinct purging of Indic elements, suggests conscious and/or partially conscious manipulation of a symbolic order and the desired recognition of Indicized parts of Malay culture, as well as a disdain for Malay cultural practices that claim an authentic core devoid of Indian influence. I

have called this elite Indian desire the countertransference of Malay desire. In this, Indians have been seen to desire recognition of Malay cultural provenance arising from an Indic-Hindu core—a reversal of the negation of Indian influence in Islamic modernism. I now turn from this phenomenological explanation to a macro-socio-cultural frame that parallels, in some measure, this dialectical logic.

Once again, Sahlins, borrowing from Gregory Bateson and Claude Lévi-Strauss, suggests that "mutual differentiation" is a critical part of all imagined identities.

> Recall that Gregory Bateson originally defined "complementary schismogenesis" as a phenomenon of acculturation. . . . Of course, this is the whole idea of how structures travel and are transformed in Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologiques*. Here again the oppositions between peoples in contact are balances by resemblances as each strives to be as good as, and better than—thus the same and different from—the other. (1993:20)

Once we extend this argument to the global frame, which has increasingly brought societies into systematic relationships for the last few centuries, the refutation of universal histories of modernization (e.g., modernization theory and convergence theory) becomes matter-of-fact. Cultural difference, or the "derivative discourse" of the postcolonial state (Chatterjee 1986) is part of the schismogenic or structural opposition generated by a common system, be it colonial or world capitalism bringing diverse social groups into relationships with one another. Sahlins explains.

> Rather than the overthrow of the World System, which is now an irreversible fact of their existence, the local peoples' inventions and inversions of tradition can be understood as attempts to create a differentiated cultural space within it. And actions that are at once indigenizing and modernizing appear as structural rather than just hypocritical. . . .
>
> If all this makes any sense, if the world is becoming a Culture of cultures, then what needs to be studied ethnographically is the indigenization of modernity-through time and in all its dialectical ups and downs, from the earliest develop-man to the latest invention of tradition. Western capitalism is planetary in its scope, but it is not a universal logic of cultural change. (1993:20–21)

Sahlins argues further that the leaders of "cultural revival" movements are often the elites in a society, which, having achieved success in the com-

mercial world, are able to appropriate the tools of modernity in the service of ethnic or religious causes. From this scenario, it necessarily follows that in a multicultural state such as Malaysia the elites from the various communities are going to articulate differences on behalf of the respective cultural communities. This also suggests that a greater intrusion of Malay Islamic modernism (itself a reaction to a schismogenic relationship with modernity) will indeed produce a complementary Hindu-Tamil response. By extension, the emergence of transnational Islamic movements and sentiments will produce a similar consciousness among Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and others. Sahlins's vision of a world that has become a "Culture of cultures," or a World System in which "local peoples' inventions and inversions of tradition" are attempts to create cultural differentiation, helps us to explain some of the discursive moves made by actors in the Malaysian narrative. Indeed, indigenizing and modernizing schisms complement one another, as has been suggested by the schematic of History one and History two—that is, the unfolding linear logic of capitalism and that which it cannot fully appropriate or that which resists its homogenizing desire. Whereas Sahlins constructs a structural binary, Charkrabarty, drawing on Marx and Heidegger, suggests a fetishistic desire for return to a past authenticity as the symptom of the fissures of ideology and consciousness (and value's contingent source) that capitalism produces. Thus what Sahlins calls indigenizing is to Dipesh Chakrabarty a site of modernist displacement or a symptom of an objectifying logic. At the same time, the metanarrative of structuralism that systematizes the cultural logics of difference is also troubling, as it tends to reify culture as a concept, separate from the notion of discourse, ideological negation, or the symptom, that carries necessarily differentiated subject positions in a social hierarchy and concomitant differences in power that affect the production of social identities. Whether it be the ethnosymbolic hierarchy of Malaysian nationalism or the intra-Indian status hierarchy, the compulsion to difference has been shown to negate the contingency of social hierarchy in an attempt to mask the "menace," as Bhabha puts it, of likeness. That is, I agree with Sahlins in his admonition of vulgar instrumentalism that the "inventions and inversions of tradition" are not merely "hypocritical." Indeed, they would not inhabit or even possess ethnic subjects in the manner I have described if they were mere tactical constructs. While such inventions and constructs do exist, and often do serve class interest, the

passionate zeal and possessive force they exert cannot be explained away through instrumental critique. But where I depart from Sahlins is in my suggestion, following a phenomenological reading of Lacan and Marx, that the fetishlike power of identity politics owes its compulsive power over the psyche, its seizurelike repetition, in order to silence the partial recognition of its contingency. Put simply, the desire for return to a place of authenticity often tells us less about a loss of a culturally real world than it does of the Real that is masked by the symbolic order. Anterior futures tell us, perhaps, less about the surviving or indigenizing shards of specific lost life worlds than of a desire to return that is symptomatic of psychosocial displacement. The "partial presence" of History one within the negations of History two is insurmountable and vice versa. As Salman Rushdie, in the quotation that began this chapter, elucidates: "The broken glass is not merely a mirror of nostalgia. It is, I believe, *a useful tool with which to work in the present*" (1991:12).

Nevertheless, and taking Sahlins's structural interpretation of globalization to heart at a macrocultural level, when one attempts to locate Hindu consciousness from within a global systems perspective, there were global or transnational elements throughout the twentieth century and perhaps earlier. Arguably, the zenith of British rule over India occurred during the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century. This was also a time when the "Hindu Renaissance" sparked the early flames of Indian nationalism—and its distinct point of departure from Western models of the secular nation (Chatterjee 1993). One of the defining moments in the awakening of Indian cultural nationalism was Vivekananda's "triumphant" address at the World Parliament of Religions held at Chicago in 1893. It was a global encounter of difference in which the swami presented an essentialist spiritual identity for India, in contrast, yet superior, to Western scientific rationalism. The "spiritual East" was given articulation in a manner that was consolidated in reaction to colonial ideologies. The derivative or dialectical nature of Indian cultural nationalism was not unique to India alone, as other nationalist movements arose in similar fashion. Moreover, Hindu nationalism in the subcontinent gained hegemonic force in the politics of independence, thus inspiring Islamic counterparts. One can make the argument, pace Sahlins, that colonialism generated a system in which the world became a "Culture of cultures." Furthermore, there was a diasporic or transnational quality to the politics of

difference being articulated in anticolonial discourses. As far away as Fiji, Indians were affected by the politics and culture of nationalism in the "homeland" (Kelly 1991). Their own struggles in the Fijian frontier resonated with the ideologies of *bhakti* articulated by Gandhi and morality articulated by the Arya Samaj (an important Hindu reform movement). Similarly, in colonial Malaya, we have seen how the politics of cultural nationalism in India was all consuming to the local Indians through the struggles of the INA and the formation of the MIC. In these two cases, and in numerous others, an anticolonial discourse circulated globally throughout the Indian diaspora.

With this perspective, transnational ethnic consciousness, though a popular topic today, is nothing new, as it occurred throughout the twentieth century and probably earlier. Moreover, if Sahlins is right, we can expect more movements to celebrate difference in a world that is increasingly interlinked by global capital and mass media. This appears to be the position argued by Arjun Appadurai (1996). Modernity, though global in its scope, is "indigenized" by the cultural politics of difference. Once again we are back to History two's resistance to the unraveling logic of global capitalism. Might not the homogenizing state discourse of Islamic modernism, particularly when wedded to capitalist development, generate an Indian and Hindu counterdiscourse in Malaysia? Or, perhaps, this is phrasing the question in agentless culturalist terms—an anthropological ascension to Huntington's infamous "clash of civilizations" hypothesis.

Reformist ideologies, which formed a large portion of the anticolonial discourses of local elites, carried within them yet another dialectic: the "traditions" of nonelites. Just as Hindu Renaissance thinkers contrasted Indian "spirituality" with the "West" and its forms of knowledge, they also asserted their difference from a stigmatized cultural identity—one that emerged from the illiterate and "backward" cultural practices of the masses. This was certainly true in Bengali nationalism, according to Partha Chatterjee, and was also the case in Fiji, according to John D. Kelly. We also saw that Malaysian Tamils are greatly separated by such cultural distancing.

I have attempted to demonstrate how cultural practices and ideologies are attached to historically situated subjectivities. Material power has been shown to produce, as Marx suggests, a "guilty conscience" revealed in the asserted universal value within cultural discourses. In pointing out that cultural practices can carry symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1977), I have argued

that there is a congruence among class position, residency, occupation, and the ability to achieve such cultural distinctions. Thus cultural reproduction is tied to status reproduction, which in turn is premised by class position. Therefore culture cannot be located outside the material condition of its production. In sounding the axiomatic Marxist bell of alarm, I am not arguing that culture is determined or fixed by any one factor. Indeed, one of the points raised many times is that of ambiguity and uncanny recognition. It is the ambiguity over notions of purity and sacrality, and thus of cultural legitimacy, that leads some to make great efforts to distinguish themselves spiritually and/or socially. Moreover, we have seen that nonelites resist, challenge, and sometimes appropriate more orthodox interpretations that would marginalize them culturally, though at the psychic cost born of appropriated symbolic orders. We need only recall the inflections of hierarchy and orthodoxy enacted in rituals such as Thaipusam or in the ambivalent use of these distinctions in the spiritual work performed by Valli on behalf of her clients in order to underscore that moments of resistance are simultaneously moments of subjection. As Bhabha suggests, there is subversion in mimicry, but the "partial presence" of the Other within the alienated assertions of spiritual inversion remains an ambivalent source of inner critique.

This case study from Malaysia cautions us not to essentialize culturalist or primordialist notions of community—be they Malay Islamic or Tamil Hindu. Exploring sentiments of diaspora and ethnic consciousness should not be investigated solely from a vantage point that would privilege the "hybridized" cultural imagination of postcolonial elites, as their reactions to modernity, nationalism, and/or racial discourses are also directed toward nonelites within the same so-called ethnic group. While I am generally sympathetic to Appadurai's call for ethnographic studies of "diasporic public spheres" (1996), I wish to call attention to the utopian dimension of his thinking, which, as in the case of Sahlins, seems to valorize expressions of cultural difference.

Appadurai's call for a transnational anthropology emphasizes the "newness" of the age we live in—suggesting that dramatic changes in information technology have, in effect, released the ethnic "genie" from the bottle of locality (1996:41). He emphasizes the expanded role of long-distance "imagination" in contemporary social life. The radical "rupture" with the past, in his view, comes from "media and migration." Appadurai

suggests that "self-making" and "self-imagining"—that is, identity—in the world today are mediated by electronic media. He hints too at the alienating effects of this mirror of identity as "disciplining" the imagined worlds of ethnic subjects. In that sense, we can recall the ethnic stereotyping within the Malaysian media and the disciplining effects in had on assertions of difference. Elite Indians, for example, were ambivalent about being labeled "Indian," given the common indexes of Indianness within the national media (e.g., Thaipusam or a backward Malay past). Furthermore, migration, coupled with electronic media, has greatly accelerated the "Culture of cultures" scenario, as together:

> These create *diasporic public spheres, phenomena that confound theories that depend on the continued salience of the nation-state* as the key arbiter of important social changes. (4, emphasis added)

The "diasporic public spheres" created by media and migration are creating a "space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern" (Appadurai 1996:4). Again, we might think of elite Indian responses to the stigma attached to their ethnicity within the media. Elite Hindus, we saw, countered the stereotypes through a diasporic imaginary that reconnected with transnational Hindu reform movements and posited a greater India premised on neo-Hindu ideas of religious ecumenism. Echoing Sahlins's argument that the "World System" (or "the modern") has accelerated the production of "difference" (that cultural identity is defined against what it is not, which is a dialectical and structural position), Appadurai argues that migration and media have brought more "cultures" into intimate contact, producing expressions of identity.

Understanding the political economy of "diasporic public spheres" seems all the more important given that, in Appadurai's estimation, they are constitutive of a new "postnational political order."

> *Diasporic public spheres, diverse among themselves, are the crucible of a postnational political order.* The engines of their discourse are mass media (both interactive and expressive) and the movement of refugees, activists, students, and laborers. (1996:22–23, emphasis added)

While this proclamation is made only at an abstract theoretical level, a number of possible consequences for ethnographic theory and method should not go unnoticed. On the one hand, Appadurai has directed our

attention to the volatility of ethnicity, and perhaps, its fetishistic attachments, within and between contemporary nation-states. He broadens our gaze beyond the nation-state, thus alerting us to the impact of transnational culture flows on the local. Methodologically, units of culture flow (*ethnoscapes* is Appadurai's descriptive word) can be studied by social analysts as expressions of "culturalism" or assertions of cultural identity within the flux of globalization. On the other hand, myopic attention to electronic public spheres taken out of the context (and ambivalent phenomenology) of their production could lead to a privileging of elite articulations of identity and an undertheorizing of the ambivalences, displacements, and elisions within that identity—that is, that which it is defined against or negates. While this is certainly not Appadurai's intent, the momentary detachment from political economy—and lack of attentiveness to a phenomenology of subject formation within sociocultural hierarchies—in his formulation of culturalism seems unsatisfying. That is, while I do not think Appadurai himself falls victim to essentializing or romanticizing,[15] his schematic could lend itself to such interpretations and influence the methodology of the ethnographic research of others on questions of diasporic consciousness. Moreover, when one considers the enduring salience of the nation-state as arbiter and censor of electronic public spheres (not to mention immigration law), one wonders what voices in our story are silenced and disciplined by the effects of culturalism. In particular, these often incorporate a romanticized rendering of tradition and a dichotomization of ethnic, gender, and religious identities.

IMAGINING MALAYSIA

In chapter 5 we encountered, among middle-class Tamils, a sentiment echoed by members of various Hindu movements: an ecumenical, Vedantic-oriented, religious consciousness was needed in order to "uplift" the Tamil community. Also, there was a desire revealed among some of these Indians that the Malay leadership of the nation would gradually be influenced by this same ecumenical spirit. These Hindus, we recall, expressed a view that, in spite of current religious policies, they would help lead Malaysia toward a pluralistic utopia of religious tolerance and understanding. That is, a Hindu modernist alternative to its Islamic counterpart was projected as more ecumenical, albeit in terms of a spiritual hierarchy

that recognized the transcendental value of ancient Vedic knowledge as being paramount—indeed the fountainhead of spiritual and cultural life in Asia. They saw their role as fostering a gradual spiritual revolution that would be waged by example, patience, endurance, and commitment. To this end, the individual devotees had to cultivate their own personal spiritual advancement through meditation and study and, perhaps most significant, by following a guru or holy personage who animated their struggle with hope and signs of the miraculous.

Two of the movements examined, the Ramakrishna Mission and the Temple of Fine Arts/Shiva Family, are committed to an expansion of activities between branch centers within Malaysia and between Malaysia and India. While the RKM has its headquarters in India, the TFA is a Malaysian institution that has since branched to India. Both movements are emphatically ecumenical in spirit, inspired by the universalistic Hindu apologetics of Vivekananda, Sivananda, and others. Both were engaged in social work that served the poor, regardless of ethnic or religious affiliation, and there was an implicit sentiment that through such activities the hearts and minds of others would be won over.

While many of their activities and beliefs seem nonpolitical, there is, we discovered, a negation of Malay-Islamic nationalism within the religious rhetoric of these movements. The reinscription of Sanskritic or Indic elements within the Malaysian national identity was seen through artistic productions and purported common spiritual "Asian" denominators between the three "races" in Malaysia. Political posturing, however, is not necessarily a conscious motive, as faith and the search for enlightenment are foremost concerns behind social service, worship, and the fine arts, my designation of their practices as "strategic ecumenism" notwithstanding.

PILGRIMAGE, POWER, AND WORKING-CLASS RESISTANCE

> Seeing the blood streaming from the benevolent eye on the sacred face of the Lord of holy Kaalaati [Siva], an Ornament on earth, and sore distressed in heart, they say, our Kannappan, a hunter by caste, gouged out with deadly dart his flower-like right eye and applied it [on the wounded eye].
> —Nami-andaar-nambi, *Periya Puranam*

The passage quoted here sings the praises of the *nayanmar* (Saivite saint) named Kannapar. This early saint of Tamil Nadu exemplifies the spirit of

bhakti through his sacrifice in front of the bleeding stone lingam of Siva. In the legend, Kannapar came from a low-caste background, perhaps being an "aborigine" from one of the hill tribes (Vanmikanathan 1985:518). He first despoils the lingam by offering flowers in an unorthodox manner and, more important, by his offering of meat to the deity. A Brahmin priest is horrified to see what has occurred and aims to catch and punish Kannapar. Lord Siva, however, wishes to teach the priest a lesson by demonstrating the spiritual greatness of Kannapar. Therefore, while the priest hides awaiting Kannapar, the lingam's eyes begin to bleed. Kannapar's instant gesture of sacrifice and devotion shows that he is a true devotee or *bhakta* rather than the Brahmin priest.

This kind of story is not atypical within the Saiva Siddhanta canon. In this uniquely Tamil tradition, caste categories of purity and pollution are often inverted as low-caste and women saints, through their supreme *bhakti*, achieve blessings (*arul*) and enlightenment (*mukti*) from the Lord. As discussed earlier, most non-Brahmin Tamils identify with this tradition. Within this tradition is a critical "Dravidian" voice countering what at various times must have been perceived as brahminical "Aryan" dominance in South India. As mentioned in chapter 3, Murugan and many of the goddesses of Tamil religion are indigenous deities who were later amalgamated into a synthetic Hindu mythology. It was the autochthonous nature of these deities that led to their political significance in the Tamil non-Brahmin movement in this century. Thus, when considering the dramatic popularity of Tamil Saivism in Malaysia, we must not lose sight of the Dravidian consciousness that separates the majority of Tamils from the Vedantic, and so-called Aryan orthodoxy.[16] This also helps us understand why neo-Hindu movements, in spite of their commitment to ecumenism and service, appeal less to the working-class Tamils of Malaysia, with their non-Brahmin backgrounds.

The resurgence of ritual, pilgrimage, and *bhakti* among working-class Tamils in Malaysia is highly overdetermined. In chapters 3 and 4, I discussed a number of economic, political, sociological, and theological factors that are contributing to this trend in Malaysian Hinduism.

As the earlier reference to Saiva Siddhanta indicates, I am suggesting that the growth of Tamil ritualism, such as that witnessed during Thaipusam, is influenced by an ancient idiom of religious commentary. But I am not suggesting an essentialist view of Tamil culture, as we have seen

that the history of the Tamil community in Malaysia has produced the context out of which Malaysian Hinduism has grown. There are other factors that must also be considered.

Great importance is placed on pilgrimage within the Saiva Siddhanta tradition. The allure of achieving a personal and intimate relationship with the deity makes *bhakti* the spiritual path of choice among devotees. Within Tamil Nadu, there are a number of sacred sites associated with the lives of great *bhaktas*. At these holy sites it is also believed that Siva, Murugan, or a representation of the goddess-consort has revealed itself to the saint. Thus pilgrim devotees reenact, through their devotional practices, the devotion that the saint achieved. It is also believed that the sacred sites, usually marked by a shrine or temple, radiate the energy (*sakti*) of the deity's immanence. Moreover, as more devotees visit the shrine and offer their prayers, the sacred vibrations within the holy site intensify. Thus over time a pilgrimage spot is believed to become increasingly powerful, and it naturally follows that visiting these places is very auspicious. As this cycle continues over a period of time, the popularity of the shrine and the legends of miracles surrounding it also grow. This process is occurring at the Batu Caves temple in Malaysia—one of the first Hindu shrines outside of South Asia to earn such a reputation. To some extent, as I suggested earlier, the popularity of Thaipusam, as well as its increasing central concentration within the Batu Caves, could be attributed to this process.

The process by which the Batu Caves are becoming an important sacred site in Tamil Hinduism is not confined to that place exclusively. There are a number of sacred sites emerging in Malaysia among the Tamil working class.[17] To some extent, working-class Tamils are motivated to create a sacred topography within Malaysia due to their inability to travel to sacred sites in India, owing to financial considerations. In large measure, the pilgrimage tours to India that I discussed earlier demonstrate how transnational cultural imaginings are greatly influenced by class position.

Marking a sacred topography within Malaysia, especially when certain sacred sites are believed to harbor the immanent powers of the Lord, suggests that working-class Tamils are constructing a Malaysian Hindu identity that, while modeled on the *bhakti* pilgrimage tradition, is not directly related to the consumption of transnational culture flows, nor does it involve a diasporic longing for return to the motherland. On the other hand, the desire to locate sources of spiritual power, thus transcending the

sociosymbolic sources of power in Malaysia, is indicative of another longing for return, not to India but to an impossibly contradictory immanent *and* simultaneously transcendent spirit; this longing represents, I have argued, another kind of displacement that one might call diasporic. The local *presence* of the Lord in various temples and shrines implies a rejection of the ostensible transnational Indian orientation of many elite Hindus in Malaysia. On the other hand, the music and dance associated with modern *bhakti* and trance, I have noted, are often patterned after those seen and heard in popular Tamil films. There are also iconographic reminders within pilgrimage sites that indicate an isomorphic relation between the Malaysian shrine and its mythological Indian precursors. The emotional and social significance of these sites, however, is not due to their relationship with India but rather to the increasing relevance of *bhakti* as an expression of power, moral worth, and desire for equality among working-class Tamils (Collins 1997).

From the vantage point of *bhakti*, the true devotee is someone who shows singular devotion to the deity, regardless of ritual convention or caste position. To some extent, the rituals of penance or vow taking among Tamils present an "antistructure" to the normal rules of hierarchy and purity (Turner 1969) within Hinduism. The devotees experience the Lord's power and grace (*arul*) through their ability to complete their vows without experiencing pain. While unorthodox, their trances and feats of self-mortification make the devotees temporarily like Kannapa, who gouged his eyes out and offered them to the Lord. The *bhakti* tradition, then, is a cultural idiom and resource that presents a counterdiscourse to categories of hierarchy and purity (Parish 1996). That is not to say that rules of purity are abandoned in such practices. To the contrary, the Thaipusam celebration, and others like it, observe a number of orthodox conventions (e.g., vegetarianism, abstinence, carefully prepared ritual items). I am suggesting that orthodox beliefs are internalized within the minds of those who openly resist the discourses of their oppression (Parish 1996). We saw this very clearly in the case study of Valli in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, an assertion of equality and moral worth is made that attempts to negate caste-based hierarchies.

I have chosen to discuss religious phenomena primarily in terms of class. I have adopted a framework for understanding Malaysian multicultural politics in terms of material power. That is, the status distinctions

created by colonial and postcolonial racial discourses were premised on different positions within the economic infrastructure of the colony and nation. I have argued that working-class Tamil religious expressions are born out of particular historical circumstances and a consciousness that these have engendered. I have argued that fissures within the Indian community were widened throughout the century as a result of unfair labor practices (e.g., the *kangany* system), the impact of the Second World War (e.g., the bitter legacy of the Indian National Army), and the creation of a race-coalition form of governance (e.g., the Alliance and Barisan National), which deterred the growth of effective unions and interethnic working-class political cooperation. A Tamil working class already powerless and divided has also found its situation worsened by recent Malay Islamic discourses and economic policies.

While far from discounting the cultural alienation experienced by middle-class Indians, who have seen their status gradually erode in postcolonial Malaysia, there is something entirely different about the desperate circumstances that face working-class Tamils. Estate closures and the growth of urban slums have only worsened the growing social crisis within the Tamil community.[18] I discovered a deep sense of desperation, economic at heart, which motivates individuals to seek divine intervention and/or validation of self-worth through divine manifestation. Both anomie and economic despair have led Tamils to seek an abstract category of identification in which they locate "powers" and "miracles." That they produce, through collective rituals, these immanent nodes of power within shrines, which, in turn, possess those who produce them, suggests a partial yet fetishized recognition and simultaneous silencing of this alienated essence. Religious revival among the working class must be understood in this light, not solely in static cultural terms. The idiom of expression is culturally rich, but the *causes for* and *phenomenology of* increased ritualism remain unexplained in culturalist accounts. The resurgence of religious ritualism, in other words, is not just an expression of cultural "difference." It also involves a compulsion for miraculous results. By emphasizing only the normative cultural aspect, we run the danger of ignoring a greater urgency behind *bhakti* ritualism (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988).

Having explored the question historically and noting the large cleavage between the transnational neo-Hindu organizations patronized by elite

Indians (which themselves were born out of Indian cultural nationalism as it was being articulated by colonial elites) and the Saiva Siddhanta tradition of *bhakti*, it is not surprising that the majority of Tamils continue to be wary of the assumed cultural leadership of higher-status Hindu groups and organizations.

Thaipusam is marketed for its tourist value. It also serves to validate the state's pluralistic credentials (through tacit sponsorship and MIC backing), and it signifies an Indian cultural identity within the parameters of a nationalist narrative that emphasizes Malay Islamic modernism. The spectacle of Thaipusam, as caricatured in the national media, helps identify the "irrational," "feminine" Other—not to destroy it, but to nurture, celebrate, and protect it under the benevolent Islamic patriarchal state. As Appadurai cogently observes:

> [N]ational and international mediascapes are exploited by nation-states to pacify separatists or even the *potential fissiparousness of all ideas of difference.* Typically, contemporary nation-states do this by exercising taxonomic control over difference, by creating various kinds of international spectacle to domesticate difference, and by seducing groups with the fantasy of self-display on some sort of global or cosmopolitan stage, (1996:39)

The assertion of *bhakti* serves the state well in legitimizing both its multicultural credentials and the teleology of Islamic modernity, whereas the alternative modernity, neo-Hindu ecumenism, offers a more subtle challenge to nationalist ideologies that is less easily represented via "taxonomic control."[19]

Hindu reform movements in Malaysia will continue to grow, particularly if they offer emotional and intellectual satisfaction for alienated Indian elites, who themselves feel marginalized by pro-*bumiputra* policies and ideologies and yet distance themselves from the stigmas associated with the Indian community. At the same time, there are indications that the future Tamil communities in Malaysia will continue to reproduce the status distinctions that divide them from within. The "rational" and ecumenical appeal of neo-Hindu movements is having little impact on the working class (either economically or culturally). Thaipusam is more popular than ever, as is Adi Puram and other festivals associated with the goddess.

Tamils who carry *kavadi* or engage in other rituals considered demeaning to higher-status Hindus are not unaware of the criticisms leveled

against them. Nor are they oblivious to the stereotypes that are attached to them by non-Indians. I have suggested that while the dramatic increase in collective ritualism is related to social, political, and economic marginalization in Malaysia, there is also an implicit rejection by the Tamil working class of the orthodox Hindu hierarchy and, by extension, the high-status Indians who wish to provide moral and spiritual leadership while "reforming" those still in spiritual "kindergarten." In that sense, the ritual practices of working-class Tamils draw on a *bhakti* tradition, utilizing idioms of symbolic expression as well as cultivating personal faith in the immanent power of Sakti, as expressed both through the intervention of the goddess and through the grace of Murugan and his mighty Sakti-wielding instrument, the Vel. But to turn full circle back to the issue of class, it should also not be forgotten that those Tamils from the working class who are increasingly turning to the supernatural are doing so, in part, I have argued, out of financial desperation coupled with sociopolitical marginalization. While I hope the macro, and indeed nationalistic, framework proves useful in understanding, at a general level, the phenomenon of Tamil revivalism, the necessity of individual case studies derived from phenomenologically rich interviewing and participant observation cannot be overlooked. The question of whether spiritual transcendence of the symbolic through *bhakti* and political and social protest being enacted through ritual are the primary motivating factors is difficult to discern. My argument has combined, following a synthesis of phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and Marxist theory, both factors, but at the same time, these two principal factors (the spiritual and political) are closely related in Tamil social history and take a culturally specific shape in *bhakti*. But this idiom, in turn, took specific historical shape in, and was exacerbated by, the colonial racial discourses behind the division of labor in Malaya that continue to haunt the contemporary vicissitudes of Malaysian nationalism and identity politics. Moreover, I am not suggesting that working-class Tamils are any less spiritually inclined than the middle classes. Rather, I have argued that there is a great deal in common between the *bhakti* practiced by both the working and middle classes. It is this ambiguity of status brought on by a belief in an immanent deity (i.e., a powerful guru or a wish-granting god or goddess), I suggest, that compels traditionally higher-status Tamils to distance themselves from the working class.

To conclude, I wish to pose and answer the following question: What

would bring about Tamil-Indian unity and political cohesiveness in Malaysia? I have only argued that while Tamils as a whole are becoming increasingly marginalized they are not rushing to band together to meet this threat. Rather, class and status-group concerns are still more salient than abstract sentiments of ethnic affiliation, particularly among members of the middle class, for they have much to lose by rallying together with working-class Tamils against the Barisan National coalition. The UMNO-led government has never persecuted Tamils, and as far as middle-class Indians are concerned their interests lie in supporting the status quo, while perhaps finding psychological solace for their subordinate status to Malays through religious expression. If, on the other hand, an economic crisis were to erode confidence in the coalition government, and in the event that ethnic conflict were to erupt in a manner similar to what has occurred in Sri Lanka, then the Tamils would surely rally together against the terror of state violence and/or ethnic attacks, and in so doing they would forget the historical fissures and resentments between higher- and lower-status groups (Daniel 1996).

Having said this, let me say that I hope that achieving a Tamil unity is never a necessity under these terms. Do not misunderstand me. Indians would be better off if they were more united politically and socially. Through economic cooperation, opportunities could be created that would erode the destructive status divisions within the community. What I am underscoring, however, is that the story of the Tamil community in Malaysia is one of class and status inequality. I do not want to reify ethnic or cultural categories by theorizing a "Tamil unity." Ethnic categories, I have argued, have been and continue to be manipulated by colonial and post-colonial elites in order to further their economic interests at the expense of the working class of all ethnic groups. Moreover, one of the principal claims of this study has been that these categories belie more permeable and contingent boundaries of Self and Other. It is when the category assumes a fetishistic form that the compulsive fixation on ethnic purity drives a violent fantasy of categorical difference. While Malaysia does not appear to be at the brink of such a pathological moment of genocidal identification, this ethnography of Tamil revivalism, I hope, helps unsettle nationalist and ethnic imaginaries and their potential fetishization.

Notes

CHAPTER 1

1. Indians comprise 7.7 percent of the Malaysian population. Malays comprise 65 percent, whereas those classified as Chinese comprise 26 percent (Malaysia Population and Housing Census 2000). Over 80 percent of so-called Indians are classified as Tamils. Among Tamils, over 80 percent are Hindus (Rajakrishnan and Daniel 1984).

2. This can assume frightening corporeal forms in ethnonationalist and genocidal struggles (see Axel 2001; Malkki 1995; and Siegel 2000).

3. Lacan states that, "I think where I am not, I am where I do not think" (1977:166). He is not, in making this foundational premise, describing an observable entity that can be known through categories of language and thought but, rather, the opposite, that the Real is that which gives rise to, through misrecognition (*méconnaissance*), the desire to master contingency and the anxiety provoked by this Real.

4. Four notable exceptions are Jain 1970; Wiebbe and Mariappan 1978; Mearns 1995; and Collins 1997.

5. "The conclusion we reach is not that production, distribution, exchange and consumption are identical, but that they all form the members of a totality, distinctions within a unity" (Marx qtd. in Marx and Engels 1978:236).

6. "The bourgeois economists who regard capital as an eternal and natural (not historical) form of production then attempt at the same time to legitimize it again by formulating the conditions of its becoming as the conditions of its contemporary realization; i.e. presenting the moments in which the capitalist still appropriates as not capitalist—because he is still becoming—as the very conditions in which he appropriates *as capitalist.* These attempts at apologetics demonstrate a guilty conscience" (Marx 1978:252). Hegel's echo from the master/slave dialectic is manifest in that the source of the eternal is, paradoxically, the contingent source of the master's (or capitalist's) power and identity, the two being simultaneously acts of possession and negation.

7. Being is used in the sense of having a customary or historical understanding of itself.

8. In Heidegger's illuminating reading of Hegel, the certainty of the absolute is premised on a recognition of the infinite process of "absolving." That is, the truth of the absolute is paradoxically certain of itself only in its mediated relativity. Contingency, and its radical negation, which is consciousness and desire, in Hegel's terms, produces the certainty and "traditionally" understood authenticity of the "ontic," in Heidegger's terms. As Heidegger says, "we can say that the essence of the absolute is the in-finite absolving, and therein negativity and positivity are at the same time

absolute or in-finite" (1994:51). The mediated and contingent source of certainty, truth, and authenticity need not be seen as antithetical to life, as Žižek distinguishes Hegel and Heidegger's dialectical turn from the Nietzschean constraining order of Truth imposed by some power (2000:79) but, rather, enjoins the ethnographer to understand the event of meaning he or she interprets insofar as it "arises against the background of—and thereby conceals—the imponderable Mystery of its emergence" (80).

CHAPTER 2

1. A more detailed historical analysis can be found in Stenson 1980; Sandhu 1969; and Arasaratnam 1979.

2. Rajakrishnan (1987) notes that the category Paraiyar includes the Chakkiliyar, Pallar, and Paraiyar *jatis*. The majority come from the latter, thus the category has "gained currency to the extent that all lower castes are designated Paraiyar," except concerning marriage proposals. Marriage proposals lead to negotiations and status distinctions between the *jatis*. For example, a Chakkiliyar may assert higher-caste ranking over a Pallar, and vice versa, during the planning of a wedding. Paraiyars, in turn, refrain from marrying Chakkiliyars. This could, and does, cause elopement marriages among low-caste Malaysian Tamils (see Rajakrishnan 1984:50–51).

3. Rajakrishnan cites the following sources in this order: *Emigration Proceedings of the Government of India*, January 1884, 7–14; D. W. Figart, *The Plantation Rubber Industry in the Middle East* (Washington, DC, 1925), 174; C. A. Vlieland, *British Malaya: A Report on the 1931 Census* (London, 1932), 67; *Straits Settlements Factory Records*, vol. 94, 1824, 15.4.1824; K. S. Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 57; *Report of the Commission Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour in the Straits Settlements and Protected Native States* (Singapore, 1890), 57; *Report of the Commission Appointed to Enquire into the State of Labour in the Straits Settlements and Protected Native States* (Singapore, 1896), 237–38.

4. These Tamils prefer the designation Ceylonese to Sri Lankan, reflecting, in part, their lack of recognition for the Singhalese-led nation-state of today.

5. More disturbing is Arasaratnam's citation of a concerned British official in Nagapatnam, who reported that kidnapping of laborers was common and that sickly peasants were stuffed onto ships just to meet invoice requirements (1979:13). That many who arrived in Malaya were already afflicted with a variety of illnesses might explain why the mortality rate was highest there among all the plantation-based colonial enterprises in other countries.

6. In the earliest phases of immigration, indentured contracts stipulated that the laborer must repay the payment of the voyage through five years of labor on the plantation. Later, when the demand for labor grew as the rubber market expanded, the estate managers agreed to pay full passage without expectation of repayment (Jomo 1993).

7. A smaller percentage was recruited from the English-educated Malayalee elite of Kerala.

8. During the early phase of immigration, the vast majority of laborers were males. Later, females were encouraged to immigrate in order to provide a more stable family-based social structure in estate villages. As the need for a constant supply for labor grew in the first three decades of this century, and repatriation after short-term contracts was deemed uneconomical, a more sedentary population of estate Tamils arose with a greater percentage of women (Oorjitham, in INSAN 1989).

9. Some critics argue that this pattern of underachievement in Tamil schools continues to this day. Tamil educational activists, in turn, argue that this is an elite misperception of Tamil schools authored by the English educated.

10. Those who refused to join Bose's INA , or to support it financially, were subject to arrest. When K. P. K. Menon, a prominent Indian leader, called Bose a "fascist dictator" for his coercive methods, he was arrested by the Japanese and sentenced to six years' imprisonment. While Bose did not order the arrest, he did nothing on behalf of the community leader (Stenson 1980:99).

11. The NEP only calculated wealth based on the *bumiputra-nonbumiputra* distinction. By default, the Indians share a category with the more economically advanced Chinese. This has prompted many Indian leaders to call for a more specific categorization. Left-oriented Indians, however, feel that further classification is only going to help the petit bourgeois Indians, leaving the working class behind. For example, the MIC's recent call for a "national uplift program" for Indians was met with derision by some of the leftist Indians I spoke with.

12. This observation is supported by the 2003 "Human Rights Report" of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Suara Rakyat Malaysia, or the Voice of the Malaysian People (SUARAM).

13. As was mentioned before, each Tamil movie is immediately followed by a show hosted by Tamil Muslims, who preach about overcoming social vices through Islam. The emphasis is usually placed on Islam's social message of equality and respect. These shows are careful not to directly attack Hinduism, but indirect criticism is understood by most Tamil Hindus.

14. I found that, on the whole, stereotypes about "blacks," as perpetuated by the Western media, were hardly questioned in Malaysia.

15. This was the name given to a broader alliance, which came into being after 1969, replacing the old Alliance. A number of smaller political parties were brought under the same umbrella together with old Alliance partners, UMNO, MCA, and MIC.

16. The policy within the public university system was that a ratio of four *bumiputras* to one *nonbumiputra* were admitted.

17. The last noncommunal party of any significance was the Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM, Malaysian People's Party), under the leadership of Dr. Syed Husin Ali, a former professor of sociology at the University of Malaya and a former prisoner under the Internal Security Act (ISA). The party fared poorly in the national elections in 1994. The DAP, while purporting to represent a noncommunal ideology, has always been seen as a working-class Chinese party. This perception has been manipulated by the DAP to secure heavily Chinese populated areas. The DAP's pro-Chinese image has helped it gain more support than the more multiracial PRM.

18. I am using the word *alienation* liberally in this context. Culturally, the newly urbanized Malays, as we saw earlier, found the non-Malay atmosphere of Kuala Lumpur alien. Those Malays engaged in industrial production were experiencing alienation in the classic Marxist sense, as Muzaffar argues (1987), and hence turned to Islamic movements, and the unfair advantage English-educated Chinese and Indians had at the university made Malays (those nonelites accepted under new NEP quota policies) uneasy.

19. The media reported GNP growth rates of 8 percent for eight years in a row.

20. I found this to be true after observing student socializing at the university and

in the racially mixed schools. During recess, students of the same ethnic group would cluster together. When I raised this point with several people, they all agreed that this was the case and, moreover, that it was worsening under the Islamic movements that began to take hold in the late 1970s.

21. During Deepavali in 1996, one man expressed the same sentiment to me. After a Malay family visited during his open house and tentatively sampled some Indian curry, he told me that they asked him many times if he had ever cooked pork in the house. They, he said, "were not happy at all to eat our food in spite of my assurances that we never eat pork in the house."

22. Many Tamil laborers remember that the Kanganies, CIAM, INA, and NUPW all claimed to "protect" the Tamils.

23. There are rumors that the MIC gets "coffee money" from illegal *samsu* (a cheap but potent liquor) dealers on the estates and in squatter areas in exchange for protection against police raids. The implication of the MIC in a *samsu* syndicate was later confirmed when some branch leaders were expelled from the party after their alleged activities were made public. Samy Vellu has not been directly implicated in such activities. Rather, he often speaks out against *samsu* use and promises to punish any MIC members involved in alcohol production. In a populist voice, he even threatened to "smell the breath of all MIC party leaders" to see if they drink. Some Indians, in partial jest, have told me that Samy is the "ringleader," despite the fact that he has never been charged for any of these activities.

24. Muzaffar (1993) suggests that the political weakening of the Indian elites after the NEP and Islamization programs took effect has prompted many to work in the name of the Tamil community through NGOs. These social service organizations, however, "buttress" the position of the middle-class Indians rather than helping change the structure that marginalizes the laboring Tamils.

25. The enterprise was dealt another blow when D. P. Vijendran, a rising star in the MIC and deputy speaker in Parliament, was appointed to head the MAIKA project. Shortly thereafter, he was forced to resign all his posts after it was allegedly discovered that he had secretly videotaped women while having sex with them. It was alleged that one of his victims was so disgraced after the tapes surfaced publicly that she committed suicide. The sex videos have been circulated widely in Malaysia, though Vijendran was never charged with a crime.

26. Samy Vellu is a Kallar.

27. More recently, a third Indian-based party, the People's Progressive Party (PPP), has emerged on the scene. Like the IPF, it, too, has pledged loyalty to Barisan Nasional rather than the opposition.

28. I heard people joke on more than one occasion that MIC meetings were spent mostly ducking under tables, as "chairs and fists" would often fly.

29. I asked some Tamils what they thought of the plan. With a couple of exceptions, most felt that none of the projects mentioned therein would materialize due to self-interested apathy within the party.

30. The two main Tamil newspapers are *Tamil Nesan* and *Nanban*. Both have MIC connections but represent opposing factions within the party.

31. I was told by one ex-volunteer that the center caters to those who wish to launch MIC political careers. He reported that the educational aims were sometimes subsumed by politically ambitious college youths who used their estate visits as a way to build up a political base.

32. *Bohsia* refers to an increase in promiscuity seen among Malay teenagers, who congregate at shopping malls, rock concerts, and other "Westernized" spaces. Functionalist-minded analysts in Malaysia tend to blame "anomie" for this behavior, brought about by the rapid social and economic changes during the 1980s and 1990s. Malays, it is argued, were affected most, as they have been the fasted-changing community since the inception of the NEP.

33. The general election of 1994 had just concluded. Barisan National, through its speeches and advertisements, had promoted itself as multicultural, and Malaysia was seen to exhibit more of a syncretic identity through the media campaign.

CHAPTER 3

1. The classic model for the spiritual "potency" of the center, and the cosmic leader who is recognized for possessing it, has been described famously in different parts of Southeast Asia by Wolters (1999), Anderson (1972), Geertz (1980), and Tambiah (1976). Significantly, the cultural construction of power and potency draws much from an Indological perspective on the region. That is, the Indic sphere of influence on local conceptions of spiritual power being signified by, but not achieved through, material "prowess" posits a deep layer of Hindu/Buddhist ontology resting beneath the practice, for example, of contemporary Islam. For a dissenting voice, see Hefner 1998.

2. Other notable examples include the UMNO building, Pusat Islam, and the graceful Hajji Tabung building.

3. Anwar Ibrahim, the former deputy prime minister, later imprisoned on charges of corruption and sodomy, was accused by certain Islamists as being a Hindu when he fasted from his jail cell in protest of the court's disallowal of his request to seek medical treatment for his bad back abroad.

4. There is a romantic element in this modernist vision, as the elements of Mughal, Turkish, Persian, and Malay architecture are stylistically merged with the long and straight angles of high-rise construction. In contrast, the new administrative capital, Putrajaya, has a decidedly nostalgic appearance, evoking Persian and Mughal glory but without the aesthetics of high modernism. In that sense, the commercial capital represents a fusion of futurity and, perhaps, retroactive authenticity through its motifs, whereas the government capital represents heritage, Islamic authenticity, nostalgia for the golden age of Islamic political order, and stability.

5. Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohammad routinely utilized the national media—the *New Straits Times*, and RTM (Radio Television Malaysia)—to press this point. His warnings, while possibly sincere, also betray a concern that the Muslim masses might perceive his policies as anti-Islamic.

6. In Malaysia, one need not differentiate Malay and Muslim except with regard to Indian Muslims, a small minority within this minority group.

7. It also includes the overshadowing of non-Muslim programming with proselytizing Islamic messages. For example, all Tamil movies are immediately followed by a Tamil-Muslim talk show in which the glories of Islam are expounded. The one Tamil variety, news, and entertainment show, *Nadeswara*, is not allowed to discuss Hindu or Christian themes directly. Hence, many have mentioned that the Hindus, in particular, lack a forum in which to educate, discuss, or explain theological matters.

8. Dr. Mahathir coauthored a book entitle *The Voice of Asia*, in which he criticized the exclusive and chauvinistic views of Christians in the West in contrast to his liberal and ecumenical vision of Islam in Malaysia.

9. Collins (1997) discusses the perceived resurgence of Tamil Hinduism in Malaysia's second-largest city, Penang.

10. I personally remember four cases in 1995 alone in which Hindu temples were destroyed to make way for some construction. In all cases, the temples had elaborate carvings and a permanent structure but were not properly registered. In one extreme case, a temple in Kedah with a seventh-century foundation dating back to the Pallava period was destroyed to make way for a Telekom project. This raised the ire not of the generally compliant MIC but rather of the Malay director of the Department of Archaeology and Antiquities, who voiced his outrage at the destruction of a piece of Malaysian heritage. The Malaysian Hindu Sangam pointed out that the temple was still being used and in recent centuries had been restored.

11. He is also known as Skanda, Subramanian, and Karthigai. His brother Ganesha or Vinayagar, the elephant-headed god, is more famous among the North Indians. However, Murugan, the Lord of the Hill or the "tree god" is an indigenous Tamil deity later amalgamated into Sanskritic Hinduism (Sulman 1980; Hart 1975; Clothey 1983).

12. Clothey (1983) also shows how a Tamil saint named Seykunder, hallowed by Muslims, is associated with Murugan. He found Tamil Muslim pilgrims visiting one of the five sacred shrines for Murugan in Tamil Nadu.

13. Gopinatha Rao describes the (1916) lance or javelin as a Sakti—a Sanskritic term; however, among Tamils, the instrument is always referred to as a Vel. Clothey (1978) demonstrates how the term is related to the time of the early Tamil chieftainships during the third Sangam (first to third century AD). The Vel was an instrument of war and symbol of the warrior. Icongraphically, it has a leaflike shape resembling that of the *venkai* tree. The tree, also associated with Murugan, was a potent symbol in early Tamil literature (see Hart 1975).

14. Devanei was married to Murugan or Subramaniya in a traditional brahminical manner. Valli, symbolizing *bhakti*, was seduced by the god as she was working in the fields. Clothey (1978) and Collins (1992) have observed that the devotional love expressed by Valli is idiomatic of the earliest examples of Tamil *bhakti*. They suggest a fusing of Sanskritic and Tamil cultural ideologies in the symbolism of Murugan's consorts.

15. Thaipusam specifically concerns the asterism Pusam. On the festival day, the Pusam is said to be that of Tantapani (Clothey 1983:64).

16. Saiva Siddhanta places Siva, as well as his sons Murugan (Subramaniam) and Vinayagar (Ganesh) as the supreme deity. But, unlike Advaita Vedanta (nondualism), where Brahman is one and the same as Atman, the exponents of Saiva Siddhanta maintain a conceptual difference between the individual soul and Siva. Thus, the emphasis is on cultivating a devotional relationship with the Lord.

17. Swami Sivananda, the founder of the Divine Life Society, and resident in Malaya in the early twentieth century, describes the festival as attracting around seventy thousand devotees to the Batu Caves ("Thaipusam," undated leaflet issued by the Divine Life Society, Batu Caves ashram).

18. The festival is also celebrated in Singapore with great fanfare. I was told, however, that many Singaporean Tamils prefer to travel to Batu Caves, as this temple is particularly "powerful." Also, Singapore places greater restrictions on the festive behavior. For example, loud music is not allowed during the procession, *kavadi* size is monitored, and extreme forms of penance are disallowed. Malaysian non-Indians (Chinese, Malays, and tourists) are attending the festivities in Malaysia, thus a small portion of

those attending are not Malaysian Tamils. Assuming the *New Straits Times* is correct in its estimations, the totals from Ipoh and Penang represent a doubling of attendance within a single year!

19. The chariot was made in India earlier in the century and resembles the style of a typical South Indian temple chariot. It has carved wooden horses on its platform and an elaborately carved *vimana* (tower) with various mythological deities adorning its sides. It is said to be made of silver. The financing of the chariots in Penang and Kuala Lumpur is discussed by Collins (1992).

20. A recent immigrant from India who was visiting the festival for the first time remarked that it was "Indiavalle polle" (just like India).

21. Collins (1992) found a similar sentiment in Penang, where the festival drew around two hundred thousand in 1985. The upper-caste Hindus felt "embarrassed" by the exhibitions of asceticism. Collins, using psychoanalytic theory, suggests that this unease has to do with repressed anxieties; however, in my view, status distinctions are more central to the upper-class and caste attitude toward Thaipusam, although status concerns can also involve an uncanny or repressive quality generative of its compulsive quality.

22. Chettiars are a traditional caste of merchants and moneylenders who consider themselves to be of high status. A number of Chettiar families were successful as financiers in colonial Malaya.

23. I was told that the drummers were specialists through their *jati*, or occupational guild or caste, supposedly from the Paraiyan community, the traditional drummers in South Indian villages. The word *paraiyan* refers to drums in Tamil (Rajakrishnan 1984).

24. As mentioned, the Vel is Murugan's sacred lance, with which he vanquishes demons (both external and internal). This symbolically demonstrates both the Lord's power and mercy.

25. Whitehead (1921) describes the deity as "cheroot smoking and toddy-drinking." In modern Malaysia, the cigar seems to have replaced the cheroot; however, toddy is still found in lower-class Indian areas. Shrines of Muniandy and Munneswaran, a slightly more Sanskritic name for Muniandy, might have either a bottle of beer or a toddy placed before them in offering.

26. I never saw women carrying *mayil kavadi*, only the milk pots. Obviously, the heavy *kavadi*, and the extreme forms of mortification associated with it, are gender specific.

27. Clothey elucidates this interesting paradox. While Murugan has six sacred pilgrimage centers in Tamil Nadu, only five are specified. The sixth spot is somewhat ambiguous. In Clothey's words: "The popular opinion, generally undisputed by the tradition's scholars, is that the sixth site is every other shrine in Tamil Nadu dedicated to Murukan. The Tamil expression is actually Kunrutoratal, which can be translated 'every hill on which the god dances'" (1983:24–25). Murugan is everywhere in his universal aspect, yet certain spaces gather power over time through the spiritual energy generated by pilgrims. A Malaysian Tamil explained to me that while certain temples (especially Batu Caves) are known to be "powerful," their power derives from the accumulated energies (*shakti*, in his words) of their prayers and penances. Thus, the sacred space generates more devotees, making the space more powerful, as the cycle repeats itself.

28. Sangren (2000) offers a detailed analysis of the alienated "transcendental" power produced in pilgrimage and ritual in the context of the Mazu cult in Taiwan.

29. *Vibhuti* (cow-dung ash) is supposed to have certain magical powers. While the sacred ash represents the transience of life, it also is a sanctified substance, believed to work as a bodily coolant, a talisman for safety and protection from evil spirits. Its distribution marks the culmination of all rituals.

30. *Tunaivar* and *Deivam* are Madras-produced religious epics from the 1970s that were hits in Malaysia, especially among the estate-working Tamils. When the "*kavadi* song" occurred it literally entranced the audiences. That song form, derived from the films, is now commonly heard and danced to at Thaipusam. In a sense, the so-called little tradition of folk practices is informed by another tradition, the film industry.

31. The head of the Divine Life Society, Swami Guhabhaktananda, and the respective heads of the Malaysian Hindu Sangam and Sri Mariamman Devasthanam are very concerned about this trend, which they feel destroys the spiritual atmosphere of the event.

32. Collins (1992) also recounts how two Malay brothers faced charges of apostasy by the *ulamaa* in the federal territory. Thus, they decided to quietly fulfill their vows in Penang.

33. The most frequent stories I heard concerned individuals who normally could not walk up to the steep caves due to ill health "miraculously" having the strength to make the climb with the added burden of a *kavadi*. I also heard about sterile couples conceiving children after carrying sugarcane *kavadi*. This offering, consisting of two long poles of sugarcane, between which a blanket carrying a baby doll with sweets and fruit is tied, is lifted to the sanctum and offered with the specific request for children from the god. In another episode, the platform on which the MIC president was speaking collapsed a few years ago. Some saw it as an omen that Murugan was not happy with the party or its president! "Miraculously," as I was told, nobody was hurt when this occurred. Yet another bit of local lore surrounds an Australian named Carl Belle. This individual has performed *mayil kavadi* for many years in a row at Batu Caves. His "mystical" experiences are cited as further witness to the "truth and power" of Murugan. These experiences are described in detail (along with his conversion to Hinduism) in his book *Towards Truth: An Australian's Journey*. This book is sold in temples and Indian bookshops. In 1995, the *Tamil Nesan* newspaper featured an article on Carl Belle. Samy Vellu met with the Australian pilgrim, and a photo of Mr. Belle and Mrs. Samy Vellu shaking hands was shown (1/17/95).

34. I heard similar reasons from many taking the vows. Sometimes it related to finding a better job or simply passing the college entrance exams. Lee (1989), Collins (1992), and Babb (1978) chronicle similar cases. While I never heard of any vows undertaken for morally suspect ambitions, there are repeated calls by Hindu leaders to make the vows acts of "devotion" (*bhakti*).

35. Morris (2000) has provided a compelling account of this paradoxical empowerment, haunted by the uncanny recognition of an alienating source of the Self, in her fascinating discussion of Thai spirit mediums in Chiang Mai.

36. The *New Straits Times* front-page headline in 1996 read: "Religious Fervour, Carnival-Like Atmosphere at Thaipusam Festival." A large color photograph of thousands of devotees inside the main cave also appeared on the front page above the headline (2/5/96).

37. See *New Straits Times* 1/18/95; and *The Sun* 2/5/96. *Nanban* and *Tamil Nesan* (Tamil dailies) featured stories and testimonials for two days (*Nanban* 1/18/95, 1/19/95; *Tamil Nesan* 2/5/96, 2/6/96).

38. Srinivas's "Sanskritization" hypothesis is an interesting issue in this context, as there are clear tensions manifested between the *agamic* (vegetarianism, Saivism, ritual purity, milk offerings, etc.) and the folk traditions of *kavadi*, possession, self-torture, the propitiation of minor deities such as Muniandy. Some voices in the Indian community (e.g., the Malaysian Hindu Sangam, as well as various Hindu-based ashrams) wish to cast a positive, and more orthodox, Hindu interpretation on the festival (Lee and Rajoo 1987). But in this sense, Sanskritization is directed toward enhancing the image of the festival in the eyes of non-Indians rather than an expression of upward caste mobility in Indian society (Srinivas 1966). Ultimately, ambiguous messages seem to emerge. Those attempting to "reform" or *agamize* the festival may be asserting their higher-status superiority, while others resist these influences in varying degrees. This ambiguity is noted and elaborated on by Collins (1992). As I have suggested, however, in addition to the ideological rationalizations that are a function of status concerns among more or less elite Hindus in Malaysia, another thread of meaning might be located in the ambivalent self-image that Hindu devotees possess in the mirror of the Islamic modernist ideology propagated by the state. Nevertheless, in some measure, the festival, with its massive popularity among members of the working class, suggests resistance to orthodox or "brahminical" Hinduism. Even in India, a similar revival of Murugan worship has been at times associated with the anti-Brahmin "Dravidian movement" led by the populist DMK party (see Clothey 1978). I elaborate on the divisions internal to the Indian community in chapters 5–7.

39. In addition to Batu Caves, the Waterfall temple in Penang and the Siva temple in Maran, Pahang, also attract devotees for pilgrimages. There too heads may be shaved.

40. During his 1996 speech, he requested support for the construction of a new Batu Caves Tamil school to replace the existing crumbling structure. He also announced the formation of an investment fund for Indians (*New Straits Times* 2/5/96). In previous years he promised to continue lobbying to make Thaipusam a national holiday.

CHAPTER 4

1. Munneswaran, also called Muniandy, is part of the Tamil Saivite (Siva worship) religious symbology. In Malaysia, due to the Hindu Sangam's efforts, this minor deity has been "elevated" to the status of being a manifestation of Siva himself (Lee and Rajoo 1987). As such, the Hindu Sangam has argued, animal sacrifice and nonvegetarian offerings, coupled with alcohol and tobacco, are deemed inappropriate, though these offerings are the ones said to be the deity's preference, according to most devotees I have met and observed.

2. Putrajaya, meaning, "victory to the Son," in reference to the *bumiputra*, or Malay, community, warrants a separate analysis, beyond the scope of this essay (see Bunnel 2002). In short, however, its Islamic aesthetic differs slightly from much of what is found in Kuala Lumpur, in that the buildings are nostalgic re-creations of the Mughal glories of South Asia and perhaps Persian architectural wonders. In this sense, they resemble the original colonial buildings in Kuala Lumpur, which also were built to represent an idyllic Muslim society. Ironically, the pasts they evoke are of not of the age of the sultans in Malaya but of Mughal, Indo-Saracenic, or Persian pasts. A Malay intellectual commented to me on the "inauthenticity" of the great Malay city imagined and designed by Mahathir. Many foreign scholars and local intellectuals, particularly non-Malays, share this view.

3. Even the *agung's* (king's) palace, the Istana, is modeled after Mughal-Islamic splendor.

4. The same would hold true for the other major cities in peninsular Malaysia, Penang and Johore Bahru.

5. Chakrabarty does not employ Lacanian or psychoanalytic language but does rely explicitly on Heidegger, who, in turn, has influenced Lacan heavily.

6. Mahathir held the post of prime minister from 1981 to 2003.

7. Mahathir has downplayed his paternal ancestry, never publicly acknowledging his significant Indian ancestry. Among many rumors, I have been told by various Indians that he speaks Tamil fluently; applied to the University of Malaya, Singapore, checking the "Indian" ethnic category box before entering; had his birth certificate altered to remove the surname Iskankar (associated with Indians Muslims); and was "converted" to the Malay "race" after being called "one of us" by Indians at an international nonaligned movement conference in the mid-1960s. The importance that some Indians attach to his Indian ancestry, and its alleged "cover-up," suggests that these same Indians are incensed by the inauthenticity of his Malay nationalist assertions.

8. *The Malay Dilemma* was actually banned during the reign of Tunku Abdul Rahman and his successor, Tun Razak, out of fear that it would incite communal unrest between Chinese and Malays.

9. This displacement parallels an actual replacement of professional Indians in the civil service over time through a quota in hiring and increasing public/private joint ventures that were under the jurisdiction of the *probumiputra* legislation. The middle-class Indians, a favored professional class employed by the British in order to run the colonial administration, now find themselves with a less certain future in the public sector and, equally important, a significant loss of cultural status within the pro-Malay rhetoric of the state.

10. Mahathir often claims that the West is deliberately misrepresenting Muslim societies due to its "pro-Israeli" Jewish lobby.

11. The PAS-ruled state of Kelantan has called for a ban on *Ramayana* performances unless the stories are rewritten to tell of the heroic exploits of Islamic warriors. The Islamic modernists sponsored by the central government, on the other hand, have been less restrictive of *adat* (Malay culture) that is not Islamic, though they have become increasingly conservative in partial response to the growing popularity of the PAS.

12. Kessler notes the tactical and evocative use of Sanskrit within national songs and slogans. Interestingly, even the national car—the vaunted project spearheaded by the government—invokes antiquity through the Sanskritic naming of car models (e.g, the Iswara, Wira, Perdana, and Satria). In this sense of archaicness, the Indic is invoked within the modern, as the Hindu is simultaneously negated and relegated to the past.

13. Squatters are defined as those not owning a title to the land they occupy. When evicted, they usually receive 1,000 Malaysian ringgit (about US$400), though in many instances they are given no compensation. Much depends on the individual negotiations between lawyers for the developers and squatters.

14. Collins (1992) argues that the "festival of the goddess" (Adi Puram) is actually declining in favor of the more universal and egalitarian *bhakti* toward Murugan. I disagree with her on this point. A revival of goddess worship, while not as pronounced as the cult of Murugan, is nevertheless occurring in urban areas. I do agree with her, however, that estate festivals are declining, as Tamils are fast migrating to urban areas.

15. While I was told by many that this festival, like other Hindu festivals, was reviv-

ing in Malaysia, I cannot verify this quantitatively; however, that there was an ethos of revival in the air was a widely shared sentiment and is therefore interesting in itself.

16. Minakshi is another name for Sakti in Tamil Nadu. The Minakshi (fish-eyed one) myth and principal shrine is located in Madurai. Both Fuller (1992) and Shulman (1980) detail her cult's history.

17. Hart (1975) discusses how the origins of devotional religion in Tamil culture were associated with the rites of divine kingship.

18. Presently, according to an MIC survey, there exist over one thousand of these temples in the country (Raymond Lee, personal communication).

19. The longhouses are provided by the government to some families after they have had their squatter homes destroyed. Usually those families that have resided for a long while (twenty years or more) in the same house, and have received water and electricity bills for some time, are eligible for the longhouses. The latter generally are very cramped for extended families.

20. Pandarams are not Brahmins, and hence do not generally know Sanskrit, nor do they wear the sacred thread that Pusaris do. The festivals where possession is common are usually officiated by Pandarams.

21. All Hindu temples have *naga* shrines outside the main shrine. Sometimes these are just stones with the image of intertwined snakes. But, often a tree is said to have a live snake, which is actually residing in the tree in order to protect the temple from evil. In the temple mentioned earlier, I was told, there was such a spirit snake residing in the tree where the *naga* shrine existed.

22. The continuity between ancient Tamil culture and society and modern practice is discussed by Hart (1975). He explains that in early Tamil literature and poetry the primordial sacred power, *ananku*, is most potent in young women who have reached sexual maturity. They possess great amounts of *ananku*, which they must learn to control. This is best done through chastity, the wearing of ornaments, and the tying up of the hair. In particular, the breasts and hair of women are seen as potent carriers of *ananku*. During trance states the embodiment of Sakti (perhaps analogous to *ananku*) requires untied hair and the shedding of ornaments. It seems clear that in modern festival behavior in Kuala Lumpur there exist models surviving in traces from ancient Tamil society and culture.

23. A long and resonant drum played with sticks.

24. A similar interpretation of trance and the application of *vibhuti* as a representation and construction of hierarchy can be seen in South India (Dirks 1994).

25. I saw a surprising number of teenage girls desiring the Vel to be inserted into their tongues. The youngest ones were turned away.

26. My friend and adviser, Dr. Carlos from Bangalore University, went so far as to say that in the Indian context "Tamil films do not represent reality; they are reality for the Tamils."

27. Obeyesekere (1981) distinguishes among public, private, and personal symbols. Public symbols, though shared, may or may not be meaningful to individuals. Private symbols, on the other hand, are idiosyncratic—that is, relating to individual psychodynamics. Personal symbols incorporate both public and private domains. They have shared significance to a number of people yet speak to individual psychic motivations and needs.

28. The second time I witnessed this festival, in 1995, it was more subdued and less wild, especially among the female devotees. The literature being distributed in

temples from various Hindu organizations had, perhaps, made some impact. The Malaysian Hindu Sangam had conducted meetings at one of the two temples discussed.

29. This god has been Sanskritized in recent years in Malaysia, now being seen as aspects of Siva (Lee and Rajoo 1987). Muniandy is the Tamil name, whereas Munneswaran is from Sanskrit.

30. Ryerson (1988) discusses how the DMK used the Tamil film industry to champion low-caste heroes and present Brahmins as corrupt and bumbling fools. The virile Tamil hero-gods, such as Madurai Viran, were popular among the lower classes. The same seems to be true in Malaysia.

31. The same person works as an assistant in another village shrine and as a courier. I saw him in the same possession trance at Thaipusam.

32. Her aunt was one in a group of sisters, all of whom were believed to have some degree of Amman's power. It runs in their family. Their mother was said to drink chicken blood during trances. She could "accurately" divine peoples' futures. The grandfather, who was from India, was also believed to have powers of divination.

33. As Obeyesekere (1981) pointed out in his study of mediums of low social status in Sri Lanka, the respect given to such individuals, who are perceived to harness dangerous yet sacred powers (Hart has also pointed out that in Tamil culture the dangerous powers are the most sacred yet cannot be handled by normal people [1975]), might enhance self-identity and social status.

34. I have not verified that this is indeed true, but this Indian perception may exacerbate insecurities within the Tamil enclave.

35. I cannot enter here into the complex debate regarding the relationship between Tamil Saivism, or Saiva Siddhanta, and brahminical Hinduism. Suffice it to say that this is a highly charged political and religious debate. While the voluminous scholarship is often polemic, I have been most influenced by George Hart's scholarship, which, in short, avoids polemics, and carefully analyzes interacting, yet divergent, systems of meaning within Tamil Hinduism. For an excellent introduction these debates, see Daud Ali's edited volume *Invoking the Past* (2000), particularly the essays by Romilla Thapar, Thomas Trautmann, and Sanjay Subramaniyam.

36. I do not have the room to elaborate on the debates surrounding Aryan and Dravidian categories. Suffice it to say that these categories, like the ethnic ones in Malaysia, attempt to silence more complex histories.

37. The Parti Socialist Malaysia (PSM) is explicitly socialist but has not been allowed to register as a legal political party. It is numerically small, its members being mainly activists working through NGOs.

38. We might call this metonymic desire in Lacan's sense (1977).

39. The number of Indians killed in policy custody and shootouts is grossly disproportionate to their percentage of the population (Nagarajan 2004; Nadarajah 2004; Suaram Human Rights Report 2004).

40. Indeed, a vicious attack on Indians by Malays within a nearby squatter area in March 2001 left five Indians dead and scores injured. After interviewing several victims, it became clear that none knew his attacker. A detailed analysis of this violence and its aftermath can be found in S. Nagarajan (2004).

41. While I have focused on these two festivals, there are others that are also said to be growing in Malaysia. For example, Panguni Uttiram, Timithi, and Navarathri are all said to be increasingly important for Malaysian Tamils.

42. I have described three other Adi Puram celebrations variegated by class and status elsewhere (1998). In the interest of space, I have omitted them here.

43. This correlates roughly, however, with the population percentage decline for Indians.

44. Hart points out the close association between Kannaki and the manifestation of female power. This indigenous Tamil belief eventually merged with northern Indian philosophical elements to produce in later Tamil Hinduism an emphasis on Amman worship.

45. I have found Hart's (1978) discussion of Tamil *bhakti* very useful: "It is the *bhakti* temple, I would suggest, that treats the worshipper as an individual, grants his or her wishes, and changes his or her state. The *bhakti* temple is analogous to the *agamic* temple in one important way: *the deity must be kept pure.* Like the *agamic* god, there is something about the space around the *bhakti* deity that will not allow the presence of the indigenous sacred: there is a boundary beyond which the taint of death cannot enter. But, while the *agamic* deity is unable to tolerate this taint, the *bhakti* god is able, under certain conditions, actually to dispel it. This, I submit, is the great function of the *bhakti* god for the devotee: *to create a way out of the indigenous system*" (Hart 1979:20, emphasis added). In the Malaysian context, the Thaipusam festival clearly falls into the category of a *bhakti* event. At the same time, the practices of penance and possession are considered impure and dangerous to more orthodox devotees. Yet to the *bhakta*, the "way out" of impurity or a defiled state—perhaps in terms of the stigma attached to Tamils, more broadly, in contemporary Malaysia—afforded through pilgrimage and *bhakti*, empowers as it simultaneously reinscribes the categories of purity and impurity, as the deity must be kept pure, even in its momentary transcendence.

46. The Navarathri, Sivarathri, Panguni Uttiram, and Vinayagar Chauturthi festivals are also growing in popularity in Malaysia.

CHAPTER 5

1. Freud's important discussion in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* of the child's play of *fort* and *da* as the first "cultural achievement" can be interpreted , as Lacan often suggests, as the formative developmental moment that leads to the subject's submission to the Law or subjection to the symbolic order. Given that the child, at the moment of separation, recognizes its own contingency and powerlessness, given the mother's absence, a primary trauma fuels, alternatively, the desire for mastery within what Lacan would call the symbolic, and for Freud the introjection of the superego (to be later solidified in the oedipal stage), and a desire for dissolution or transcendence of the symbolic, or what Freud calls Thanatos, the so-called death instinct.

2. Thomas Macaulay was an educationist famous for downgrading the significance of Asiatic culture and languages. The impact of Macauly's ideas, especially in Bengal, were significant. For a detailed analysis, see Jones 1989.

3. The influence of theosophy, and the efforts in particular of Annie Besant, also fueled this revival and reform of Hinduism, to be later labeled the Hindu Renaissance.

4. A detailed reading of the socioeconomic context out of which Hindu reform movements emerged is found in Jones 1989.

5. Other criticisms included the practices of caste, *sati* (widow self-immolation), and child marriage.

6. His rousing call to nationhood was propagated in a "matriotic" novel entitled

Bande Mataram (Hail the Mother). In it, India appeared as a female victim of the "rapacious" British.

7. A third category was the immigration of merchant classes: Chettiar moneylenders, Gounders, and Tamil Muslims. While some of these Indians were involved in government service, or in the estate sector, most ran businesses in the towns and cities.

8. The *gurudeva* (god-man) or spiritual leader of that movement was Swami Sivananda, himself a great devotee of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda.

9. They continued to have a moderate influence through their centers in Singapore and Penang. But, as I surveyed the Tamil bookshops in Malaysia, I found that Ramakrishna Mission literature forms a large percentage of all books relating to Hinduism. These materials are almost all produced in India.

10. Subhas Chandra Bose, known as "Netaji," was a devotee of Vivekananda. In fact, he credited the swami for inspiring the nationalist movement (Mookerjee 1977).

11. Annie Besant (a prominent theosophist and advocate of Indian nationalism), perhaps inadvertently, fanned the flames of anti-Brahminism when she commented that Brahmins in Tamil Nadu were descended from North Indian Aryans, whereas South Indian non-Brahmins were the original Dravidians. She argued further that the Dasus, the short, flat-nosed, dark-skinned people the Aryans conquered, as described in the Vedas, were the early Dravidians. These statements helped drive a growing resentment over caste privilege in Tamil Nadu even higher. Many supporters of Periyar did not support the nationalist struggle, as they feared that rule by the British was perhaps less oppressive than rule by the Brahmins would be (Irschick 1969).

12. Even today, I was told by one person, there are less than two hundred Brahmin families in all of Malaysia.

13. For example, the Ramakrishna Mission is publishing translations of these Tamil texts in English.

14. The irony is that in *Periya Puranam* episodes of self-mortification are quite common. In one famous story, the devotee Kannapan literally pulls his eyes out when he witnesses tears streaming from a stone lingam's face. For this supreme devotion, Lord Siva appears to him in a glorious vision. All the while, an amazed Brahmin priest watches from behind a tree. In this myth, clearly the devotion, albeit unconventional, surpasses the knowledge of the Brahmin priest.

15. This is an enclave for Ceylonese civil servants.

16. One of his disciples, who ran his own dance school, corroborated this story. But, this dancer claimed that Chandrabannu comes from a mixed Indian-Malay ancestry. Chandrabannu does tour Malaysia from time to time, but only Indians and a few Chinese attend his shows. To further Malay ire, his adopted namesake was a great Srivijayan king who ruled the Malayan peninsula during the twelfth century—thus, Chandrabannu the dancer is identifying with Malaysia's Hindu-Buddhist past.

17. Middle-class Hindu believers have a separate room for prayers, which contains an altar with various gods and gurus placed on it. Usually, two brass oil lamps will be placed on the sides of the altar, and a silver tray or camphor lamp is used for the *arati*, the waving of the flame before the gods—which is done three times in a clockwise direction. The altar will normally also have some king of fruit offering, milk, and a cup of water. *Vibhuti* and *kunkumum*, or ash and ochre powder, are also usually kept on the silver tray or in a brass cup. These are placed on the forehead after prayers.

18. The festival celebrates the three aspects of Sakti—the Goddess: Durga, Lakshmi, and Saraswati (spiritual adjudicator, wealth and health, and education and cul-

ture, respectively). The dolls represent different aspects of Sakti. They usually portray women in domestic contexts. Even Durga, or Kali, rarely appears fierce in doll form.

19. The area is called Bangsar—an affluent area with a high percentage of wealthy and middle-class Indians and Chinese. More recently, the growing Malay middle class has been moving into the area.

20. Seremban is a city about one hour's drive from Kuala Lumpur.

21. In the Bujang Valley, a series of temple ruins have been discovered. While many archaeologists have noted Indian inscriptions, some in the Pallava-Grantha script, an early form of Tamil, the idea that these temples were part of a Chola outpost is largely unsubstantiated and hotly debated. Malay archaeologists have been, for example, critical of earlier scholarship that attributed the design and inscriptions to an Indian presence in the peninsula, positing that the temples were built by Hinduized Malays, not Tamil speakers. For contrasting evidence and interpretations, see Coedès 1968; Quaritch-Wales 1976; and Rahman and Yatim 1990.

22. I had conducted fieldwork in Bangalore, South India, two years earlier (1992–93) and had earlier written my master's thesis on Swami Vivekananda, having traveled to Calcutta and Delhi in 1989.

23. Sutras are verses intended to teach morality and philosophy. *Samskaras* are life-cycle rituals.

24. In Tamil these are called (1) *aram*, duty, or service toward society;(2) *porul*, recognition, fame, and mastery of some skill; (3) *inban*, pleasure, mainly sexual; and (4) *veedu*, liberation from rebirth. In Sanskrit, these are called *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, and *moksha*, respectively.

25. This is perhaps the oldest monastic tradition in India, begun by Sri Sankara, the great Vedanta philosopher, one thousand years earlier (Sankara dates are given as AD 788–820). The *Sankaracharya* is as the highest central authority in orthodox Hinduism. There are four in different corners of the subcontinent. They are chosen through a guru-succession tradition. *Darshan*, is the "act of seeing and being seen" by a spiritual presence. For the significance of this, see Eck (1981).

26. Later in my fieldwork, I discovered from many other prominent members of the Hindu community that the Colonel is quite a venerated figure. Also, some described him as a modern-day mystic with paranormal abilities.

27. While also witnessing this impression on TV, I would add that the West, and in particular America, is presented as a violent, lawless, free-for-all society through the selective screening of particularly lowbrow films and World Wrestling Federation programs.

28. A very large congregation in Kuala Selangor, about one hour's drive from Kuala Lumpur, participates with the Mamandaram. This temple, and its *gurrukal*, a Sanskritically trained priest, is famous for its pure *agamic puja* and its efforts to Sanskritize Hinduism on the surrounding estates.

29. Thiruvallavur wrote the most famous Tamil text on morality, the *Thirukurral* (Voice of the Lord). Ramana Maharshi was a twentieth-century Tamil saint.

30. Kandasamy is another name for Murugan, or Subramaniam, the son of Siva.

31. This is another canonical work in Tamil, like the *Periya Puranam*, which together form a corpus of Tamil-Saivite literature.

32. Some took great offense at the TV shows praising Islam that were aired in the Tamil language; others, however, simply turned the volume down until the Tamil evening news aired half an hour later. Statistics suggest that Islam wins few converts

from the Tamil community unless a marriage between a Muslim and non-Muslim has occurred, in which case conversion is mandatory according to state law.

33. Rajanikanth is the most popular film hero in Tamil Nadu and among Indians in Malaysia. A former bus driver turned actor, the film hero is famous for his "superstar" fighting skills. I have even heard debates among Tamils as to whether Rambo or Rajanikanth would win a hypothetical battle!

34. This was during 1994–95. The ashram in 2003 housed a swami in residence from India and has completed a large temple, classrooms for children, and several offices.

35. This marked the swami's "triumphant" historic address at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago during the World's Fair.

36. Petaling Jaya, I was told by a Ramakrishna Mission devotee, comes from the Tamil Sanskrit *periya lingam*—or "Great Lingam." *Jaya* is a Sanskrit word meaning "victory" or "conquest." Hence, he claimed the area was settled by Indians originally. But both words are common in the Malay tongue. So while borrowed words from Sanskrit are quite common in Malay, it is impossible to tell whether the naming of a place was done by Indians or Malays.

37. I was told by a swami at the RKM ashram in Singapore that Uma Sambanthan's father, a Brahmin from India, was a "spiritually advanced" devotee, albeit a "layperson." Her father was given the robes of a swami—a rare honor to extend to a lay devotee. He also added that "Toh Puan" was a very great "spiritual force" in Malaysia.

38. While Vivekananda was an outspoken Vedantist, he defended his guru's worship of the Kali statue. In his own short life, he alternated between Vedantic philosophy and devotional worship of Kali.

39. Navarathri, Sivarathri, and Kalpataru Day are celebrated, while "minor" Tamil-oriented festivals, from a Vedantic standpoint, such as Thaipusam, Panguni Uttiram, and Adi Puram, are not recognized. Additionally, Sankara Jayanthi (the founder of the Vedantic monastic system) and Ramakrishna/Vivekananda/Sarada Devi Jayanthi are separately celebrated. Guru Purmina is also celebrated; however, at this time, a visiting guru from Singapore or India must be there for the festival to take place.

40. He even flew into a rage when visiting a supposedly "pure Vedantic" temple in the Himalayas, which he had built specifically for meditation on God without form. But, when visiting the temple, he found that his brother disciples had installed a picture of Ramakrishna and were performing *pujas* before it.

41. Most of these songs were composed by Vivekananda himself or by Rabindranath Tagore, the great Indian writer who was also a devotee of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda.

42. This is a famous Vaishnavite (Vishnu) epic, detailing the teachings and stories of Krishna.

43. This assumption is generally true. I found that most representatives of the professional-class Indian community are not involved in the more "blue-collar" MIC. The MIC has a reputation as a "party of thugs and gangsters," as it was often described to me. The current president of the party, who is also a close friend of the prime minister, has publicly stated that he does not trust intellectuals, and in my estimation the feeling is mutual.

44. My impression, upon revisiting the ashram in 2003, is that the popularity of it has grown, but not dramatically. The resident swami does have a steady stream of visitors each day who come to him for spiritual and personal advice.

45. The tours cover pilgrimage spots and temples generally. Accommodations, food, and so on cater to the tastes of the upper and middle classes. Working-class Tamils who travel to India usually use a less costly company. While researching the Shiva Family, I found that many of the core families make yearly trips to India, joining the Hamsa-Vahini tours or helping facilitate the TFA performances and tours. Thus, this branch, like other branches, has a permanent clientele that does not mind paying slightly higher than market rates. Sometimes, I was told, "Swami" leads the tours personally. Thus, joining such a tour will bring spiritual merit or the "enlightening" experience of spending time in India with "His Holiness," as they call him.

46. A swami with a different organization in Singapore mentioned to me that one would have to be a "saint of the highest order" to remain otherworldly in the midst of such worldly activity. I sensed that this swami doubted whether Shantanand had remained committed to his vow of Sanyass (renunciation).

47. The dancer, Dr. Chandrabannu, who had already raised Malay ire with his conversion to Hinduism and by naming himself after a famous Hindu-Buddhist king from the pre-Islamic times in the peninsula, further alienated himself from Malays when he claimed that the Mahsuri legend is actually derived from an earlier Hindu myth concerning the goddess Durga (see Haron 1980).

48. The PAS government has stated publicly that *wayang kulit* is Hindu in origin and thus should be banned. In 1994, in response to criticism from the prime minister that PAS was going too far and actually hurting Malay culture, the party issued a statement that it would tolerate *wayang kulit*, if non-Hindu themes and characters were used. It suggested using heroes from Islam rather than the *Ramayana*.

49. My landlord in Kuala Lumpur, also an Indian, characterized the Shiva Family as an elitist "cult." But she admired its devotees memorization of Sanskrit lines.

50. My wife, herself a Malaysian Indian, was among those very impressed. She was amazed at the bliss apparent on the faces of the TFA members, remarking to me that this could be seen in the way they danced.

51. The TFA claims it is not professional, nor does it wish to be. It has nonprofit status.

52. To readers of Heidegger, the affinities between Žižek's reading of Hegel and the return to the "ontological" question of Being in the former are striking, as are the ways in which Lacan's notion of the Real appears to be inspired by Hegel and Heidegger as much as it is by Freud's notion of the death drive and the "oceanic" state (mystical desire).

CHAPTER 6

1. This is mostly true at the bachelor's-degree level. I knew of many who earned their MAs, PhDs, or MDs in Malaysia after earning a bachelor's degree abroad. At the same time, I knew of a few Indians with a bachelor's degree from a Malaysian university who were seeking a foreign MA, PhD, or MD. Those in the former category would often belittle the BA or BS from a Malaysian university, claiming that the undergraduate standards were rapidly sinking.

2. *Shakti* is the most popular of the locally produced Hindu magazines. *Hindu Dharmam* is another popular magazine but of generally lower production quality. *Hinduism Today*, an international Hindu journal published in Hawaii, is also very popular among middle-class Hindus. It is *Shakti*, however, that features well-written articles by local Hindu leaders and academics. It is available in both English and Tamil, with the

English version being slightly more expensive and featuring better graphics and finer paper.

3. Echoing the TFA's production (chapter 5), cultural variation and "universal themes" are highlighted in *Shakti*. When describing the *Ramayana* epic in Malaysia, the article states:

> The oldest Malay Ramayana work is called "Hikayat Seri Rama," which is based on the Tamil Ramayanam. There have been distortions due to later additions to the main story in the Malay version of Ramayana.

It goes on to chronicle the "distortions" accrued in the Malay adaptations over the centuries. Naming the source of the Malay classic drama as Tamil is, perhaps, indicative of the desire for recognition discussed earlier.

4. This magazine has ceased publication since the time of my original fieldwork.

5. There are, of course, well-developed Bahasa Malay (Malay-language) media in Malaysia. Indians, on the whole, avoid the Malay media, feeling that they carry a pro-*bumiputra* bias. Also, elite Indians, as mentioned in chapter 5, tend to look down on the language as "inferior" and/or Tamil and Sanskrit derived. I was told how "simple" and "primitive" a language it was, especially when judged against the "complexity" and "subtlety" of Tamil.

6. *Nanban* is said to favor S. Subramaniam, the deputy president of the MIC and an old rival of the current president, Samy Vellu. *Tamil Nesan*, I was told, is owned by Indrani Vellu, the wife of the current party president. Both papers will usually feature daily articles and photos chronicling the activities of their patron leaders.

7. The Tamil weekly *Nayanam*, for example, features articles ranging from the grotesque (deformities and obesity) to the silly (half human–half alligator, a child with a dog's face, etc.). This popular magazine sells very well in areas with a high concentration of working-class Tamils, such as Brickfields.

8. Neolocal residence is the increasing norm among Kuala Lumpur's Indian population. I came across very few joint families.

9. One Tamil woman, for example, told me she was teased as a schoolgirl by Chinese kids. They would call her "burnt toast." In a more blatant example of racism, I was asked by a Chinese taxi driver if I "liked Chinese girls." When I explained that I married a Tamil. He remarked, "So black, lah, . . . you couldn't get a Chinese girl?" In another context, a professional Chinese colleague asked me after my son was born: "So, black or white?" There were also Chinese female students that I knew of who experienced great difficulty from their families if they had Indian boyfriends. On the other hand, Indian males often expressed great attraction to Chinese females. In general, the working-class Indian families were usually not opposed to intermarriage with Chinese. But, they objected to marriage to Malays over the issue of mandatory conversion to Islam.

10. Malays watch Hindi movies and purchase Hindi audiocassettes. The influence of North Indian music on Malay film and popular music is profound. Malays generally consider North India to be more "civilized" than South India. Those Malays who visit India as tourists will invariably visit the north with its Mughul splendor. Islam in North India and Pakistan has also greatly influenced Malay Islamic identity. The preference for the north over the south is also due to the presence of Tamil "coolie" labor, which has created a perception of cultural backwardness in colonial and postcolonial racial discourses.

11. I knew a female pop singer who, despite winning numerous awards for her

singing, could not land a good recording contract, while lesser performers were climbing ahead of her professionally. She was, however, a Tamil with a somewhat dark complexion. Although her features and overall stage appearance were attractive, her color, I was told by her image consultant, and by another friend of hers, deemed her unmarketable.

12. The strangest account of racism I heard was told to me by a well-respected professional Indian actor and playwright. His apartment had been robbed and vandalized. When the police were investigating the crime scene, one approached him and announced, "We know who did this." With great excitement and anticipation he said, "That's fantastic. Who robbed me?" The Malay policeman answered, "The robber left a very large shit on the carpet [a sign of insult], and we know he must be Indian because it is very black in color." He swore to me that the story was true! I have always suspected that it was a strange piece of short fiction.

13. There may be some truth to the notion that "whiteness" was a status distinction within a colonial racial discourse. Even colonial ethnographers such as Edgar Thurston categorized racial and cultural accomplishments, attempting to correlate skin color into his analysis. Interestingly, it was suggested to me by Tamil scholar George Hart that "blackness" was indeed considered beautiful in the oldest Tamil Sangam literature.

14. This involves knowing how to properly conduct a *puja*, draw a *kolam* (a decorative design protecting the house from evil), cook, wear a saree, and so on.

15. The Sutra dance company is headed by the highly versatile and talented Ramli Ibrahim. Though a Malay, Ramli has aesthetic leanings toward Indian dance, having mastered the art of *bharata natyam* and Odissi in India. His troupe was formed to experiment with different dance traditions, drawing freely from modern Western dance; ballet; and Indian, Malay, and Chinese dance. Its productions explore the cultural and psychological complexities of a postcolonial multicultural society. Western influences are incorporated but also problematized. Dissonance is sometimes seen between various cultural elements, and, unlike the TFA, it is hard to interpret the meanings in the dances through a single narrative (i.e, transcendental Hinduism). Rather, the group, while searching for a Malaysian artistic voice, problematizes singular identities. It is hard to find an unambiguous Malay, Indian, Western, or Chinese voice in its productions. Similarly, being "Asian" (something highly vaunted in state rhetoric) is deconstructed and explored in its work. Those in attendance were either from the local fine arts scene or from the more intellectually curious Indian middle class. Some among the more orthodox Indian middle class, however, complained that Sutra presents Indian dance in an "inauthentic" manner.

16. I knew a few Muslim Tamils who were similarly Westernized; however, Muslims face so many legal pressures to conform to Islamic law that they tend not to identity with the West. This is also due to the paucity of elite Indian Muslim families in Malaysia.

17. The government also fears the homosexual orientation of some clubs, which is never explicit but tacit. I witnessed openly homosexual fraternizing between gays and lesbians in Kuala Lumpur's clubs. But, sexual behavior was unseen, as government agents were known to raid clubs from time to time.

18. The student was in my introductory anthropology class at a private college.

19. In Malaysia, an *archenai* (song of praise) ticket is purchased by the devotee at the temple office. On reaching the sanctum, the devotee will present the ticket to the

attending priest (*pusari*), who will then perform a *puja* on his or her behalf, incorporating the name of the devotee into the *mantirams*. The priest will then distribute special *prasadam* to the devotees, in addition to the *arati* flame, *vibhuti* (ash), and milk. Usually this consists of a halved coconut filled with bananas, flowers, *vibhuti*, and *kunkumum* (ochre powder), all of which can be brought home and utilized in a household *puja*. In practice, most simply place the sacred *prasadam* on their household shrines. As a sanctified object, its presence brings the presence of the God into the house.

20. Weddings are also status generating or deteriorating for a family. A grand wedding performed in an orthodox manner will impress on the guests the wealth and piety of a family. At the same time, a wedding that appears to be haphazard or breaks some convention can be scandalous. Though the price of a wedding can be staggering to all but the rich, cutting corners on expenses brings ridicule and a loss of face.

21. The Sri Maha Mariamman temple in Kuala Lumpur, in particular, has a reputation for being a "social hall." Visiting the temple on numerous occasions, it was clear that not only were there groups of young men sitting together eyeing the young women dressed in their finest sarees, but the temple was a popular meeting place for an innocent date. After observing this many times, I was told that parents could not object if their children went to the temple, whereas permission to meet a "date" outside of the temple might be scandalous if other families were to find out. This pattern occurred mostly among the working-class and middle-class families. In contrast, the high-status Ceylonese temples seemed to lack "temple dates," or even the social hall atmosphere. The Mariamman temple, on the other hand, attracts large crowds of working-class and the petit bourgeois rank and file of the MIC.

22. Once again, Mearns suggests: "Even in temple ritual, however, the intellectualist standpoint is not entirely consistent. Individuals who offer this depersonalized view of the nature of the divine, and of the appropriate form of worship toward it, often make sure that they drink and take home some of the milk in which the image has been bathed. This milk is considered a sort of prasadam or blessed return gift from the deity, and is thought to have absorbed some of its power. The struggle to ensure that some of the milk, and later some of the panjamuratham fruit mixture, are ingested, would appear to belie the purely symbolic interpretation offered by some middle-class Indians that the act is merely a way of demonstrating one's humbleness before the divine" (1995:192–93).

23. This tension between *bhakti* and orthodox ritualism has been a feature of Hinduism for a long time. In the Tamil tradition, since the seventh century, *bhaktas* became saints (*nayanmars*), and their life stories formed a significant portion of the Saiva Siddhanta canon. In many cases, these saints were from low-caste backgrounds and achieved the blessings of Siva by transgressing *agamic* rules. Similarly, in the Bengali tradition, there is a tradition of saintly "divine madness," in which the orthodox emphasis on meditation, ritualism, and brahminical dominance is challenged by ecstatic *bhaktas*, who through extreme devotion, and even possession, achieve "union" with the deity (McDaniel 1989).

24. While attending Vinayagar Chauturthi (the birthday of Vinayagar), it was explained to me by a Hindu scholar and teacher at the Temple of Fine Arts that the Pudu Pilliar (Vinayagar) temple in Kuala Lumpur—a popular shrine noted for being powerful—had "very strong vibrations because so many devotees had used it over the years." After a sunrise worship at the TFA, we arrived at the Pudu temple by 8:00 a.m. Thousands of devotees were gathered outside of the shrine scrambling to get a glimpse and

have *darshan* (viewing and being viewed by the image of the deity). My friend and informant said that there was an "energy field" within the temple because of the "collective power" of the devotees' prayers over a period of time. I heard the same interpretation of a temple's inherent power from a few other Hindus in Malaysia. Rather than emphasizing a personal and immanent deity, the energy field is created by the devotees. The same informant also explained the significance of Vinayagar worship intellectually. He maintained that it is a "humbling exercise" to worship something as ridiculous and impossible a form as a man with the head of an elephant. He also said that the rat, the symbolic "vehicle" for Lord Vinayagar, is yet another ridiculous impossibility. If God can be "realized" in such a form, then "spiritual progress can surely be attained." The point being made was that it is much more difficult and humbling to find God in the silly than in the sublime. He also reiterated the often discussed resemblance between Vinayagar's face and trunk and the syllable *om*, when written in Tamil. The *om* syllable symbolizes Brahman or Siva (the "Absolute") in Vedantic and Saiva Siddhantic philosophy.

25. Household *pujas*, even in high-status families, also demonstrate a concern with keeping various "polluting" spiritual forces at bay, while encouraging a benign protectorate deity (Vinayagar) and bringer of material prosperity (Lakshmi) to "inhabit" the house. Again, from an orthodox, nondualist viewpoint, there is a clear contradiction between beliefs. Many other customs persist among higher-status Tamils that reveal a belief in malevolent supernatural spirits and demons. For example, entering a home at night without first washing the feet is considered dangerous, as demons are known to attach themselves to feet at night. The washing of feet at night is strictly observed when a baby is present in the house, which is believed to be the most vulnerable to evil spirits. Also, the weekly burning of *samrhani* (camphor incense) is believed to rid the house of evil spirits and purify it for Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. I witnessed both these rituals in many observant households.

26. Some wrote about how Tamils believe in spirit possession and many gods and were generally superstitious. Among non-Indian surveys, there were none sympathetic to Hinduism. Particularly strong anti-Hindu sentiments were common among Christians, both Chinese and Indian.

27. I was also able to observe social interactions along Jalan Masjid India and Leboh Ampang, both of which are known as Little Indias in Kuala Lumpur.

28. The traditional South Indian meal is served on a freshly cut banana leaf. The Malaysian Tamils say that food tastes better if eaten off the leaf. Usually rice is spread over the center of the leaf, with vegetables, salads, and sometimes meats surrounding it. A dal-based gravy called *sambhar* is usually poured over the rice. Almost all Tamils use their right hand to eat.

29. *Jalan* means "street" or "avenue" in Malay, and *Tun* is an honorific title given only to national leaders, often after their deaths. This particular street is named after the late MIC president, V. T. Sambanthan, whose widow we met earlier.

30. An AIDS-prevention social worker told me that prostitution (both the sex workers and their patrons) is rife among members of the Tamil poor and working classes.

31. During a brief return trip in 2002, I was told that these old structures were slated for destruction.

32. This temple is run by Sri Lankan Buddhist monks and caters to the small Sinhalese community, though many, if not the majority, of devotees are Chinese.

33. Across from the business spine along Jalan Tun Sambanthan, otherwise known

as Jalan Brickfields, Brickfields grew up along the railway lines. Railway workers, predominantly Tamils during colonial times, were housed in "railway flats." These old dwellings are gradually being torn down to make way for newer development projects. The Indian railway workers have been increasingly replaced by Malays, and by automation. Both in Brickfields and in Sentul, where many of the railway workers formerly lived and worked, there has been a gradual displacement of these workers and their homes.

34. The items usually sold include prayer oil and brass oil lamps (*kuttu vilakkus*); ghee (clarified butter) for clay lamps; *margossa* leaves; turmeric (*manjal*); bangles (both plastic and gold) used in prayers; pictures of deities (*sami padam*); camphor cubes (*carpuram*) for *arati*; and *vibhuti* (cow-dung ash) and *kunkumun* (ochre power), both of which are used in prayer and later applied to the forehead as a "blessing" and talisman.

35. The *tali*, the golden string and gold pendant used in the Hindu marriage ceremony, literally denotes the "tying of the knot." At the exact moment of marriage, the groom ties the string around his bride's neck. Three knots must be tied for the marriage to be complete. The wife is expected to wear the *tali* for the remainder of her life. After a certain time has elapsed, the string may be replaced with a permanent gold chain. A Hindu priest must conduct the transfer of the *tali* pendant to the gold chain. After completing the ritual transfer, the yellow string is usually thrown into the sea.

36. A Malaysian Tamil rap group had released its first tape and CD during 1994. Also, there were instances of mostly Indian rock groups, such as the fairly successful Alley Cats, selling well. DJ Dave, a Punjabi Malaysian, had a successful career recording Indian (mostly Hindi) songs in Malay. In these cases, however, the market was not exclusively Tamil, as many successful groups performed in English or Malay. Among working-class and poor Tamils, the Madras-produced film songs reigned supreme.

37. Perhaps the most famous composer today is A. R. Rahman, a twenty-something boy wonder who has penned the songs for many of the recent hit films. His soundtracks are instant best sellers in Tamil Nadu and among Tamils in Malaysia. Rahman, who also tours and sings his hits in Malaysia, earns tremendous royalties from sales of his music.

38. Malay subtitles are provided for all movies in Malaysia (English, Cantonese, Mandarin, Hindi, and Tamil) except those in Malay or Indonesian. Nevertheless, Malays show little interest in Tamil movies. They will, however, often attend Hindi films, finding the actors more attractive (i.e., lighter skinned). Moreover, one could speculate that the stigma attached to working-class Tamil culture figures large in this preference for North Indian, as opposed to Tamil, cinema.

39. When planning Indian Cultural Day at the college where I taught, this tension was evident, as Tamil students actively debated exactly what constituted Indian culture. In the end, mainly religious leaders were invited to speak. Some said that this was too "dry" for the Indian students. Some students suggested having a disc jockey play popular Tamil songs and having a song and dance contest and fashion show. All of these activities, in turn, were seen to be "Klingish" by other students and staff.

40. For instance, one must remove one's shoes when entering a house, and it is necessary to wash the feet when entering a temple. Also, it is an insult to point your foot at the person in front of you while sitting. Not only are the feet considered physically the dirtiest part of the body, but they also attract a host of malevolent spirits.

41. After MGR's passing in the late 1980s, a large memorial was erected on the Madras waterfront. Tamils make pilgrimages to this shrine, offering flowers and pray-

ing before it. When MGR passed away there were many suicides by grieving devotees.

42. I was told that the MIC was instrumental in bringing two of the biggest stars of Tamil cinema to Malaysia, Rajanikanth and Sivaji Ganesan. Sivaji Ganesan was actually honored by the party president at a special function. Rajanikanth performed a special benefit show for charities in Kuala Lumpur. One critic told me that the MIC was "exploiting the poor Tamils" by having the Rajanikanth show in Malaysia. The tickets for the show were forty-five ringgit, an extremely high price for working-class Tamils. Still, the show drew forty-five thousand fans.

43. KL Sentral was completed more recently and now serves as the main railway and Light-Rail Transit station.

44. I do not mean to imply, however, that it is culturally condoned.

45. *Jinns* (genies) are more popular as possessing spirits among Tamils in Malaysia than in Tamil Nadu, where other spirits of Hindu origin, such as *bhuts* and *pretas*, are better known (Nabokov 2000). This may be due to the Islamic influence, as *jinn* is believed to be an Arabic word. It is tantalizing to speculate that *jinn* possession is related to the alienating presence of Islamic modernism, but I have no data to back such a claim.

46. In Tamil films, Amman or Sakti songs are often utilized when a female or group of females is about to be empowered or possessed by the goddess. The songs build in rhythmic intensity and climax as the deity is manifested in the person or persons.

47. It is normally unthinkable that an educated Punjabi would live with a low-status Tamil.

48. Almost daily, while on my "rounds" in Brickfields, I would stop in and talk with Valli and observe the rituals she performed for her clients. At one point, I thought of writing my thesis around her life history but deliberately chose to broaden my perspective on the Tamil community. Valli seemed almost too eager to be the focus of my study. She even said that I should write her "life story." In all honesty, I believe she tried to subtly manipulate me to that end (and perhaps she also entertained the idea that I would become her disciple), just as I manipulated her through my friendship and sincere interest for information that would be useful for my research. Both of us sensed a tension between our hidden or not so hidden agendas and unconscious, transferential desires and the easy rapport that had been established between us. From that first evening, I sensed (or imagined) a lot of emotional pain and hopelessness in that prayer room and erected some psychological barriers against Valli, which included, among other things, a degree of resistance perhaps inappropriate for a "participant-observer."

49. These are worshippers of Vishnu and his incarnations. Krishna is considered an avatar (incarnation) of Vishnu. Krishna is often honored in household shrines and some temples, but in comparison with Murugan, Mariamman, or Ganesha his popularity is less visible. Ashrams and other neo-Hindu organizations will usually teach Krishna's gospel, the *Baghavad Gita*, through lectures and classes. Thus, on a whole, Krishna worship is associated with middle-class devotees who are English educated. For example, the RKM and Shiva Family honor Krishna as part of their ecumenical collection of sages and world teachers (e.g., Buddha, Christ, and Ramakrishna). But Kaliamman shrines or even Murugan temples usually do not have shrines dedicated to Krishna. I know of one exception to this in the town of Kluang, in Johore, where a low-status temple patronized by working-class devotees has shrines to Krishna and Murugan. Generally, the deity is seen to be North Indian, or Aryan, to many non-Brahmin

Tamils. Even in India, Tamil Nadu's Krishna devotees are mostly Brahmins (see Singer 1972).

50. Valli had noted that my interests were incompatible with what a "normal" woman would want from a good husband. By this she meant that financial security and children were the first priorities in a marriage. Indicative of Krishna's "destructive power" in my life was my move to Malaysia. She also thought me "ascetic" in my mainly vegetarian diet, which in her mind is associated with Brahmins and orthodoxy. She would make fun of me, calling me a *samiyar*, which can mean anything from a shamanic medium to an orthodox Hindu swami and perhaps represented a deliberate blurring of spiritual hierarchies on her part.

51. I am following Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) distinction between "monoglossic" discourses and "heteroglossia," the dialogue or intersection between discourses. Dialogic knowledge, then, by its very nature, is pluralistic and deconstructive of "singular" discourses (myth and religious orthodoxy being the most rigid). But I take Bakhtin's distinctions to be ideal types, or analytical heuristics, rather than theoretical mirrors of reality. For even in charter myths there exists a plurality of interpretations, even within a so-called orthodox spiritual tradition.

52. Since there are actually very few Brahmins in Malaysia, I took her comments to be directed at the high-status Hindus who attended the functions of neo-Hindu organizations and participated in the fine arts, especially classical dancers and musicians, and orthodox priests (some of whom actually were Brahmins).

53. My wife certainly thought this was the case after meeting Valli and witnessing her prayers.

54. Parish (1996) notes similar cases in Bhaktapur, Nepal. He theorizes that conflicting discourses, particularly in the minds of low-caste individuals, are held simultaneously and activated, in turn, by the context of the social interaction. But there is a clear difference between Bhaktapur and Malaysia in that Hinduism, as a systematic organizer of social and cultural life, is far more fragmented in the latter due to the specific conditions of migration discussed in this study.

55. It is easy to interpret this event in Freudian terms, with the act of being "caught" in the "hole," a repressed symbolization of a traumatizing sexual encounter. This, however, did not occur to me at the time, and thus I did not further question Valli on this event. That her "power" emerged in the rage of this event does, however, suggest that there is more to this story than meets the eye.

56. Her sisters also believe that they have "special powers," but they say that Valli has the "highest" powers of all in the family, except for the now-deceased mother. While I was doing research, Valli's niece, whom she was raising, also began to experience possession trances.

57. I had a chance to observe and talk with many local mediums who came to seek Valli's hospitality and instruction. Some seemed very troubled and much less in control of their emotions and thoughts than Valli was. It was clear that some mediums would have very little ability to offer insights into other peoples' needs or problems.

CHAPTER 7

1. Kessler notes that the Sanskrit words *negara* (nation), *raja* (king), and *bangsa* (race) are pivotal in the song. I would add to the list of Sanskrit-derived words used in the song *bakti* (devotion), *amanah* (trust), *agama* (religion), and *tercinta* (love).

2. This tower, aside from its enormity and great height, features Islamic motifs. The Islamic artistry of this structure was given much attention in the media.

3. Observing the call to prayer on television in 2005, Malaysia's tallest buildings, the Petronas Towers and the KL Tower; the light-rail train service; the new airport; and the new administrative center in Putrajaya were shown as a backdrop to verses exhorting Muslims to enjoy "worldly success."

4. *Lallang* is tall wild grass. In this context the word means "cover-up," since nothing can be seen when covered by tall grass.

5. In 1995, the ISA was again utilized to arrest the spiritual leader of the Al-Arqam, a communitarian Islamic group. This particular group had been attracting many disaffected young Malays in and around Kuala Lumpur during the 1980s and 1990s. It operated a collective on communal lands and appeared to be self-sufficient. All male members were distinguished by their green turbans and Arabian-style clothing. Women dressed only in black tunics and were completely veiled except for two eyeholes. The group was highly critical of the government, while its leader was fast becoming a cult figure among Malays. A media campaign was directed against the movement and its leader. It was reported that the leader considered himself a messenger of God, a clear violation of the orthodox Sunni Islamic tenets upheld by the Pusat Islam. Also, the leader was accused of having a number of wives—far beyond the limit allowed by polygamy laws in Malaysia. As a "dangerous extremist," the leader was crafted in the media as heading a "deviationist" cult.

6. More recently, after the Asian financial crisis hit Malaysia, rumors of a Jewish conspiracy again became popular among some Malays. Mahathir himself fueled this anti-Semitic mood when he identified the financial speculator George Soros as the principal agent of currency devaluation in Asia—that and Mahathir's revelation that Soros was a Jew.

7. This trend has been partially reversed more recently, as the government is once again promoting the use of English in order to compete in the global economy.

8. Of course, the Malay-Chinese dialectic has been neglected in this study. Though it falls beyond the scope of this book, the reader should not assume that I think ethnographic research on that subject is unimportant.

9. It is difficult to identify a single subaltern school, given the vast differences between scholars such as Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Partha Chatterjee. Nevertheless, the dialectical conception of postcolonial subjectivity is consistent in both subaltern studies and postcolonial theory more broadly. Homi Bhabha and Paul Gilroy, though not considered part of the subaltern studies collective, explicitly utilize a neo-Hegelian, (in the latter) and a Lacanian (in the former) conception of dialectical and mimetic formation of the subordinate subject within a hierarchical relationship. Where the phenomenological roots of postcolonial thought do not allow for the retrieval of an authentic cultural logic that can be assessed from the archive, Sahlins retains the culturalist premise that semiautonomous and unique cultural logics do exist, though not sui generis. Indeed, Sahlins is deeply critical of some postcolonial representations of cultural difference as being derivative, or caught in the crucible of colonial desire, as in the transferential relation between the colonial master and the object of desire. The now infamous Obeyesekere-Sahlins debate on the death and apotheosis of Captain Cook in Hawaii makes clear the implications of this theoretical difference. While I do not wish to enter the particulari-

ties of that debate, the psychoanalytic, postcolonial, and phenomenological orientation that I have adopted probably falls closer to Obeyesekere's position than that of Sahlins's sophisticated structural variant of culturalism.

10. As Heidegger states in "The Age of the World Picture," "The flight into tradition out of a combination of humility and presumption, can bring about nothing in itself other than self-deception and blindness in relation to the historical moment" (1977:136).

11. In this game, the young child manipulates an object's presence and absence, thus mastering the painful contingency of the subject's mother being absent.

12. Or, as Hegel argues, "we have to struggle against an enemy, to vanquish whom is really to suffer defeat, where victory in one consciousness is really lost in its opposite" (1977:127).

13. Žižek (1993:200–238) specifically links this superego's impossible demand to overidentification with the nation.

14. Interestingly, while Freud argues that "anyone who has completely and finally rid themselves of animistic beliefs will be insensible to this type of the uncanny" (1997:224), he proceeds to describe the frightening and disgusting experience he himself had on encountering his double in the mirror within a railway car (225).

15. In addition to other writings by Appadurai, where he clarifies and corrects his position, he raised this very point in a talk he delivered at Cornell University in 2003. He openly acknowledged, to his credit, that in these deservedly influential passages his utopian impulse temporarily silenced his own dystopic doubts, which friends and critics alike have called to his attention. In that sense, my sympathetic critique is not intended to be illustrative for the purposes of my argument, nor directed at convincing Appadurai of a position that he engaged with subsequently.

16. Separating so-called Sanskritic (or Aryan) and Tamil or Dravidian cultural elements is, of course, problematic in the sense that these categories were inspired, in part, by orientalist conceptions and later by reformist-nationalist ideologues. Separating linguistic and historical evidence from the ideological projects attached to Dravidianism, Aryanism, and Hindu nationalism is thus problematic, as recent works by Eugene Irschick and Sumathi Ramaswamy have well demonstrated. Moreover, the historical consciousness embedded in precolonial critiques of so-called Brahminism does not render these texts and traditions nonideological or essentially Dravidian.

17. Throughout peninsular Malaysia there are certain temples and shrines—though usually less than one hundred years old—believed to possess the deity's presence in varying degrees (Willford 1998).

18. This is the focus of fieldwork I conducted in 2003–4 and 2005.

19. Kelly (1991), in his study of Fijian Hindu movements, goes further by suggesting that *bhakti* serves fixed-income capitalism well, deflecting communal identification through an emphasis on individual devotion and responsibility. Kelly's work proves useful as a comparison with the politics of Hinduism in Malaysia. His study, which explores the anticolonial Arya Samaj—a Hindu reform movement—between 1929 and 1931, revealed a similar fissure between neo-Hindu or "Renaissance" Hindu polemics and the prevalence of *bhakti* devotionalism within the estates and among members of the working class generally.

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