Ina Marie Lunde Ilkama

The Play of the Feminine

Navarātri in Kanchipuram

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A Note by the Editors

Starting from this volume, Ute Hüsken will join Axel Michaels in editing the book series Ethno-Indology. We are pleased to announce that the series has found a new home at Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing, Heidelberg University, following its tenure under the esteemed publisher, Harrassowitz. We would like to express our appreciation to the teams at Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing and Heidelberg University Library for embracing the vision of the Ethno-Indology series and their dedication to promoting interdisciplinary research.

Furthermore, we are delighted to acknowledge the commitment of the members of the newly established editorial board, who have kindly agreed to contribute their expertise and guidance. Their collective knowledge and diverse perspectives will undoubtedly enrich the series, ensuring its continued growth and relevance. The revised edition of the series will undergo a thorough peer review process to maintain the highest quality standards. All volumes of the Ethno-Indology series will be published in Open Access. Additionally, Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing offers print-on-demand options.

Heidelberg, in July 2023 Ute Hüsken and Axel Michaels

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Any errors in fact or interpretation are my own responsibility.

Notes on Language and Transliteration

This publication incorporates terms in Sanskrit and Tamil. Generally, I give prominence to Sanskrit rendition to be consistent, but Tamil terms are favored when dealing with vernacular tradition such as the *kolu*. When I consider it relevant, I provide both terms. Tamil is transcribed in accordance with the Tamil Lexicon, published by the University of Madras. Sanskrit is transcribed according to the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST). Terms in Sanskrit and Tamil are italicized and explained the first time they appear (and occasionally twice if they appear far apart).

Names of contemporary people, place names and castes appear without diacritics, but names of deities, characters from literature and folklore, and famous historical persons are given with diacritics. I favor Sanskrit names in the cases where the deities are widely known (such as Śiva and Durgā rather than Civaṉ and Turkkai). Less known and local deities, such as Māriyammaṉ, are given with Tamil transcriptions.

Abbreviations

ARE – *Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy*, New Delhi.
DM – *Devīmāhātmya*
KV – *Kāmākṣīvilāsa*
LSN – *Lalitāsahasranāma*
LU – *Lalitopākhyāna*
MW – Monier Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary (http://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/monier/)
SC – *Saubhāgyacintāmaṇi*
Skt. – Sanskrit
Ta. – Tamil

Introduction

In many contemporary contexts in India, female religious agency is undergoing radical changes.[1] Such agency is not only present when "male" ritual roles are taken over by women but is equally evident in traditional female roles, be it as goddesses or as women, and particularly within India's religious festivals. This book is about the autumnal nine-night festival of the goddess which in Tamil Nadu is often characterized as a festival for women. Navarātri (Skt. "nine nights", Ta. Navarāttiri) is celebrated with great fervor across India and in the diaspora, alternatively known as Navarātra, Mahānavāmi, Durgā Pūjā, Daśarā, or Dassain. I investigate the ritual procedures and mythology of this festival, explore how play is an important expression of female agency, and theorize on the interrelation of playfulness and ritual in relation to the Navarātri festival as it is celebrated in the South Indian temple town Kanchipuram.

While many sholars have emphasized the link between Navarātri and royal power,[2] this book sheds light at feminine power during Tamil Navarātri celebrations, what I call "the play of the feminine". During the festival, devotees gather in temples to watch and enact the play (Skt. *līlā*) of the goddess and enjoy her special decorations (Skt. *alaṃkāra*, Ta. *alaṅkāram*). The abundant domestic *kolu* display of dolls is a ritual performed mainly by women, which evoke notions of playfulness, agency, and the feminine – be it divine or human. This playfulness combines deeply meaningful religious fervor with fun and is

1 See, for example, Wadley 1995; Hüsken 2016, 2022b; Bedi 2016, 2022; DeNapoli 2022; More 2022.

2 As Christopher Fuller (1992, 108) writes, Navarātri is often characterized as "*the* festival of kings and Kshatriyas," which "eclipsed any other single event as the most prominent ritual of kingship across India". Navarātri became renowned as the pre-eminent royal festival of the king in South India during the Vijayanagara Empire (14th–17th century) due to its associations with conquest. The earliest sources of Vijayanagara celebrations of Mahānavāmi are travel reports by European travelers dating back to 1420. From 1610 the festival was celebrated in grand manner by the Mysore royal family in Karnataka as Daśarā. In the Nāyaka kingdoms, the Vijayanagara successors of the 17th century, it became known as Navarātri, and eventually Navarātri celebrations were adopted by many minor kingly houses (Stein 1983, 79). The festival's focus was the reigning king and the revitalization of his kingdom: the goddess's supremacy over the demonic forces symbolized the restoration of the kingly order, the king's own relationship with the deities was re-affirmed, and the king's rule. See, for example, Fuller (1992), Price (1996), Ikegame (2013) and Sarkar (2017).

expressive of diverse forms of agency. Agency here is not seen as resistance against oppressive structures, but as the power of creativity and transformation.[3] An understanding of the female ritual agency expressed during Navarātri provides important insight into the dynamics of women's roles in Indian religion, and especially in contemporary trends where female ritual agency is more visible than ever before. Still, women's roles, play, and the celebration of the goddess's triumph over the (buffalo) demon during Navarātri, are at the same time very different expressions of female agencies. Each setting is therefore looked at in depth, allowing to uncover diverse forms of female agency in each setting that I explore.

The Nine Nights of the Goddess

Navarātri is celebrated during the nine days after the new moon in the Tamil month of Puraṭṭāci (September-October).[4] The festival commemorates the goddess's victory over demonic forces and is in various ways centered upon her worship and veneration. This cosmic battle of the goddess and the demon is described famously in the *Devīmāhātmya* of the 5th or 6th century, in which Durgā slays the buffalo demon Mahiṣa. However, the festival entails many regional variations and much diversity, and despite this pan-Indian "master narrative", it is instead local mythology of goddesses battling demons that underlies the celebrations in Kanchipuram.[5]

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3 This concept of agency is inspired by Abu-Lughod (1990, 2013), Mahmood (2001, 2005), and Sax (2006).

4 According to the traditional Hindu lunar calendar, Navarātri begins with the new moon in the lunar month of Āśvina (September-October). The lunar calendar, which is the most common in India and Nepal, extends over 30 lunar days (Skt. *tithi*) and ends, according to two different systems of calculation, either on new moon (*amāvāsyā*) or full moon (*pūrṇimā*) (for details, see Stanley 1977). Most annual pan-Indian festivals are fixed according to this calendar. In Tamil Nadu and Kerala, as well as in parts of eastern India, the year is divided into 12 solar months of 30–32 days. This system is quite similar to the one used in the west, where a solar month equals the period the sun remains in a particular zodiacal house, from the perspective of the earth, during its journey around the sun. As lunar days vary in length up to 4 ½ hours (Stanley 1977, 27), the dates may occasionally collide between the two calendars, and the festival either loses or gains a day or two.

5 Simmons and Sen (2018) provide a nice overview of the festival and its relation to the epics and *purāṇas*. For textual accounts, consult Kane (1974, 154ff.) and Einoo (1999). For historical accounts, consult Crooke (1915), Grieve (1909), Rao (1921), Titiev (1946). See Stein (1983), Sivapriyananda (2003), Price (1996, 136ff.), Ikegame (2013) and Sarkar (2017) for historical studies on Navarātri. For studies on the well-known Kolkata Durgā Pūjā, consult Mc.Dermott (2011), Guha-Thakurti (2015) and Sen (2016).

Since Navarātri in this way celebrates the divine in its feminine manifestation, it is particularly important in temples dedicated to unmarried goddesses (Ta. *ammaṉ*) but may also be celebrated grandly in temples where the goddess is represented as a consort of a male deity. It is generally said that the three first days are for worshipping warrior goddess Durgā, the middle three for Lakṣmī, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, and the final three are dedicated to Sarasvatī, goddess of knowledge and arts. These goddesses are three different manifestations of the supreme female cosmic energy, known as *śakti*. However, since all goddesses are considered forms of the Great Goddess (Skt. *devī*), we find that in temples of local and regional goddesses Navarātri celebrations are centered upon these manifestations of the goddess, and their respective mythology. This divine *śakti* also manifests in humans, yielding the identification of women and girls with the goddess during the festival.

Navarātri is a joyous festive occasion: nation wide holidays are declared; families may reunite; women and young girls often dress in their finest; and people prepare and eat special meals and delicacies (Rodrigues 2018, 322). In Tamil Nadu, women and their children visit homes of friends and relatives for viewing *kolus*, the tiered displays abundant with clay dolls (Ta. *pommai*), which are worshipped as the embodiment of the goddess during these nine nights.[6] They sing and recite in praise of the goddess and receive auspicious gifts. Once restricted to Brahmins and upper castes, *kolus*, in the past couple of decades, have become increasingly popular among families across caste distinctions. There are close connections between the *kolu* and womanhood; and while in temples male priests conduct the rituals worshipping the goddess, in the domestic sphere women are the main ritual actors, embodying and mediating the divine. It is widely believed that the goddess will be among the *kolu* guests in the form of a woman or a girl, and in homes as well as temples, she may be worshipped in the form of auspicious married women (Skt. *sumaṅgalī*, Ta. *cumaṅkali*) and/or prepubescent girls (Skt. *kanyā*, Ta. *kaṉṉi*).

People also visit temples during the festival, some of which are sites of expansive public rituals and displays during Navarātri. These include music and dance performances, and ritual enactments of the goddess's fight with the demon (Ta. *curasaṃhāra*). In the temples, the goddess will be adorned in creatively fashioned *alaṃkāras*, ornamentations of fresh flowers, shiny jewelry,

6 The *kolu* provides a link between the royal celebrations and the contemporary domestic celebrations of Navarātri (Logan 1980, 252; see also Narayanan 2018 and Ikegame 2013). The word *kolu* means royal presence (Tamil Lexicon), and the assembly of dolls resembles the king's court. *Kolu* is also observed in the South Indian states of Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and parts of Sri Lanka during Navarātri.

and colorful fabrics, and give *darśana* (Skt. "auspicious viewing") each Navarātri evening in a different form. During this time, she also receives more elaborate worship by her priests.

The nine-night festival of the goddess also includes Sarasvatī or *āyudha* (Skt. "weapon") *pūjā* on day nine, when vehicles drive through the streets garlanded, and computers, books, musical instruments, electrical appliances, and the like are marked with auspicious ashes and vermillion powder, as people worship their learning, arts, and work-related tools. The tenth day serves as a final commemoration of the goddess's victory and is known as Vijayadaśamī (Skt. "the victorious tenth [day]", Ta. Vicayatacami).[7]

Approach and Methodology

With an overarching focus on "the play of the feminine" I investigate the *līlā* of the goddess in the mythological narratives and in the festival performances; analyze roles and images of the feminine as expressed in mythology and Navarātri rituals; and explore notions on playfulness in Navarātri celebrations as articulated, for example, in competition, creativity, and aesthetic and dramatic expressions.

The sites of research are *kolus* in various homes across Kanchipuram and two goddess temples, namely the well-known Brahmanical Kāmākṣī Ammaṉ temple and the popular but smaller temple of village goddess Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ, and texts pertaining to these temples. My approach to the festival is thus a combination of textual studies[8] and ethnographic fieldwork. I am convinced that a study of text and context (known as "ethno-indology", Michaels 2005, 11) may enrich and illuminate each other. A focus on two temples allows for in-depth descriptions and analysis of the festival's ritual procedures and their connected mythology. These two goddess temples celebrate Navarātri lavishly with their own distinct ritual traditions and shed light on the "same" Navarātri rituals performed "differently". Through highlighting textual and performative differences between Brahmin and non-Brahmin celebrations, I explore how

7 Vijayadaśamī is also known as the day Rāma conquered Rāvaṇa. In contemporary Tamil Nadu, Navarātri and Vijayadaśamī are celebrated as one prolonged festival, or two holidays that closely connect, while certain academic works, including Kane's *History of Dharmaśāstra* (1968), treat them as two distinct festivals. According to the festival programs of the temples dealt with in this thesis, Navarātri celebrations extend beyond the nine Navarātri days and include subsequent rituals that connect to the festival. When I speak of the Navarātri festival in this study, I include Vijayadaśamī, as well as the other rituals mentioned in the printed programs of the temples.

8 I speak of texts in a broad sense, including also oral narratives, and not only written text.

female agency during Navarātri is expressed differently in the elite (Sanskritic) and subaltern ("folk", vernacular) traditions of Hinduism. Importantly, text and performance also differ *within* these "traditions." This study of Navarātri is thus built on several sets of dichotomies: text – fieldwork, temples – homes, non-Brahmin – Brahmin settings.

The fieldwork was carried out in Kanchipuram during the autumns of 2014 and 2015 for approximately two months each.[9] To participate in a festival such as Navarātri encompasses many opportunities with its multiplicity of rituals and sites and things going on at the same time. It is not possible for one researcher to cover it all. The "totality" of a festival, as presented in a study like this, might therefore appear artificially constructed from the perspective of any one participant (Flueckiger 2013, 27). Thus, my work offers a glimpse into the richness and many forms of Navarātri. As Alf Hiltebeitel (1991, 11) writes about his research on Draupadī Ammaṉ festivals: "in a sense, we are faced with distilling what is essential from so much variety when variety is its essence".

During Navarātri I conducted interviews in the Kāmākṣī and Pāṭavēṭṭammaṉ temples with priests and devotees I met, as well as in various homes while viewing *kolus*. Some of these homes I visited once, others several times. All in all, I visited about 50 *kolus* across town, three *kolu* doll makers and their workshops, and I also conducted interviews in the well-known Ekāmranātha and Varadarāja temples,[10] and (apart from the Kāmākṣī and Pāṭavēṭṭammaṉ temples) six smaller goddess temples. Interviewing in the Pāṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple was unfortunatley hampered, in part because of loud music playing during the evenings. The number of female voices included in this chapter is thus smaller than I would have preferred.

The respondents came from a variety of caste backgrounds, and lived in different parts of the town, since I wanted to document as many *kolu* practices as possible to see what differed and what was consistent in various communities and neighborhoods. All respondents are anonymized by giving them pseudonyms.

The Sanskrit texts I rely on are local *sthalapurāṇas* or *māhātmyas* which contain the stories of the goddess killing a demon, and the ritual manual *Saubhāgyacintāmaṇi* (*SC*) which is used in the Kāmākṣī temple. I initially

9 Prior to this I had experienced Navarātri in the Kāmākṣī and Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temples (among others) in 2011 and 2009, experiences that sparked my research interest in the festival.

10 The Ekāmranātha temple does not celebrate Navarātri to any great extent other than decorating the goddess and performing ablutions to her. For Navarātri celebrations in the Varadarāja temple, see Hüsken (2018).

identified and translated altogether four different stories of the goddess Kāmākṣī and the demon(s) from three texts.[11] When I came to Kanchipuram for fieldwork in the autumn of 2014 and participated in the Navarātri celebrations of the Kāmākṣī temple, I learned that the myth of Kāmākṣī and Bandhakāsura found in the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa* (*KV*) is the story referred to by the priests as underlying their celebrations.

It is also important to point out here that the Sanskrit texts such as the *SC* say nothing (or, very little) about female or non-Brahmin ritual practices: it is the male Brahmanical perspective which is transmitted and acknowledged. Therefore, female as well as non-Brahmin agency will be overlooked when dealing with only texts, and we need to look "to the ground" to document these practices.

No written texts pertain to Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ, but a rich mythological tradition surrounds the goddess and the temple. I have included two oral narratives in my analysis, one from the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple and one from the Kāmākṣī temple.

Exploring the Play of the Feminine

In my study of Navarātri I highlight the festival's feminine dimensions. "The play of the feminine" refers to an overall focus on the role of the feminine, both human and divine, in concrete spaces and places (temples and homes), in mythic imagination (the tales of the goddess and the demon), and in the festive activities (particularly in *kolu*, *alaṃkāras* and the fights between the goddess and the demon). The role of women, their religious agency, and the nature and images of the goddess are explored through the lens of play.

When I throughout the book use the term "the feminine", I speak of the feminine gender as well as qualities traditionally associated with women, or normative female identity, a "manifold grammar" (Hancock 1999, 254) of what it means to be a woman at this specific place and time.[12] I view the feminine as a collective experience shared among women and also goddesses, expressed in shared cultural codes such as dress and ornamentations, and a shared idea of a feminine nature (*śakti*). "Female" and "feminine" therefore often overlap in my discussions, although it is important to recognize that men can be feminine, and

11 These texts are *Kāmākṣīmāhātmya*, *Saubhāgyacintāmaṇi*, and *Kāmākṣīvilāsa*. In the two Sanskrit *Kāñcīmāhātmyas*, the demons are killed by Viṣṇu and Śiva, not the goddess.

12 Importantly, feminine identity never stands alone – it is intervowen intimately with caste, class, age, ethnicity and material and reproductive status (Hancock 1999, 256).

women need not be. The term "the feminine" was chosen over for instance "womanhood" to include not only human women, but also the goddess and girls.

Navarātri and the Feminine

Several scholars have underscored the connections between Navarātri, the feminine, and womanhood.[13] Many of my respondents did the same.[14] In Tamil Nadu and South India in general, the connection between Navarātri and the feminine very much revolves around the prominence of the *kolu*, an increasingly popular practice.

Tracy Pintchman (2007, 5) observes how women tend to appropriate religion in ways that usually involve female gender-specific social roles, experiences, and values, as well as often personalizing religion by emphasizing practices that provide spiritual meaning regarding their everyday lives. This is very much reflected in *kolu*, which revolves around what is considered typically female concerns: *kolu* is associated with fertility, marriage and gaining and maintaining the auspicious status of the *sumaṅgalī*. As pointed out by Amy L. Allocco, the goddess shares an especially intimate involvement in female affairs, as women and the goddess "participate in a reciprocal relationship of intimacy and protection" (2009, 336, see also Allocco 2013, 198). The devotee is expected to partake in ritual practices, give offerings and the like to please the deity; and the deity is in return expected to fulfill the request of the devotee and bestow her blessings. This give-and-take relationship is expressed during several Navarātri rituals – not only regarding the *kolu*, but also in vows, possessions and other rituals that may take place in temple contexts, typically in those dedicated to non-Brahmin goddesses.

Although my primary focus here is on the feminine in its human and divine forms, it is important to recall that "gender" does not only pertain to women. The temple priests conducting the rituals for the goddesses in the temples continue to be men (the Brahmanic Sanskritic temple tradition is particularly male dominated) and among my respondents were also a handful of male *kolu*

13 See, for example, Logan 1980, Fuller and Logan 1985, Hancock 1999, Tanaka 1999, Rodrigues 2003, 2005, Narayanan 2003, Sivakumar 2018, Ortgren 2022.

14 A sample of quotes from my fieldwork illustrates this point: "Navarātri is centered on womanhood"; "Navarātri is especially for women"; "As far as the Navarātri period is concerned, it is the ladies who do much work"; "[Navarātri] is for Ammaṉ so ladies are given importance"; "Wherever you go during Navarātri you will find only women"; "It is a festival women celebrate together"; and "it is a festival for ladies, from young girls to old women".

enthusiasts. Among the devotees of village goddess Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ, who do not keep *kolu* but celebrate the festival in the temple, Navarātri was largely regarded as a festival the family celebrates together and not specifically a women's festival, and among the goddess's devotees there are, of course, men and women alike.

Agency

The concept of agency allows us, within the frame of the festival, to investigate the dynamic relations and negotiations between individuals, institutions and groups, "authors" and recipients of tradition and innovations, and the roles of superhuman agents (Chaniotis 2010, 4). I will particularly highlight female ritual agency, which is prominent in the domestic sphere, and compare this to the temple context, where women are less visible as agents since male priests perform the main rituals for the goddess.

The term agency has been closely connected to free will, and therefore, to a large extent, to resistance (Chaniotis 2010, 6, Sax 2006, 474). The sociological implications of agency include intentionality, the ability to act and, importantly, the capacity to choose to act otherwise. According to these terms, if a person *must* act in a prescribed way and does not act independently, but follows prescribed rules, one can hardly speak of agency (Weber 2010, 63). This leads Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw (1994, 99, cited by Sax 2006, 478) to conclude that ritual commitment abandons agency altogether and that there is no such thing as ritual agency, since the performer of a prescribed ritual defers the "intentional sovereignty" of the individual agent: he cannot *not* perform the prescribed ritual actions. Agency defined as the ability to act and choice to act otherwise is therefore a secular conception of agency, and not how I use the term.

I follow William S. Sax (2006), who emphasizes the *transformative* aspects of ritual and distinguishes agency from action in defining agency as "the ability to transform the world". This definition suggests that we can talk of agency also within the frame of religious ritual. However, agency may also be seen in the ability to *maintain* things, or to cause an effect (not just change). This transformative aspect points back to ritual efficacy, the "success" or "failure" of a ritual; whether the ritual was performed successfully at a given occasion (Sax 2006, 477). Sax's definition also highlights the competence of the performers of ritual, who may be humans, groups, institutions, non-embodied entities, or superhuman agents such as deities. Sax takes his argument further by claiming that rituals themselves also have agency, in that rituals effect change of some kind.

As such we can distinguish between two types of agency or efficacy of ritual: the end the ritual presumably achieves (such as fulfilling of vows through ritual piercings), but the ritual may also be utilized on the basis of intervention by individual or collective actors to achieve an outcome (such as making fancy *alaṃkāras* in order to draw devotees to a particular temple, or start with *kolu* to communicate social status) (see also Pennington and Allocco 2018, 8). Rituals are complex, in the sense that they often are collective activities that involve audience as well as performers. The field of ritual agency must therefore include a "scale of different roles – from being a leading ritual participant to a mere observer or spectator" (Michaels 2016, 118).

Līlā – Divine Play

Among Sanskrit words used to designate "play", we find *līlā* (play, sport, amusement) and *krīḍā* (sport, play, pastime, amusement). *Līlā* has a more abstract meaning as a theological concept as well as a concrete performative dimension. On the one hand *līlā* refers to the Hindu idea of creation as God's play: God is not compelled to act since (s)he is complete, yet (s)he chooses to do so as spontaneous play. (S)he acts out of overabundance enjoying his illusive powers, for instance through *avatāras* (Kinsley 1979, 4) – not out of purpose or necessity. Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and Śāktism have all incorporated this idea to various degrees, although the god Kṛṣṇa might be the divine player *par excellence*, as David R. Kinsley (1972, 1979) has shown in his works. Thus, Viṣṇu creates the world as a dream while sleeping on the ocean of milk as Brahmā appears from his navel and Śiva creates and destroys it through his cosmic dance in his form of Naṭarāja. Kinsley says of the Great Goddess – embodied in warrior goddess Durgā of the *DM* – that she is "divine display embodied […] the essence of the flitting *līlā* of the gods" (1979, 20). This is because she is the embodiment of *śakti*, the creative force of all the deities, and because she is the most ambivalent figure of the Hindu pantheon (ibid., 27). She is spontaneous, and unpredictable, manifesting herself as horribly wrathful, as well as motherly and benevolent. She is the One Great Goddess as well as the myriad of localized forms; she is associated with death, disease, and destruction, as well as abundance, fertility and prosperity, often in the one and same manifestation. Indeed, Kinsley says that "[i]n her many and varied forms the Goddess is probably the clearest manifestation of creation as divine *līlā*. Her restless nature is the very embodiment of *līlā*" (ibid., 21).

The mythologies of the goddess slaying the demon refer to play in that they articulate her *līlā*. Kinsley elaborates on the idea of "combat-as-*līlā*"; the gods

battling with demons for amusement or as a diversion. The goddess is so aloof and detached from this world that she knows she will win and sports with the demons for her own pure amusement. The *Devī Bhāgavata* states that

> "Without hurling any trident, axes, *Śaktis*, clubs, or any other weapons; merely by Thy mere will Thou canst kill; still for sports and for the good of all beings Thou incarnates and fightest for the sake of *Līlā*" (Devī Bhāgavata V. 22 32, cited in Kinsley 1979, 52).

On this note, it is illustrative that the text that tells the story of the goddess Kāmākṣī and the demon is entitled *Kāmākṣīvilāsa*, which means the "sport" or "play" of Kāmākṣī, in addition to the "manifestation" or "appearance" of Kāmākṣī.[15]

Līlā also refers to staged plays, frequently commemorating the actions of the gods, or "religious dramas" (Sax 1995b, 4). A well-known example is the *rāmlīlā* coinciding with Navarātri in the north of India.[16] In these contexts, as devotional plays, *līlā* is another word used for a Hindu festival (Michaels 2008, 88).

Defining Festival and *Utsava*

In Tamil Nadu religious festivals are not called *līlās*,[17] but are known as *uṟcavam* ("temple festivals, public festivity", derived from the Sanskrit *utsava*[18] ("festival, jubilee, joy, gladness, merriment") or the Tamil *tiruviḻā* or just *viḻā*, ("festival in a temple") (Tamil Lexicon, MW). In Sanskrit, *utsava* is the term most used for festival. Accordingly, the Navarātri invitation (2014) from the Kāmākṣī temple, where Sanskrit is used in rituals, invites to "*śrī cāratā navarāttiri mahotsava*" (Skt./Ta. "honorable great festival of autumnal Navarātri"), whereas the invitation (2015) from the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple, where Tamil is used

15 *Vilāsa* is one of the words expressing similar or identical ideas as *līlā* (the playfulness/sportiveness of deities) in later than Vedic Sanskrit literature. The concept originated in the Vedas with the word *krīḍā* (Schweig 2012).

16 See, for example, Einarsen (2018); Lutgendorf (1991); Sax (1990); Schechner and Hess (1977). Other *līlās* include *raslīlā* (Schweig 2005) and *pāṇḍavlīlā* (Sax 2002).

17 If a Tamil festival contains a religious drama, such as the Draupadī festivals studied extensively by Hiltebeitel (1988, 1991) these are called *nāṭakam* (drama) or (*teru*)*kūttu* ([street] dance or drama), not *līlā* (Hiltebeitel 1995, 204).

18 According to the MW, the term *utsava* is derived from the verb root *ud*-√*sū*, "to cause to go upwards". Gonda (1975) has however argued that utsava rather stems from *ud*-√*su*, "to set in motion, impel, rouse, press out". Thus, the word *utsava*, which occurs only twice in the *Ṛg-veda*, would mean "the generating, stimulating, producing (viz. of power)", and refer to man's ability to influence the powers of nature by periodical rites and ceremonies (1975, 275).

in rituals, invites to "*navarāttiri viḻā*" (Ta. "Navarātri festival") (figure 0.1 and 0.2). An *utsava* is a dynamic celebration, commonly including a variety of elements, such as *pūjās*, sacrifices, fasting, dancing, music, ritual enactments of mythological events, recitations, and religious vows (Skt. *vrata*). In temples, processions of the temple's movable deities on huge carts (Skt. *vāhana*) through the streets often form popular and important parts of the *utsava*. Indeed, Richard Davis (2010, 31) labels processions "the defining act of the South Indian temple festival".[19]

The English translation *festival*[20] is also a broad term, encompassing different and manifold events ranging from the Olympic Games to jazz festivals or the birthday of Gaṇeśa.[21] Like the *utsava*, a single festival often encompasses a mixture of various performance genres such as music, plays, games and competitions, carnival, healing, and pilgrimage (Hüsken and Michaels 2013a, 10), adding to the difficulty of definitions. Festival is defined in an English dictionary as "a sacred or profane time of celebration, marked by special observances" (cited in Falassi 1987, 2). In South India *utsava* and *tiruviḻā* refer to a specific type of festival, namely the annual temple festivals, and are thus more narrowly defined than the English festival.[22] For festivals celebrated domestically, secularly or outside temples (such as Navarāttiri *kolu*, Poṅkal and Dīpāvalī), the Tamil word *paṇṭikai* is used.[23] In the following, I will use the terms *utsava* and

19 In festival calendars the festival timings are therefore often given as *puṟappāṭu* (Ta. "procession of an idol"), referring to the start of a procession. It is noteworthy that there is no procession outside the temple walls during Navarātri in the Kāmākṣī temple, considered one of the temple's big annual festivals. This is also the case in the Mīnākṣī temple of Madurai. Fuller suggests that the reason is that the demonic forces have invaded the temple, and that the danger of Mīnākṣī's accrued heat resulting from the battle would, in the case of a procession, threaten the community at large (see Fuller and Logan 1985, 87–88). Kāmākṣī leaves the temple on Vijayadaśamī for a *vaṉṉi* tree *pūjā* but this does not include a grand procession.

20 Etymologically, the word *festival* stems from the Latin noun *festum* meaning "festival, feast day or holiday", and the adjective *festivus*, meaning "festal, fine, jolly good, amusing". Equivalents of the word festival derived from Latin are found in all Romance languages (Fallassi 1987, 1–2).

21 Closely related to and often overlapping with festival are the terms and topics of *celebration* (Turner 1982, Grimes 2010 [1982]), *spectacle* (MacAloon 1984b), and *wonder* (Srinivas 2018).

22 Within the ritual treatises on temple festivals, such as the *Śaiva āgamas*, several types of *utsavas* are defined: yearly, monthly, daily, etc. (see Davis 2010, 25–29). Thus, parts of an *utsava* are also called *utsava*, such as *teppotsava* (float festival) and *uñjal utsava* (swing festival).

23 *Viḻā* (without the prefix *tiru* [holy]) might also be used for secular festivals, but usually implies a huge number of celebrants.

religious festival as synonyms, and thereby include the domestic *kolu* in the equation.

Figure 0.1–0.2: Festival programs.

Festivals, Rituals, Play and Playfulness

As Raj and Dempsey (2010a, 1) point out, Johan Huizinga's notion that "ritual grew up in sacred play" (1949, 173) points to the role and significance of play in rituals. Huizinga saw play as pervasive in human culture in general, including religious myth and ritual. Neither play nor ritual, the "building blocks" of a religious festival such as Navarātri, are easily pinned down and defined, in that they involve a constellation of characteristics. Like Huizinga does with play,[24] Ronald L. Grimes (2010, 14) approaches ritual not through a definition, but through identifying a set of "family characteristics".[25] It is striking how some of

24 Huizinga sums up the characteristics of play as "a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious,' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner" (Huizinga 1949, 13).

25 For Grimes, rituals are activities characterized by some or all the following qualities, although none of them is definitive of or unique to ritual (2010, 14): 1) Performed, enacted gestural (not merely thought and said). — 2) Formalized, elevated, stylized, differentiated (not ordinary, unadorned, or undifferentiated). — 3) Repetitive, redundant,

the features that characterize play also characterize rituals and thus religious festivals. Indeed, within the world religions, it is particularly festivals that contain fun and playfulness, say Bado-Fralick and Norris (2010, 133). This common ground is, I argue, what makes the concept of play a useful and legitimate analytical tool in the context of Navarātri.

Among the commonalities between play and festivals, most prominent might be how both create a world apart, or a time set apart, outside of ordinary space and time, with its own borders (Callois 2001, 6, 9–10, Huizinga 1949, 13). Many scholars of festivals have highlighted the special "time" of the festival frame. For instance, Guy R. Welbon and Glenn E. Yocum (1982, vii) label festivals "special performances (or complexes of performances) at special times", Joseph Pieper (1999, 3) speaks of "an interruption in the ordinary passage of time" as contrasted to labor, and Alessandro Falassi (1987, 4) speaks of a "time out of time" devoted to special activities.

Festivals and play thus function as a liminal time set apart from the ordinary. Regarding festivals this is closely connected to their framing, which usually includes rituals that mark their beginning and end. Accordingly, in temples during Navarātri there will be inaugural rites as well as rituals of closure marking the festival frame.[26] Likewise, in the homes, installing the pot in which the goddess is invoked on the *kolu* sets off the time as well as and the space of the home as sacred for the duration of the festival, until a *kolu* doll is laid flat marking its end.

The *kolu* creates a temporary sacred space within the homes, and houses were even compared to temples by my respondents once the *kolu* was set up, with its consecration of also secular objects such as toys and Barbie dolls.

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rhythmic (not singular or once-for-all). — 4) Collective, institutionalized, consensual (not personal or private). — 5) Patterned, invariant, standardized, stereotyped, ordered, rehearsed (not improvised, idiosyncratic, or spontaneous). — 6) Traditional, archaic, primordial (not invented or recent). — 7) Valued highly or ultimately, deeply felt, sentiment-laden, meaningful, serious (not trivial or shallow). — 8) Condensed, multilayered (not obvious; requiring interpretation). — 9) Symbolic, referential (not merely technological or primarily means-end oriented). — 10) Perfected, idealized, pure, ideal (not conflictual or subject to criticism and failure). — 11) Dramatic, ludic (not primarily discursive or explanatory). — 12) Paradigmatic (not ineffectual in modeling either other rites or nonritualized action). — 13) Mystical, transcendent, religious, cosmic (no secular or merely empirical). — 14) Adaptive, functional (not obsessional, neurotic, dysfunctional). — 15) Consious, deliberate (not unconscious or preconsious).

26 Beginnings and ends are not necessarily straightforward, as a festival may include many framings, and distinct rituals in turn have distinct framings. In the Kāmākṣī temple for example, subsequent rituals are connected to Navarātri, but not considered part of the Navarātri festival "proper" (although they are listed in the festival program).

Therefore, rules of purity are more pronounced in the home during the festival. When it comes to temple celebrations, in Tamil Nadu it is common for the deities to go out of their temples during festivals to interact with the devotees and give *darśan* on *their* secular ground. In a festival we may thus find a reversal when it comes to space, and this is also the case during the Navratri rituals I discuss, when when the secular space and everyday items and persons becomes sacred and intimately connected with the divine, such as in case of the *kolu* and the worship of young girls and women, or when the sacred visits the secular (through processions).

Moreover, both festivals and play are characterized by a joyous mood (Callois 2001, Huizinga 1949, MacAloon 1984b). It is suitable, then, that several of the meanings of the word *utsava* point to this characteristic (joy, gladness, merriment).

Despite the similarities of liminality and the joyous mood, there are several contrasting features between play and festivals, and between play and rituals. While, theologically speaking, the play of the gods is superfluous; playfulness of religious activity is not. And, while play is regarded mere leisure, an important aspect of rituals is efficacy, whether the ritual "works" or not, as addressed previously with regard to the agency of rituals. According to Richard Schechner (1985), a performance is often a "braided structure" of efficacy and entertainment,[27] and not one or the other (and entertainment can also be an effect!).

Another difference between rituals and play is that play commonly is voluntary, while rituals rather are performed out of necessity. Festivals are moreover calendric, and not spontaneous, as play often is. Fun is often paired with play as opposed to work, although play is not always necessarily pleasurable,[28] and work can be fun. Many respondents labeled their *kolu* duties as work while simultaneously enjoying them very much. Rituals are sometimes seen as boring, static, and formalized by authority or tradition (Bado-Fralick and Norris 2010, 166). Hence, they are understood as prescriptive rather than creative and adaptive (ibid.). However, as I will show, there is room for creativity in the rituals and making the tradition one's own. Festivals are dynamic and multifaceted celebrations – in fact, I argue that it is the very playfulness and playful nature of the festival that opens this arena for change and creativity. Tom F. Driver says

27 Entertainment differs from play in that play requires an active involvement, while entertainment is passive and often performed by someone else.

28 For instance, one can be forced to participate in play, and play can be serious, such as in professional sports (Bado-Fralick and Norris 2010, 128).

> "the so-called 'sacred space' and 'sacred time' of religious rituals are, above all, imaginative constructions, 'rules of the game.'… The playfulness of rituals, however, does not mean that they are nothing more than play-acting, much less that they cannot be efficacious. … In short, rituals are a kind of playful work. … We may speak of ritual, then, as work done playfully" (Driver 1998, 8 cited in Raj and Dempsey 2010a, 5).

If we include the religious festival in this equation, "work done playfully" is more characteristic of some rituals than others, typically those we think of making up a festival: namely the rituals that are "performance centered" (such as enactments of fights, vows, *alaṃkāras*, *kolu*) rather than "liturgy centered" (cf. Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994 in Michaels 2016). Liturgy is more formalized; following a stipulated script ("have we got it right"? vs. "did it work"? [ibid.]). However, a religious festival often consists of liturgy as well as performance centered rituals – often at the same time (such as *Brahmanical* temple rituals). And, as Michaels demonstrates looking at *adhikāra* (ritual competency) in text and performance of a Hindu death ritual, there is scope for variation in rituals however prescribed they are (Michaels 2016, 118–127). Likewise, the chapter concerning Navarātri rituals of the Kāmākṣī temple in the ritual handbook *SC* provides alternatives in the performance of certain temple rituals. It is precisely this capacity for variation, which is intrinsic to certain types of play, which allows for creativity. The rules can be and sometimes are modified.

By bringing in the concept of play and playfulness to the analysis, I do not want to suggest that Navarātri is celebrated for fun, although fun may be part of it, or that festivals are superfluous. John J. MacAloon who has worked extensively on the Olympics, regards festivals as well as rituals, games, and spectacles as genres of cultural performances (1984b)[29] in which "as a culture or society we reflect upon and define ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and history, present ourselves with alternatives, and eventually change in some ways while remaining the same in others" (MacAloon 1984a, 1). A cultural performance of this kind is "more than entertainment, more than didactic or persuasive formulations, and more than cathartic indulgences" (ibid.). I argue that the Navarātri festival is a network of cultural performances, and as such is more

29 The term "cultural performance" is borrowed from Milton Singer: "Since a tradition has a culture content carried by specific cultural media as well as by human carriers, a description of the ways in which this content is organized and transmitted on particular occasions through specific media offers a particularization of the structure of tradition complementary to its social organization. These particular instances of cultural organization, e.g. weddings, temple festivals, recitations, plays, dances, musical concerts etc., I have called 'cultural performances'" (Singer 1955, xii–xiii, see also Singer 1959, 27ff.).

than entertainment and indulgence mainly due to two factors. First, the festival is more than entertainment and indulgence in that it is is centered upon *efficcacy*, particularly visible in activities such as vows and prayers, seen both in temple and domestic rituals. Navarātri is an occasion for interaction with the goddess in a variety of manifestations. Secondly, festivals constitute *meaning* for those participating in them. For instance, the *kolu* display of dolls combines fun and play with deep religious and personal meanings. In interviews that I conducted, some, particularly elders, would complain that nowadays *kolu* has become an opportunity to show off, while in the past it used to be about devotion and worship. The *kolu* is also an arena of competition, and newspapers and TV are full of *kolu* competitions during the Navarātri season. People often employ great creativity in their doll displays and may for instance create thematic *kolus*. *Kolu* is also a didactical display for teaching children Hindu mythology, and an occasion for votive donations of dolls as prayers to the goddess, one aspect of its efficacy. When it comes to the enactments of the fight between the goddess and the demon, integral parts of Navarātri celebrations in several temples, we also find elements of play integrated with meaning. These fights are performed as public spectacles, with people cheering and rallying as the fight goes on, finally culminating in the worship and praise of the goddess once the demon is defeated. These enactments make the goddess's play present for her worshippers. Some devotees would in turn identify with the symbolic or moral meanings of the story, seeing the fight as actually concerning the destruction of evil within themselves. The *alaṃkāras* of the goddess's temple image, which may also be themed, is one ritual of the festival that allows for artistic creativity. While such *alaṃkāras* undoubtedly entertain, they are important in the devotee's experience of *darśana*, and form part of the goddess's *pūjā*.

Other playful elements within the Navarātri festival include the often elaborate dressing up of pots, oil lamps and images of the goddess in connection with the *kolu*; the concerts, staged competitions and various entertainment in the temples during the evenings of the festival; the dressing up of children as gods and saints while *kolu* hopping; and the swing-festivals of the temple goddesses, where the images of the deities are gently pushed while seated on their swings, to mention some. Rodrigues also draws attention to how display becomes play in the festival context: "kings, buisnesses, communities, and individuals display their wealth and playfully share their bounty with others. This is display as play" (2018, 324). And the context of this human play is how the goddess is displayed and invoked in a myriad of forms as "embodied displays" (ibid.).

Festivals enact values and embody meaning, be it religious, aesthetic, social, economic, or political – and most likely all together, to different degrees. Gender values are also reflected during the festival, evident in the emphasis on *sumaṅgalī*-hood as the ideal female status expressed through *kolu* rituals and *pūjās* in homes and temples. Class and caste values are evident in how various caste communities creatively modify the *kolu* rituals after adopting the practice, by offering meat and alcohol. The *kolu* also visibly affirms religious affiliations, and, as I will show, these displays might contribute to enhancing or keeping social positions through conspicuous consumption and gift giving.

Rather than viewing play and ritual as opposites at either end of a scale it is more fruitful to consider how they function together in a dynamic whole. Festivals are lighthearted *and* serious (Raj and Dempsey 2010a, 3), frivolous *and* momentous. Navarātri combines fun, play, entertainment, meaning and efficacy without opposing these factors. I agree with Hüsken (2012, 194) in that ritual and play should be considered "modes of experience and participation rather than clearly distinct forms of action". She further argues that employing the terms "playfulness" (Bado-Fralick and Norris 2010, 132, Hüsken 2012, 194) and "ritualizing" (Grimes 2010 [1982], Hüsken 2012, 1944) allows for more fluidity as analytical concepts than the more static "play" and "ritual". Following these lines of arguments, the notion of playfulness[30] is regarded an attitude or a mode of action; a way of entering the world of ritual.[31] When I speak about the playfulness of Navarātri rituals in the following, it encompasses creativity, competition, aesthetic and dramatic expressions, as well as notions about *līlā*.

About the Book[32]

Chapter 1 introduces the field in detail, provides a brief history of Kanchipuram, and introduces the two goddesses Kāmākṣī and Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ, their temples, and ritual traditions.

Chapter 2 examines the "combat-as-*līlā*" myths of the goddess and the demon pertaining to the Kāmākṣī and Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temples. One myth is

30 Bado-Fralick and Norris (2010, 132) define playfulness as an "attitude that enables any activity to become play".

31 Grimes identifies six modes of ritual, celebration being one of them (along with ritualization, decorum, ceremony, magic, and liturgy) (2013, 203–207, see also Grimes 2010 [1982]). He considers them layers (like tectonic plates – interacting, combining, and modifying each other) and not types; suggesting the density and depth of rituals (2013, 205).

32 Versions of parts of chapters 3–7 are published in Ilkama 2018, Ilkama 2022a and Ilkama 2022b.

from the Sanskrit *sthalapurāṇa Kāmākṣīvilāsa*; the other two are oral renderings. I summarize and analyze these local versions, which conform to a generic pattern of the archetypal goddess fighting a demon myth found in the *Devīmāhātmya* and *Lalītopākhyāna*. I show that Kāmākṣī's fierce nature is very much played down, whereas Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ is born as the fierce Kāḷi for the purpose of battling Makiṣa. These myths connect to several rituals explored in the next chapters.

Chapter 3 presents the Navarātri ritual procedures at the Kāmākṣī temple, with special emphasis on the rituals that are peculiar to this festival; namely *pūjās* to prepubescent girls and auspicious married women, the fight between the goddess and the demon, Navarātri *alaṃkāras*, and a *vaṉṉi* tree *pūjā*. Here, the relation of the ritual manual *Saubhāgyacintāmaṇi* to contemporary performance is discussed. I highlight the nature of the goddess as expressed in ritual and show that several interpretations are available regarding how and if Kāmākṣī kills the demon. While priestly actions dominate the ritual life at this temple and devotees are a passive audience, when worshipped as embodiments of Kāmākṣī, women have a more pronounced role than during the rest of the ritual year.

Chapter 4 examines the Navarātri celebrations of the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple. Special Navarātri rituals in this temple include Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ's fight with the demon in the form of a banana tree, themed Navarātri *alaṃkāras*, processions, and a piercing ritual. This temple sees an active involvement of devotees during Navarātri, and especially women partake in the goddess's powers through various ritual actions. I also pay attention to this temple's special *alaṃkāras*, through which Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ transforms into various forms of the divine each festival evening, and show how playfulness, entertainment and efficacy blend in this ritual.

Chapter 5 highlights the feminine connotations of *kolu*, the nature of the goddess on the *kolu*, and the ritual agency of women, through describing and discussing various *kolu* rituals. I label *kolu* and Navarātri a "power-event" during which women annualy may renew their auspicious nature.

Chapter 6 investigates the playful and creativite aspects of *kolu* and how contemporary trends may or may not affect the ritual. I explore the dolls, their making, and displaying their *līlā*, before discussing notions of play such as competition, aesthetics, and social commentaries in *kolu* through vibrant examples.

Chapter 7 examines social mobility and change through focusing on newly started *kolus* and approporiation of *kolu* rituals. I show here how *kolu*, when adapted by individuals and communities that are not Brahmin, may integrate

ritual elements that are associated with non-Brahmin ritual practice, and suggest a monumental change that goes beyond the concept of Brahminization.

Chapter 8 explores the Sarasvatī Pūjā, largely a domestic practice in Tamil Nadu, and demonstrates how this ritual is closely connected to *kolu* wherever this is kept.

In the **Concluding Remarks** I presents some final reflections on the play of the feminine.

PART I

NAVARĀTRI IN MYTH AND TEMPLES

Chapter 1
Kanchipuram, the Goddesses, and Their Temples

In order to contextualize the temples and their goddesses within the South Indian temple town Kanchipuram, this chapter introduces the field in more detail. I will provide a brief description and history of Kanchipuram before describing the two temples addressed in this study, their residing goddesses, and their ritual traditions.

Kanchipuram: A Brief History

Kanchipuram (Ta. Kāñcipuram), or just Kanchi, is a famous temple city and popular pilgrimage site in northern Tamil Nadu. The city lies 75 km southwest of Chennai on the banks of the Palar River. The city houses many well-known temples and attract pilgrims among Śaivas, Śāktas and Vaiṣṇavas alike. Among the most famous temples, all named after their main deity, are the Śiva temple Ekāmranātha,[33] the Viṣṇu temple Varadarāja and the goddess temple Kāmākṣī ammaṉ. The latter puts Kanchipuram on the map as an important and powerful *śaktipīṭha*,[34] a place of worship dedicated to the goddess, and it hosts the principal goddess of the city. According to Hindu theology, Kanchipuram is one among the seven sacred cities of India,[35] where it is considered easier to achieve liberation (Skt. *mokṣa*) from the cycle of life and death and has been described as the "Benares of the South" (Gopal 1990, 177, Gupta 2001) and as "the City of Thousand Temples". In literature, the city was mentioned first by the grammarian Patañjali in his *Mahābhāsya* (2nd century) and later described as "the best among cities" by the Sanskrit poet Kālidāsa (probably 5th century).

33 The Ekāmranātha temple is one among the five *pañcabhūtasthalas* (Skt., "shrines dedicated to the five elements") in Tamil Nadu. Here, Śiva is represented as an earth *liṅga*.

34 The 51 *śaktipīṭhas* are considered the 51 places on earth onto which the body parts of the goddess Satī fell, the first consort of Śiva, after she had immolated herself and the lamenting Śiva carried her corpse around the world. These became important seats of goddess worship spread across India.

35 According to the *Garuḍapurāṇa*, the *saptamokṣapurīs* (lit. "the seven cities of liberation") are enumerated as follows: *ayodhyā mathurā māyā kāśī kāñcī avantikā purī dvāravatī jñeyā saptaitā mokṣadāyikāḥ* (2,38,5). This translates "Ayodhya, Mathura, Maya (Haridwar), Kashi (Varanasi), Kanchi (Kanchipuram), Avantika (Ujjain) and Dvaravati (Dvaraka); these are known as the seven cities granting liberation". Kanchipuram is the only one of the cities situated in the south of India.

Kanchipuram was the capital of the Pallava kingdom from the 3rd to the 9th century CE, and during this time, Kanchi's two oldest archeological heritage temples Kailāsanātha and Vaikuṇṭha perumāḷ were built (the 8th century). Kanchipuram was later a sub-capital of the Cholas from the 10th–13th century, and of the Vijayanagara kings from the 14th–17th century. The British East India Company ruled from the end of the 18th century.

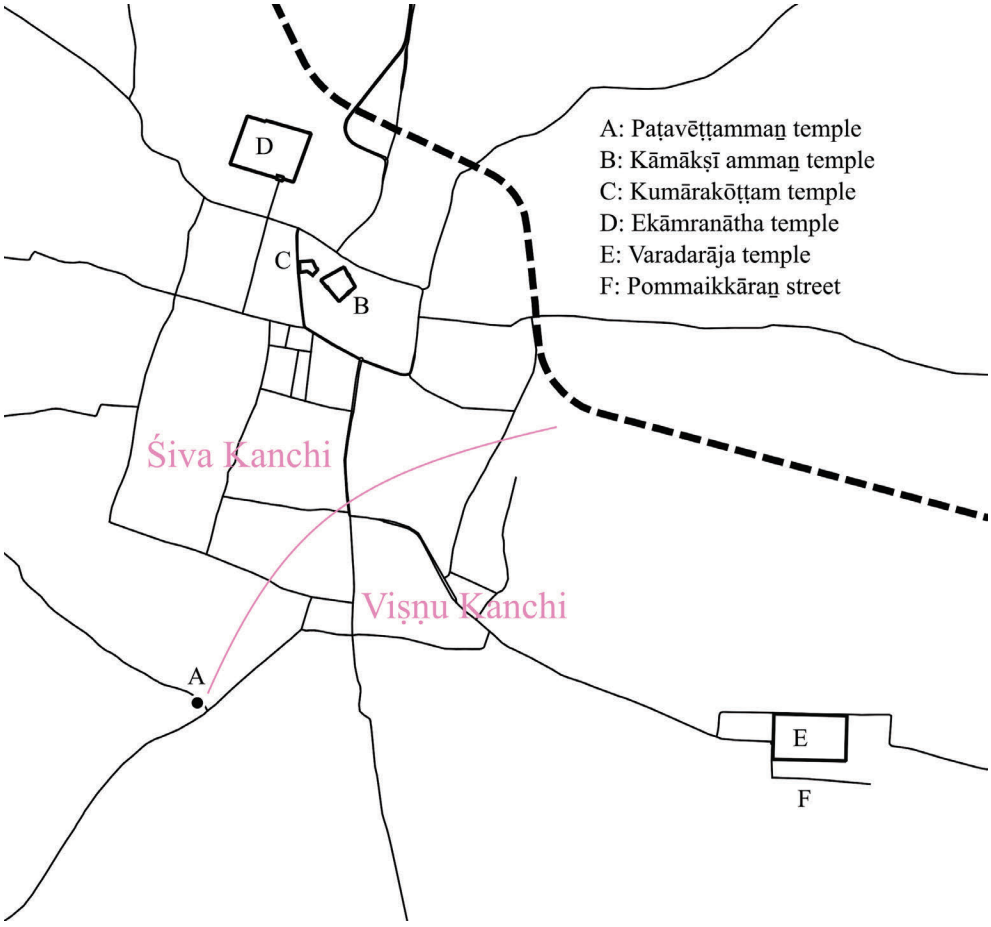

Figure 1.1: Map of Kanchipuram. Modeled on the map in Schier (2018, 16).

The city center of Kanchipuram is today divided in two: Śiva Kanchi, also known as big (Ta. *periya*) Kanchi, and Viṣṇu Kanchi, or little (Ta. *ciṉṉa*) Kanchi. Śiva Kanchi is the northern part where the Ekāmranātha and Kāmākṣī temples are situated. The well-known Murukaṉ temple Kumarakōṭṭam lies between them,

so that these three temples form a so-called "somāskanda cluster."[36] These are all independent temples who follow their own liturgical systems, although local mythology ties them together. Viṣṇu Kanchi is the south-eastern part of town, where the Varadarāja temple is situated.

Kanchipuram has long been a thriving center for religious, political, and cultural activity. Besides its numerous Hindu temples, a variety of faiths are represented with mosques, churches, Jain temples and a Sikh institution (Rao 2008, 30). While Buddhist, Jain and Hindu spirituality was thriving in Kanchipuram for centuries; there is no practicing Buddhist presence left today. Apart from its numer ous famed temples, Kanchipuram is, like Varanasi, known throughout India for its production of fine and exclusive hand loomed silk saris, distinguished in style by wide contrast borders.

The Kāmākṣī Ammaṉ Temple

The Kāmākṣī Ammaṉ temple (henceforth the Kāmākṣī temple)[37] is situated in the middle of Śiva Kanchi. The part of town where it is situated is called Kāmakōṭṭam (Skt. *koṣṭha*), which is also a general name of devī shrines in Śiva temples.[38] The temple covers about 10 000 square meteres and has four entrances with *gopurams*, ornate pyramid shaped towers characteristic of Dravidian temples, above them. The main entrance *gopuram* faces east (figure 1.3), as does goddess Kāmākṣī in her sanctum.

The temple in its present, modern form was built by the Cholas in the 14th century (Rao 2008, 102),[39] but the Kāmākṣī cult itself dates back prior to the 10th century (Brooks 1998, 71). According to Kerstin Schier (2018, 122), the

36 Referring to the Śaiva family group depiction originating in the south during the 6–8th centuries, where Śiva and his spouse Pārvatī are represented along with their son Murukaṉ.

37 The temple's full name is Śrī kāmākṣī ampāḷ devastāṉam.

38 A mythological narrative explains why none of the Śiva temples in Kanchipuram have a separate shrine for the goddess as Śiva's consort: Kāmākṣī withdrew all the powers of the śaktis into herself to help the god of love to conquer Śiva. Later, she granted that the śaktis returned, but not to Kanchipuram. Thus, the Kāmākṣī temple functions as Kanchipuram's Kāmakōṭṭam. For more on the development of Kāmakōṭṭam, see Schier (2018, 122–123).

39 Some scholars have argued that the present Kāmākṣī temple is a second temple, while the earliest or original temple is that of Āti Kāmākṣī Kāḷikāmpāḷ, situated very close to the Kāmākṣī temple and adjacent to the Kumārakōṭṭam, dated by Venkataraman to "a little after A.D. 800" (Venketaraman 1973, 12). See also Schier (2018, 125–131).

first reference to the goddess of Kanchipuram with the name Kāmākṣī occurs in an inscription dated to 1392 CE, by the Vijayanagara king Harihara II.[40]

After entering the main *gopuram* (figure 1.2), the visitor may circumambulate the sanctum by moving clockwise through the outer *prākāra* (Skt. "temple corridor"). Here, she will first pass the flagpole (Skt. *dvajastambha*), the pedestal for food offeings (Skt. *balipīṭha*) and the goddess's vehicle – the lion (Skt. *siṃha*), who looks directly at Kāmākṣī through a square hole in the wall of the sanctum building.[41] The Navarātri pavilion (Skt. *maṇḍapam*) is situated in the southwestern corner (figure 1.3). This is where the goddess is brought out at Navarātri evenings for her fights with the demon, and a concert is performed here afterwards. In front of the western *gopuram* and thus behind the sanctum, lies the temple tank called Pañcagaṅgatīrtham. On the northern side of the tank, there is a Durgā shrine, and the temple's *nīm* tree (*sthalavṛkṣa*). Its branches are filled with small wooden swings or cradles, often with baby Kṛṣṇas in them, hung up by devotees as prayers for conceiving, and under it are stone cairns set up as prayers for property. The *yāgaśālā*, where the fire-offerings are performed during festival times, is situated at the right side of the entrance *gopuram*. On top of the sanctum building shines the golden tower (Ta. *baṅgāru vimānam*)[42] as well as a smaller golden *gopuram*.

The sanctum and the inner *prākāras* are at present only open for Hindus.[43] The entrance to the temple interiors is situated in front of the main *gopuram*. In front of the office, close to the entrance of the temple interiors, looms the *jayastambha* (Skt. "victory post") which, according to local mythology, was erected after Kāmākṣī's victory over the demon Bandhāsura. The devotee passes by several shrines on her clockwise way to the sanctum, including those housing the procession images of Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī who come out along with

40 ARE 1890, No 29 and ARE 1954/55, No. 316. However, the temple and the goddess were probably sung of even earlier by the Śaivite poet saints Campantar, Appar and Cuntarar (7th–9th centuries). The three references in the Tēvāram (collection of poetry) that very likely refer to Kāmākṣī of Kanchipuram mention the names Kāmakoṭi, Kāmakōṭṭi and Kāmakōṭṭam. See Schier (2018, 119–121).

41 Only the main sights and those relevant to the Navarātri festival will be described here. The descriptions are based on how the Kāmākṣī temple looked before the latest renovation (finished in 2017), and since temple architecture also is subject to change, changes might have occurred since then.

42 *Baṅgāru* is the Telugu word for gold, and relates to Baṅgāru Kāmākṣī, the golden procession image originally kept in the Kāmākṣī temple, but later brought to Tanjavur and installed there.

43 This has been the case during all my visits between 2009–2015. The following description is based on interviews with priests and a hand drawn map made by Ute Hüsken and Mr. Satyamurti Sastrigal.

Kāmākṣī during Navarātri evenings. The main image of Kāmākṣī (Skt. *mūla-mūrti*, Ta. *mūlavar*, *mūlapēram*; lit. "root image") is situated in a 24-pillared hall called the Gāyatrī Maṇḍapam, where each pillar represents a syllable of the Gāyatrī mantra. Here she is surrounded by her subsidiary (Skt. *parivāra*) deities; Vārāhī, Mātaṅgī, Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī, and Annapūrṇā, and has the *śrīcakra* diagram installed in front of her, to be described shortly.

Kāmākṣī and Śrīvidyā

Kāmākṣī, the principal goddess of Kanchipuram, is considered a form of Lalitā Tripurasundarī, also known as Rājarājeśvarī. She is the Great Goddess of the tantric *Śrīvidyā* ("auspicious wisdom") tradition. As such, she is the highest aspect of the divine, and considered a form of Pārvatī or Durgā. Kāmākṣī of Kanchipuram is explicitly identified as Lalitā Tripurasundarī in the text *Lalitopākhyāna* (*LU*) of the *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa* (chapters 39–41), and Kāmākṣī is one of Lalitā's thousand names (n. 62) in the *Lalitāsahasranāma* (*LS*), which is popularly chanted during Navarātri in Kanchipuram.[44]

Śrīvidyā is a pan-Indian tantric *śākta* tradition devoted to goddess worship, with roots stretching back to the 6th century (Brooks 1992, xiii). The tradition had manifested in South Indian temples by the 13th century. The practice originated among Brahmins and is in contemporary South India closely associated with Smārta Brahmins, who define their tradition in terms of not being tantric (Brooks 1992, 5). *Śrīvidyā*, following the Śrīkula canon of tantras, focuses on the benevolent and motherly aspect through which the goddess manifests as Lalitā, contrasting with the fierce goddesses Durgā, Kālī and Caṇḍī of the Kālīkula tantras. However, as the supreme goddess, she also embodies these fierce aspects, as the Great Goddess manifests her energy (*śakti*) through both *ugra* (Skt. "fierce", Ta. *ukkiram*) and *saumya* (Skt. "benevolent", also Skt. *śānta*, Ta. *cāntam*) manifestations. In this view, *any* goddess is seen a form of the supreme goddess, who is localized in various forms and under various names. At the same time, she transcends the local boundaries by being part of the supreme *śakti*. Thus, Lalitā Tripurasundarī has manifested in Kanchipuram as Kāmākṣī.[45]

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44 Two texts are important for the worship of Lalitā Tripurasundarī: the *Lalitopākhyāna* of *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa* and *Lalitāsahasranāma*. These will be further addressed in chapter 2. According to Brooks, the *LU* was probably composed either in the Kanchipuram or Sringeri Śaṅkara *maṭhas* (1992, 59).

45 Three other South Indian goddesses relate to Lalītā: Mīnākṣī of Madurai, Śivakāmasundarī, the consort of Śiva Naṭarāja (lord of dance) of Cidambaram, and Akhilandeśvarī, the consort of Jambukeśvara of Tiruchirappalli (Trichy).

Figure 1.2: Kāmākṣī temple, entrance *gopuram*, 2014.

Figure 1.3: Navarātri *maṇḍapa*, 2014.

Kāmākṣī, as Lalitā Tripurasundarī, is worshipped in three forms, corresponding to the three aspects of her nature:

1) Physical (Skt. *sthūla*) as the anthropomorphic deity represented in the temple. This is the goddess who is depicted in mythology and iconography.
2) Subtle (Skt. *sūkṣmā*) as the *Śrīvidyā* mantra, Lalitā's root mantra (*mūlamantra*) of 15 syllables.
3) Transcendent (Skt. *parā*) as the *śrīcakra yantra*,[46] a mystical diagram of nine intersecting triangles and two sets of lotus petals, numbering 8 and 16 (figure 1.4). In the middle of the diagram, there is a drop (Skt. *bindu*) representing the goddess.

46 A yantra is a geometrical contrivance by which any aspect of the Supreme Principle may be bound (*yantṛ*, to bind; from the root √*yam*) to any spot for the purpose of worship (Kramrisch 1981, 11 in Brooks 1992, 116). Kanchipuram is considered a replica of the *śrīcakra*, with the Kāmākṣī temple as its *bindu* (Wilke 1996, 148–149).

Figure 1.4: *Śrīcakra*, scan of card bought in Kanchipuram in 2014.

There is a hierarchy among these three modes of worship, where the goddess's physical form is the most accessible. This is Kāmākṣī's iconic, anthropomorphic form, which her devotees come to worship in the temple. For worshipping her transcendent form in the *śrīcakra*, initiation into the Śrīvidyā tradition is required. In the Kāmākṣī temple, it is the *śrīcakra*, and not the anthropomorphic image that is the main recipient of worship by the priests. The *śrīcakra* represents both the process of creation and its actual form, being both reality's form and its reflection (Brooks 1992, 115). The *śrīcakra* has three levels: it is a map of creation's divine power projected visually; it is divine power to be accessed for those with the right esoteric knowledge; and it is the actual presence of the divinity. The *śrīcakra* is considered an extremely potent ritual object, as it contains all the gods of the creation as well as the supreme Kāmākṣī. Mr. Satyamurti Sastrigal explained:

> "The *bindu* (the center) is Kāmākṣī. Every god is in the *śrīcakra*. So, it is called *yantrarāja* (king among *yantras*). […] When we are doing *pūjā* to the *śrīcakra*, it is like doing *pūjā* to each and every god, then finally we are going to Āmpāḷ (Kāmākṣī)".

Figure 1.5: Kāmākṣī, scan of poster bought in Kanchipuram in 2014.

The name Kāmākṣī means "Having eyes (*akṣi*) of desire (*kāma*)". Folk etymology and her priests take the syllable KA to represent Sarasvatī and the syllable MA Lakṣmī, and thus Sarasvatī and Lakṣmī are reckoned Kāmākṣī's eyes. Kāmākṣī shares many traits of the iconography of Lalitā Tripurasundarī: She

holds the noose, goad, five flower-arrows and the sugarcane bow,[47] and the moon clings to her head (figure 1.5). But two things separate her from Lalitā: Kāmākṣī is seated in lotus posture (*padmāsana*) whereas Lalitā's right leg touches the ground, and, like Mīnākṣī of Madurai, Kāmākṣī carries a parrot atop of her flower arrows.[48] According to Douglas Renfrew Brooks, her four arms suggest that she is more closely associated with Lalitā than the rest of the *saumya* goddesses such as Pārvatī, who have two hands (the more hands, the more power), and emphasize her status as the Great Goddess independent of Śiva (Brooks 1992, 71). Kāmākṣī is, as is Lalitā, depicted with the *śrīcakra* inside of a *yoni*-shaped receptacle in front of her, and the eight Aṣṭalakṣmī figures are represented inside the *yantra* receptacle.

Priests and Worship

Kāmākṣī's priests are Brahmins and belong to three families with the caste-surname Sastrigal, who hereditarily share the rights to perform worship in the temple. In 2015, about 20 priests worked in the temple regularly. Their worship for the goddess follows the Sanskrit ritual manual *Saubhāgyacintāmaṇi*, a *śākta āgama* accredited to the sage Durvāsa, who is also enshrined in the temple. Mr. Satyamurti Sastrigal explained in an interview: "There is a difference between *pūjā* performed in this temple and other temples, we only follow *Saubhāgya-cintāmaṇi*. It is called *vaidika* (Skt. "Vedic", "orthodox") *pūjā*. According to *Saubhāgyacintāmaṇi* she (Kāmākṣī) is *Śrīvidyā*."

Daily worship for Kāmākṣī includes morning, afternoon, and evening ablutions (Skt. *abhiṣeka*, Ta. *apiṣēkam*) to the *śrīcakra*, which is the recipient of worship in this temple, as well as morning and evening *Sahasranāma arcana* and *Aṣṭottaram arcana* (these are recitations of the goddess's names). In addition, full moon days are considered special days with special worship performed at nighttime, nown as the *navāvaraṇa pūjā*.[49] Several *utsavas* of various length are celebrated during the ritual year, among which Brahmotsava in the month of Māci (February–March) and Navarātri (September–October) are regarded the most important ones.

47 The five flower arrows are red and blue lotus, *asoka*, mango and jasmine (Rao 2008, 10). According to legend, Kāmākṣī snatched the arrow and the sugarcane bow from Kāma, the god of love, so that he would not use them against his devotees.

48 The parrot is an iconographical detail shared with Āṇṭāḷ, the female Vaiṣṇava *āḻvār* saint, who carries a lotus flower with a parrot on top.

49 The *navāvaraṇa pūjā* is addressed in chapter 3.

The Taming of Kāmākṣī

The Kāmākṣī temple is closely connected to the monastic institution Kāmakoṭi pīṭha (known as the Śaṅkara maṭha) and the śaṅkarācāryas, who are hereditary trustees of the temple. The *maṭha* (monistary) has administered the temple since 1842. The 8th century philosopher Ādi Śaṅkara, who according to tradition founded the *maṭha*, is popularly believed to have pacified the formerly wild Kāmākṣī and subdued her fierce powers by means of the *śrīcakra yantra* which is installed in front of the sanctum image. Legend tells how Kāmākṣī used to take the form of Kālī at night and scare people, but after Ādi Śaṅkara had performed penance, she was pleased and promised not to leave the temple anymore without his permission. Thus, he is credited with installing the original *śrīcakra* in the sanctum of the temple, as well as creating the Vaidic and orthodox form of worship in the temple devoid of tantric elements.[50] As Annette Wilke has shown in her intriguing article on South Indian legends on Śaṅkara and his taming of wild goddesses, it is however not likely that the historical Ādi Śaṅkara was involved in this cult reform. This is rather a retrospective imposition of *Śrīvidyā*, which had grown to be a regular feature both within the *maṭhas* and some South Indian temples (Wilke 1996). Ādi Śaṅkara has a shrine within the Kāmāksī temple, and during festival processions, Kāmākṣī's procession image leaves the temple only after granting permission from Ādi Śaṅkara's image. The present *yantra* in the Kāmākṣī temple was installed during the 16th century (Schier 2018, 124).

Despite her history of violence and being appeased by Ādi Śaṅkara, Kāmākṣī is today considered an exclusively benevolent goddess. Although Kāmākṣī is worshipped in her temple as an independent goddess, she is in mythological narratives married to Ekāmranātha Śiva, Lord of the mango tree, whose temple is situated within walking distance from Kāmākṣī's. The story of how Kāmākṣī embraced a sand *liṅga* after Śiva released a flood to test her, then follows their marriage, is very well known in Kanchipuram (and beyond). However, as Schier (2018) shows in her research on the Ekāmranātha Mahotsava, the marriage is not emphasized in any degree by priests neither in the Kāmākṣī temple nor the

50 Mr. Satyamurti Sastrigal held that Ādi Śaṅkara did not have any connection to the Kāmākṣī temple in Kanchipuram at all, and that the god Brahmā was the one performing the initial *śrīcakrapratiṣṭhā* (Skt. "installation of the *śrīcakra*") there. According to him, Ādi Śaṅkara installed an *ardhameru* (the base of the three-dimensional *śrīcakra*) of herbs at Mangadu, a south-western suburb of Chennai, to sooth the earth again after the heat of the goddess' austerities. Magadu is known as the place where Kāmākṣī performed *tapas* and houses another well-known Kāmākṣī temple.

Ekāmranātha temple.[51] Kāmākṣī is through this mythological marriage identified with Pārvatī, the consort of Śiva, but is still quasi-independent, since her role as a benevolent goddess is not connected to her status as Śiva's wife. Rather, she *surpasses* Śiva as the highest aspect of the divine, bestowing welfare in the world as well as liberation. At the same time, Kāmākṣī manifests as a demon-slayer who sports and ferociously battles with demons in myth and ritual. As I show when I discuss Navarātri mythology and rituals in coming chapters, there are different interpretations available to how the nature of Kāmākṣī as a beningn goddess is preserved.

The Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ Temple

The Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple[52] is situated slightly outside the city center of Kanchipuram, in a neighborhood called Jayappā nakar. The temple is private and belongs to a non-Brahmin priest (Ta. *pūjāri*, *pūcāri*) of the Ceṅkuntar Mutaliyār community, who carries out worship together with his sons. The priest's grandmother built the temple in the mid 70's, when she installed a statue of the goddess and worshipped it. According to the priest, people come to their temple for worship regardless of caste affiliations, including Brahmins.

The temple is situated in a side street off the Vandavasi road which leads out of the city towards Tindivanam and Pondicherry, and an arch where the road meets the Vandavasi road marks its presence. The Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple is small and modest and consists of a single room with the goddess's sanctum situated in the middle (figure 1.6). In line with the goddess's image, right outside the temple there is a trident (Skt. *triśula*, Ta. *tiricūlam*), a lion, and an offering pedestal (Skt. *balipīṭha* Ta. *palipīṭam*).

51 While the marriage of Kāmākṣī and Ekāmranātha is enacted in the annual *paṅkuṉi uttiram* festival, Kāmākṣī takes the position of bridesmaid instead of Śiva's wife in contemporary performance of the ritual. See Schier (2018) for more about the marriage myth and how it is re-enacted yearly in the Ekāmranātha temple.

52 The full name of the temple is Aruḷmiku śrī paṭavēṭṭammaṉ tirukkōyil (lit. the holy temple of honourable Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ).

Figure 1.6: Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple, 2014.

Inside the temple the sanctum dominates, housing a statue of the goddess with a head in front. Her son Paraśurāma (Ta. Paracurāmaṉ) stands on her left side. On the sanctum's left-hand side, there is a shrine housing Gaṇeśa (Ta. Viṉāyakaṉ), and on its right, a shrine housing Subrahmaṇya (Ta. Murukaṉ) along with his two wives. The temple also houses a shrine of the nine planets (Skt. *navagraha*, Ta. *navakkirakam*), a statue of Durgā (Ta. Turkkai) standing on the head of the severed buffalo demon, a Hanumān (Ta. Āñcaṉēyaṉ) shrine and a *liṅga* (Ta. *liṅkam*), and on the eastern side of the temple entrance there is a shrine housing stone snakes (Skt. *nāga*, Ta. *nākakal*). Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ's procession image is enshrined in a niche behind the sanctum.

Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ

Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ is a form (Skt. *aṃśa*) of the *grāmadevatā* (Skt. "village goddess") Reṇukā, who again is considered a form of the better-known and very popular South Indian "village" goddess Māriyammaṉ. Her concern is mainly with worldly problems like bestowing children and marriages, and Māriyammaṉ is widely known for curing pox diseases, nowadays particularly

chickenpox. According to Mr. Mahesh, approximately 50 people come each day during the summer season to get cured from chickenpox by receiving the goddess's *tīrtha* (Skt. "holy water", Ta. *tīrttam*).

Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ's name is derived from the town Padaivedu,[53] where Reṇukā's main temple is situated, referred to as her "head office". The story of sage Jamadagni's wife Reṇukā is known from the Sanskrit texts *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*. The myth relates how Reṇukā is beheaded by her son Paraśurāma, on behalf of her husband, for transgressing a sexual norm. Subsequently she is revived again on Paraśurāma's request and made to forget about the whole incident. In contrast to the pan-Indian Sanskrit myths, in Tamil folk tales and oral myths Reṇukā's decapitation takes a different turn as a lower caste woman is decapitated along with her. When Reṇukā is revived, her body is switched with that of the lower caste woman. She ends up with an outcaste body and a Brahmin head, after which she is known as Māriyammaṉ.[54]

This myth explains why Reṇukā-Māriyammaṉ is represented in the sanctum of her temples as a head (Skt. *śiras*, Ta. *ciram*), often with a full statue behind it (figure 1.7). This is also the case in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple, where the head is the main recipient of worship. The *pūjāri* explained: "The head is Reṇukā devī, and then there is the total form given to her [the *mūlapēram*]. That is Māriyammaṉ. She is given a form and seen. Any [Māriyammaṉ] temple you go, there will be two statues."

Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ shares her iconography with Karumāriyammaṉ of Thiruverkadu,[55] depicted with white skin, garlanded, dressed in a red sari, and sitting in half lotus posture with a stone head in front of her (figure 1.8). In her four hands she holds the *triśūla*, a knife (Ta. *katti*), a two-headed drum shaped like an hourglass (Ta. *ṭamaram*), and a bowl (Skt. *kapāla*, Ta. *kapālam*), which her priest and devotees explained was for distributing *kuṅkumam* (Ta. vermillion powder).

53 Padaivedu is in the Tiruvannamalai district, ca. 60 km from Tiruvannamalai. The small town is home to a well-known Reṇukā ampāḷ temple (see Craddock 1994).

54 According to Tamil folk etymology Māriyammaṉ means "the changed mother". The Tamil verb *māṟu* means to change but is spelt with the alveolar *ṟ*. Māriyammaṉ is spelt with the dental *r* and thus not derived from the verb. *Māri* in Tamil means rain, but in Sanskrit *māri* carries the meaning "smallpox, pestilence, death". Although none of my respondents linked Māriyammaṉ to rain, she probably originated as a Dravidian goddess concerned with fertility and rain, though such origins are difficult to trace.

55 Thiruverkadu, close to Chennai, is one of the two "head offices" of Māriyammaṉ, the other is Camayapuram in Trichy.

Figure 1.7: Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ *mūlamūrti*.

Figure 1.8: Māriyammaṉ, scan of poster bought in Chennai in 2014.

As a generalization, local village goddesses such as Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ are often tutelary or border deities of social units or towns, who protect the people there from adversity and illness. They are commonly unmarried (or, if they are

married to Śiva, they are represented without him in the temple), characterized as hot and with heightened sexual energy. Very often, but not always, these goddesses are served by non-Brahmin priests of lower castes.[56] While many *grāmadevatās*, including several forms of Māriyammaṉ, are *ukkiram* manifestations who receive non-vegetarian offerings, many of them, such as Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ, are also peaceful (Ta. *cāntam*) and receives only vegetarian offerings. Mr. Mahesh emphasized: "She is peaceful and not even a hen is given, no *bali* (Skt. non-vegetarian offering). […] Everything is vegetarian. Not even dry fish, as is given in some temples, is given here".

This picture is not black and white. While the fierce and hot character of any village goddess may be appeased or pacified in an iconic, cool form inside the sanctum, she might take on her fierce form occasionally, such as when she manifests in a non-iconic form such as a pot during a festival (Flood 1996, 194). These goddeses may also punish if not propitiated – so that she rather *potentially* is a violent and angry goddess. For instance, as Māriyammaṉ, Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ is simultaneously the cause and the cure for pox. The pox "pearls" (Ta. *muttu*) are regarded a manifestation of the goddess' grace as well as of her rage. Although the picture of goddesses as fierce or benign is polarized, the village goddesses are considered more independent and unpredictable than and distinguished from the consorts of the great gods, like Pārvatī, Sarasvatī and Lakṣmī, whose characters are exclusively auspicious and benign. This is expressed in myth and ritual, in which Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ ferociously kills the demon on Vijayadaśamī after which she needs to be cooled by ablutions.

56 Today an increasing number of village goddesses are served by Gurukkaḷ Brahmins, and temples are renovated or built new, through processes of Sanskritization and urbanization. As Joanne P. Waghorne's study of the goddess' gentrification in Chennai (2001, 2004), has shown, Māriyammaṉ and other *ammaṉs'* popularity increased from the 1970's as a village goddess to a middle-class identity marker. This growth is due to social, economic, and political changes.

Chapter 2
The Myth: the Goddess and the Demon

> "[In myth] traditions mingle, here heaven and earth, good and evil meet, here God and man come face to face. The narrator does not think in terms of fact versus fiction, history versus myth, to him the history of the goddess is as 'real' as the goddess herself. Where we might separate a myth from a historical fact, he will join them, mix them into a space which gives him access to both the historical world and the mythical world. That is the space in which goddess and devotee meet". (Meyer 1986, 1)

The goddess fighting the (buffalo) demon is the archetypal myth of the Goddess throughout India. The myth exists in countless versions, and is not just one story, although the *Devīmāhātmya* (also known as *Durgāsaptaśatī*, 700 [verses] to Durgā, or *Caṇḍīpāṭha*, Durgā's recitation) has contributed greatly to its fame. The myth has been widespread in Tamil Nadu at least since the Pallava dynasty (3rd–9th centuries CE), shown by the frequency and scale of iconographic representations (Shulman 1980, 177).[57]

As Eveline Meyer shows in her fascinating work on the mythology of the goddess Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvarī, the study of myths is important for several reasons: for understanding the complex nature of the goddesses featuring in them, since the goddess lives as much in her myths as in her temples and rituals; for knowing which narratives the narrator is familiar with and how he builds them into other myths; to discover recurring patterns and themes in the myths; and for the understanding of particular rituals, including religious festivals (1986, 1–2). Sometimes the ritual may illuminate the myth, and sometimes the myth illuminates the ritual.

I will introduce the generic pattern of the myths of the goddess killing the demon from the *Devīmāhātmya* and the *Lalītopākhyāna* before proceeding to the local versions prevalent in Kanchipuram, related to the Kāmākṣī and Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temples. After summarizing the myths, I will analyze their recurring and important motifs and themes. The synopses presented in here serve as important background knowledge when discussing certain rituals in the following chapters.

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57 An example is the well-known Mahiṣāsuramardinī relief in Mahabalipuram (late 7th century, figure 2.1).

The *Lalitāsahasranāma*, *Lalitopākhyāna* and the Demon Killing Pattern from *Devīmāhātmya*

Most myths of the goddess killing the demon conform to a pattern modeled on the well-known Mahiṣāsuramardinī ("the Slayer of the Buffalo Demon") myth from the *Devīmāhātmya* (henceforth *DM*, "Glorification of the Goddess").[58] Composed during the 5th or 6th century (Coburn 2002, 266), the *DM* was the first Sanskrit text praising the supreme divine as female. Although it forms part of the *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa* (81–93), the *DM* has an independent life as a text of its own, and forms the basis of *śāktism*, the theological teachings concerning the goddess and her worship.

Figure 2.1: Mahiṣāsuramardinī relief, Mahabalipuram, 2011.

The *DM* presents the warrior goddess Durgā in a cosmic struggle against forces of evil and chaos to maintain order and balance in the universe. The basic structure of the myth is as follows:

1) A demon gains power, usually through austerity, gets rewarded by a boon and becomes invincible.
2) The demon defeats the gods.

58 For studies on the *DM* and a translation of the Sanskrit text, see Coburn (1991, 2002).

3) The gods aim for revenge and asks one of the great deities for help.
4) A battle takes place, often with an army created by the heroine.
5) The demon is killed.
6) The gods praise the heroine who killed the demon.
(Brooks 1992, 67–68)

As Brooks (1992) shows, this well-established 6-staged "skeleton" of the myth of Durgā and the buffalo demon forms the basis also of the myth in the *Lalitopākhyāna* (henceforth *LU*) of the *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa*, in which goddess Lalitā kills the demon Bhaṇḍāsura.[59] As we shall see, this is also the case with the local myths from Kanchipuram.

While the *DM* is recited as part of the worship of the goddess during Navarātri in many places in India, it does not hold as prominent a position in Kanchipuram. Here, the local goddess Kāmākṣī, a form of Lalitātripurasundarī, is the prime object of veneration during Navarātri. Instead of the *DM*, we find that the *Lalitāsahasranāma* in "the thousand names of goddess Lalitā", henceforth *LSN*) is frequently recited in Kanchipuram during the festival. Through her 1000 names, Lalitā's image is presented as complex as that of Durgā of the *DM*. Several of the goddess' names in this hymn bear reference to the *LU* myth (n. 65–82),[60] and her names also include those of warrior goddesses Durgā (n. 140) and Kālī (n. 751). Just as Durgā in the *DM*, Lalitā is more powerful than the male gods; she for instance creates Viṣṇu's ten *avatāras* out of her fingernails during the fight (90–136). Moreover, the *LU* presents itself as bigger than the *DM*, by encompassing the *DM* myth into Lalitā's fight with Bhaṇḍāsura's armies (80–88). After elaborate battle scenes, Lalitā slays the demon with the weapon called *Kāmeśvara* (142).

The myths of Kāmākṣī killing Bandhāsura resemble the *LU* in several ways, and we will return to the *LU* in the analysis of these myths. The myth of Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ, on the other hand, rather resembles the Mahiṣāsuramardinī myth of the *DM*.

59 For a synopsis of the *LU* myth, see Brooks (1992, 68–69).

60 E.g. *Bhaṇḍāsura-vyadhoyukta-śakti-senā-samanvitā* (n. 65): "She who is equipped with an army of śaktis, ready to kill Bhaṇḍāsura"; *Bhaṇḍāsurendra-nirmukta-śāstra-pratyastra-varṣiṇī* (n. 79): "She who rains forth weapons in return to every weapon released by Bhaṇḍāsura"; *Karāṅguli-nakhotpanna-Nārāyaṇa-daśakṛtiḥ* (n. 80): "She out of whose fingernails Viṣṇu's ten *avatāras* emerge"; *Mahāpāśupatāstrāgni-nirdagdhāsura-sainikā* (n. 81): "She who burnt the armies of *asuras* to ashes with the Mahāpāśupata weapon"; *Kāmeśvarāstra-nirdagdha-Bhaṇḍāsura-Sūnyakā* (n. 82): "She who burnt the city of Suyaka along with Bhaṇḍāsura with the *Kāmeśvarāstra*".

Local Myths of the Goddess and the Demon: *Sthalapurāṇas* and *Māhātmyas*

While the mythologies of village goddesses such as Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ tend to be transmitted orally, the Brahmanical shrines and temples usually refer to texts, often (also) composed in Sanskrit, which narrate the myths attached to these shrines. This distinction sometimes becomes blurred with the introduction of new media such as the Internet, as many temples of village goddesses and Brahmanical deities today have their local stories featured on their web page, and/or in pamphlets and CDs sold in the temples.[61] It is also important to note that the Sanskrit texts of the Brahminical temples exist and have existed alongside, and been nourished by, an oral tradition, and still is.

Local mythology is found particularly in the texts called *māhātmyas* (Skt. "greatness; glorification") or *sthalapurāṇas* (Skt. "ancient [stories] of the place", Ta. *Talapurāṇam*). These texts resemble the *purāṇas* in character and content and contain local versions of Hindu mythology. The *māhātmyas* are localized texts that glorify and legitimize places, shrines, and deities, and they developed in connection with these places as a pilgrim's literature attracting devotees to the temples (Shulman 1980, 17). They are composed in local languages and in Sanskrit, and often more or less similar versions exist in vernaculars as well as in Sanskrit. Many of the *māhātmyas* claim to belong to one of the 18 *purāṇas*, possibly to enhance their status, but in fact the standard prints of the *purāṇas* usually do not contain the local *māhātmyas* claiming to belong to them.

The *māhātmyas* share the common Hindu pantheon with the major *purāṇas* and often copy their themes and stories, but elaborate on them and provide them with a local character, so that local myths and motifs are blended in. Through the "localization of mythic action" (Shulman 1980, 40) these local texts narrate how certain places and shrines came to be holy; the deeds of deities and sages connected to the shrines; and the merits one gets from performing specific rituals at these sacred places, which are often called *kṣetras* (Skt. fields; [sacred] territories). The rich local mythological in the many Tamil *māhātmyas* and *sthalapurāṇas* is an invaluable source for the study of local Hinduism, as well as for topography, as they contain much information on temple structures and shrines.[62]

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61 See Erndl (1993) for a discussion on the role of pamphlets in relation to Sanskrit and oral mythology.

62 The *māhātmyas* and *sthalapurāṇas* were for long underestimated sources in studying Hinduism and regarded inferior to the pan-Indian texts by several early Indologists. Shulman (1980) has contributed greatly to the study of Tamil *māhātmyas* with his

Kāmākṣī and Bandhakāsura/Bhaṇḍāsura/Paṇṭācuraṉ

A rich mythological tradition surrounds Kāmākṣī, expressed in various *māhātmyas* and *sthalapurāṇas*, in which she kills different demons.[63] However, the myth related to the Kāmākṣī temple's contemporary Navarātri celebrations is found in the Sanskrit *sthalapurāṇa* called *Kāmākṣīvilāsa* (*KV*),[64] in which Kāmākṣī kills the demon Bhandaka (Bhandakāsura). This story is referred to by the priests as the basis of the fight that is enacted in the temple during the first eight evenings of Navarātri. According to them, the demon's name is Bhanda (Bhandāsura, Ta. Paṇṭa; Paṇṭācuraṉ), sounding like an abbreviation of Bhandaka, but more likely modeled on Lalitā killing the Bhaṇḍāsura in the *LU*.

According to David Dean Shulman, the *KV* offers "perhaps the most complete and most mature versions of the myths of Kamākṣī" (1980, 292, fn. 28). The *KV* claims to belong to the *Śrīvidyākhaṇḍa* of the *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa* but does in fact not form part of its standard printed edition. This connection is not insignificant, as the *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa* includes the *DM*, the archetypal myth of the goddess killing the demon.[65] Although the name *Kāmākṣīvilāsa* (the "play" or "manifestation" of Kāmākṣī) indicates that Kāmākṣī is the main character, the *KV* in fact contains almost an equal share of myths for all the three principal and well-known deities of Kanchipuram: the goddess Kāmākṣī, Ekāmranātha Śiva and Varadarāja Viṣṇu. Despite narrating the sanctity of the entire sacred Kanchi *kṣetra*, Moßner (2008, 1) labels the text a Śākta *Kāñcīmāhātmya* as opposed to

analyses of Śaiva (and Śākta) myths (see also Shulman 1978, 1976, 1985, 1984). A more recent publication on South Indian temple networks which includes several chapters discussing *māhātmyas* and *sthalapurāṇas* is Ambach, Buchholz and Hüsken (ed.), 2022.

63 Among these, there is a Sanskrit *Kāmākṣīmāhātmya* consisting of four chapters which claims to belong to the *Sahyādrikhaṇḍa* of the *Skandapurāṇa*, which contains the story of Kāmākṣī killing Mahiṣāsura (4.1–17); the ritual text *Saubhāgyacintāmaṇi*, which contains a myth of the goddess killing the demon Andhakāsura (38.1–38). The *Kāmākṣīvilāsa* contains a myth on how goddess Kāmākṣī killed the demons Madhu and Kaiṭabha asuming the form of Viṣṇu (1.94 –125) in addition to her fight with the demon Bandhaka (which is explored below). In addition, there are two Sanskrit *Kāñcīmāhātmyas*, one Vaiṣṇava and one Śaiva, but in the myths therein Viṣṇu and Śiva kill the demons, and not the goddess (see Dessigane, Pattabiramin, and Filliozat 1964, Porcher 1985). For more on Kanchipuram's various *māhātmyas*, consult Buchholz 2022.

64 The *KV* is rendered in Tamil prose as *Kāmākṣīlīlāpirapāvam*, first published in 1906, and as *Kāñcimahimai*, first published in 1927 (Schier 2018, 85). See Shulman (1976) for other Tamil versions of the myth of Devī and the buffalo demon.

65 A striking intertextuality with the *DM* is found in the myth of Kāmākṣī killing the demons Madhu and Kaiṭabha. This myth is however used here to establish the supremacy of the goddess in Kanchipuram over the manifestations of Ekamranātha Śiva and Varadarāda Viṣṇu.

the two other *Kāñchimāhātmyas* mentioned in fn. 63. This is persuasive since the text places Kāmākṣī on top of the local divine hierarchy and establishes Varadarāja and Ekāmranātha as forms of her. Moreover, the text is mentioned as the *sthalapurāṇa* of the Kāmākṣī temple in the Indian census of 1961 (Moßner 2008, 7).

The date of the text is uncertain (Shulman 1980, 392, fn. 28, Wilke 1996, 157). Moßner suggests the *terminus ante quem* to be the last decades of the 17th century, when the golden image of Kāmākṣī was brought to Thanjavur due to the threat of a Muslim invasion,[66] and the *terminus post quem* to be after the Chola kings (their decline was in the beginning of the 13th century), who are devoted a section in the *KV* (14.215–232) (2008, 7). On the other hand, Nagaswamy proposes that the *KV* was composed during the late 19th century, possibly at the time of publication, because it refers to "structures of very recent origin" in the Kāmākṣī temple (1982, 207–208).[67] The first printed edition was published in 1889.

The *Kāmākṣīvilāsa* comprises 14 chapters. Chapter 12 is dedicated to the glory of the goddess Tripurasundarī who dwells in the Kamakoṭipītha. This chapter narrates Kāmākṣī's manifestation, her attributes, and heroic deeds, and contains the story of her slaying the demon Bandhaka after which she was installed in the Kāmākṣī temple of Kanchipuram. In the opening verse of this chapter, Kāmākṣī is praised as the killer of the demon: "I praise Kāmākṣī, the slayer of the *asura* Bandhaka, Mahātripurasundarī, richly endowed through her eyes that are the cause of all".[68] The demon has entered the storyline already in the previous chapter 11, when the gods are tormented by Bandhaka and flee through a deep cave at Gomukha, and come out of the cave (Skt. *bila*) in Kanchipuram called Kamakoṣṭha.[69] There, they encounter the goddess Tripurasundarī who dwells in the cave.

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66 The festival images of Ekāmranātha and Varadarāja were also brought out of Kanchipuram at this time, to Udayapalayam, but they returned to Kanchipuram in 1710. The golden festival image of Kāmākṣī (known as Baṅgāru Kāmākṣī, *suvarṇakāmākṣī* in the *KV* 14.92–109), which used to serve as a bride in the marriage festival of Ekāmranātha, was then brought to Thanjavur, where a temple for her was inaugurated in 1786 (see Schier 2018, 138–152 and Hüsken 2017).

67 Nagaswamy does not specify which temple structures he talks about, making it difficult to take a stand regarding the text's date based on these arguments.

68 *viśvakāraṇanetrāḍhyāṃ mahātripurasundarīm*
bandhakāsurasaṃhartrīṃ kāmākṣīṃ tām ahaṃ bhaje (*KV* 12.1).

69 This cave (*mahābila*) is situated in the *Gāyatrīmaṇḍapa* inside the sanctum of the Kāmākṣī temple. Later in the Bandhakāsura myth, Kāmākṣī instructs the gods to build the *Gāyatrīmaṇḍapa* and install her image there. Wilke says about the *bila*: "[it] is the place

Here follows a summary of the Bandhakāsura myth from the *KV* (11.19–25; 12.16–114):[70]

There was a *rākṣasa* (Skt. "demon") called Bandhaka, king of daityas, long-lived after a boon from Brahmā, who conquered Śiva and settled at Kailaśa with his troops. He invaded all the worlds by war and tormented gods, sages and good men out of arrogance. The gods, frightened of the demon, went to Kanchipuram through the cave called Kāmakoṣṭha. There, they encountered the goddess Mahātripurasundarī, and dwelt outside the cave in a divine Campaka tree in the form of parrots.

While in the tree, to get relieved of their sorrows, they meditated upon the goddess Mahātripurasundarī. The goddess then emerged from the cave, and out of compassion for the gods she burned the whole world to ashes in the form of the fire of destruction. She was the only one remaining, without qualities (*guṇa*), before she manifested herself again. Standing in the void, she created the *trimūrti* Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva from her three eyes, all of whom had the shape of infants. She fed Brahmā with milk consisting of the knowledge of creation, Viṣṇu with milk consisting of the knowledge of preservation, and Śiva with milk consisting of the knowledge of destruction. Drinking the milk, the *trimūrti* again got their youthful forms, and they saw that the world was desolate, thinking they were in a dream. Then, out of fear, they performed their respective actions of creating, preserving and destroying the world. And as before, the world contained Bandhaka, and the gods were settled in the tree near the cave as parrots. But the creator (*dhātṛ*, i.e. Brahmā), having experienced the death of the world and its recreation, said to them: "This is a dream."

Seeing the dreadful demon Bandhaka, lord of Dānavas, born again and sleeping at Mt. Kailaśa at night, the goddess was angered. She put down one foot at his heart and the other one at his neck. With brilliance, in the form of Mahābhairava [*sic*] endowed with 18 hands and 18 weapons, she grabbed Bandhakāsura's tuft, took the five elements and killed the enemy angrily. In a moment, she killed all the other daityas in the whole world wherever they were, with her weapons. Thereupon, at sunrise, the goddess became a five-year-old girl (*pañcavārṣikakanyakā*). She dragged the fierce-looking Bandhaka by his tuft and settled in Kāmakoṣṭha.

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where all the powers of the goddess are assembled; it is a place of penance […]; it is the cave of Kāma, the womb of the goddess; it is associated with the graveyard" (1996, 157).

70 The summary is based on my own translation of the chapter(s) in question. I have summarized rather than translated the myth to make it more accessible to the reader.

The gods in the tree saw the girl, wearing all auspicious marks and beautiful clothes and ornaments, resembling inflamed gold, as she was dragging the deceased demon along by his tuft. They realized she was the goddess and assumed their own forms. After praising her with divine and captivating music, *stotras*, incense and flower rains, they asked the girl who she was and how the demon, their tormentor, was killed.

The girl told the gods to bury the demon, erect a victory post, build a temple for her in the cave and place her on a throne, and worship her duly from midnight to sunrise. Only then would she reveal who she was, after *darśana* the next morning. The gods bowed before the maiden, dug a hole right there and buried the body of Bandhaka in it. Immediately they raised a victory post and built a *maṇḍapa* as great as the cave.[71] They sunk into an ocean of wonderous water, determined that the maiden was the goddess, meditated upon her and performed tapas at the break of dawn. Opening the door to the *maṇḍapa* in the morning, the gods saw Tripurasundarī, Lalitā, Rājarājeśī, who had assumed her own true form. The goddess said: "I burnt the world to ashes by the fire of destruction. From the wish to create the world again, I created Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. I killed Bandhakāsura in the form of a maiden, and all other *rākṣasas*, and brought him to the cave. I will dwell happily in the Gāyatrīmaṇḍapa forever! This supreme place will be known as *pralayajitkṣetra* (field conquering destruction), very stable even through destruction." The gods bowed to her and worshipped her again with lamps and food. They embellished the goddess with beautiful gifts and took her for a procession in her palanquin. The goddess told the gods that she was manifest in the world as an ocean of nectar, as *śakti*, and that she would henceforth dwell in the temple known as Kāmākṣī, bestowing wishes to the gods and others.

Lord Śiva then bowed to the goddess and granted a boon that everyone who worships the goddess in Kanchipuram shall obtain a *koṭi* (a crore, i.e. 10 000 000) of wishes. Śiva disappeared before the goddess's throne and reappeared later in the form of the sage Durvāsas, along with a group of students.

71 The *maṇḍapa* built by the gods is in a later *śloka* named *Gāyatrīmaṇḍapa*, that is the sanctum that houses Kāmākṣī's image today.

> The sage initiated his students[72] and gave the Cintāmaṇī Tantra,[73] the precepts of worshipping the goddess."

The reader will recognize the pattern described in the beginning of this chapter, but also notice several new motifs, such as the parrot shaped gods, the destruction and re-creation of the world, the five-year-old goddess dragging the demon, and the localization of the goddess, the cave and the temple.

With the destruction of the world and its re-creation, the *KV* presents the goddess as *nirguṇa*, devoid of qualities, as the *DM* does with Durgā. Lalitā is the supreme reality, surpassing and encompassing the other gods. She is the cause of the world's destruction, and the only one who is left, formless, when the world is a void. She is the primary cause for the world's creation, as she creates the Trimūrti who in turn performs *their* respective actions of creating, preserving, and destroying after being fed with the milks of knowledge. The world then appears to them as a dream (*svapna*), or as *māyā*; illusion or appearance. *Māyā* is the cosmic dream-play of the goddess,[74] or the idea that the world is created as a stage for Her to act upon, the ground for her *līlā*, expressed for instance in sporting combats with demons. While the *KV* does not elaborate on the fight in any detail, the theme of *līlā* is expressed in this cosmology, and how Lalitā, effortlessly aloof from the world, accomplishes in an instant what the gods do not manage.[75]

Indeed, both the *DM* and the *LU* are significantly more violent than the *KV* and describe the battle scenes elaborately. The *DM* moreover narrates how the goddess laughs and plays while fighting, betraying no exertion (Kinsley 1979, 52). Durgā and Lalitā of these texts are depicted as warrior goddesses, while Kāmākṣī is not. The goddess in the *LU* moreover has a more royal character, which is not stressed in the *KV*. Lalitā of the *LU* acts as the royal commander in the battlefield who instructs her subordinates, and she herself only kills the

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72 This Sanskrit *śloka* is ambiguous (*dīkṣāṃ yathākramāt kṛtvā*, from *KV* 14.114). Moßner reads it as the students followed the religious observances as prescribed ("befolgten gemäß der Tradition religiöse Observanzen") (2008, 77).

73 Cintāmaṇī is a generic term for tantric texts (Moßner 2008, 77), but in this context probably refers to the ritual handbook *Saubhāgyacintāmaṇī* (*SC*), which is used as the manual for worship in the Kāmākṣī temple. This is plausible because of the adjective "*devyarchanavidhim*" (precepts for worshipping the goddess) describing it, and the popular belief that the sage Durvāsas composed the *SC*.

74 *Māyā* is not only a power of the gods, but a common epithet of the goddess (*mahāmāyā*), which is also found in the *KV* (1.60, 1.77–78).

75 As Kinsley (1972, 150, 1979, 52–53) points out, this effortlessness is reflected in iconography: the face of the goddess is usually calm and shows no emotional involvement, while the demon may be depicted tormented, in pain or half dead.

biggest enemy, Bhaṇḍa. While the armies, soldiers, cavalries, and weapons sent back and forth are described in detail in both the *DM* and the *LU*, where the emphasis is on the battle scenes, in the *KV*, Lalitā kills the world's most dreadful demon in his sleep (!). Still, the posture described while she kills him resembles the well-known posture from the *DM*, where the goddess places a foot on the buffalo's neck, and the demon emerges halfway in his anthropomorphic form out of the buffalo's mouth before he is decapitated. The *KV* tells that Lalitā proceeds to kill all other demons, but neither of these fights are elaborated. This reflects a reluctance of promoting the more ambivalent and *ugra* nature of Kāmākṣī in this spesific Sanskrit text.

After her battle, the goddess settles in Kanchipuram and requests a temple from the gods. With this, the Bandhakāsura myth of the *KV* serves as a creation myth for the Kāmākṣī temple and the goddess' manifestation there.[76] The myth presents Lalitā as available on earth installed in the temple as Kāmāksī, granting devotees the fulfillment of a crore (*koṭi*) of wishes (*kāma*), yielding the cave's name Kāmakoṭi. As such it is linked to the concept of *pratiṣṭhā*, the rooting or consecration of a deity at a particular place. The myth thus both emphasizes Kāmākṣī's accessibility for *bhakti* (devotion) as well as her transcendence as the supreme reality, and points both to her localization and universalism.

The goddess Lalitā has several representations in the myth. First, she dwells in the cave as the supreme Mahātripurasundarī who turns the world to ashes out of compassion with the tormented gods. When the world has re-appeared, she assumes the fierce form of 18-armed Mahabhairava (lit. "very frightful, terrible") endowed with 18 arms wielding 18 weapons and kills the demon(s) angrily. Thereupon she becomes a five-year-old girl (*kanyakā*; maiden, girl, virgin) and drags Bandhakāsura by his tuft to Kāmakoṣṭha. After the gods have worshipped her duly, she assumes her own true form (*svasvarūpa*) as "Tripurasundarī, Lalitā, Rājarājesī" and dwells thereafter in the temple as Kāmākṣī.

76 The *KV* does not point towards any connection between this myth and the timing of Navarātri: the goddess left her maiden form and assumed her own true form as Tripurasundarī in *Kṛtayūga*, at the break of dawn the Friday of the first dark fortnight in the month of Phālguna (Ta. Paṅkuṉi, i.e. February–March, *KV* 11.74–77), and *not* during Āśvina Navarātri in the month of Puraṭṭāci (September–October). In the ritual handbook *Saubhāgyacintāmaṇi* on the other hand, the connection between the myth of the goddess and the demon and the timing of Navarātri is made explicit. In this text, the full moon day of the month Āśvinā and the nine days starting from the first day of the bright fortnight are labeled as superior (*SC* 38. 1–4).

Figure 2.2: Bālā Kāmākṣī, scan of card bought in Kanchipuram in 2014.

However, in Kanchipuram it is widely known, and emphasized by the priests of the Kāmākṣī temple, that Kāmākṣī killed the demon in the form of a maiden (Bālā Kāmākṣī, figure 2.3).[77] Indeed, not a single person I talked to, priest or devotee, mentioned her form as Mahābhairava. The dismissal of the Mahābhairava form may be an attempt to play down a fierce aspect of Kāmākṣī, as Kāmākṣī's manifestation in Kanchipuram is that of a benign goddess. Interestingly, the goddess, too, explains in her speech to the gods in the *KV*, after she has

77 Bāla Kāmākṣī has her own temple in Nemili. Her iconography is prominent also in the Kāmākṣī temple of Kanchipuram, for instance on posters and plastic pocket cards sold in the small shop near the main entrance. She is depicted in a benign form, seated in a lotus with two hands holding a rosary and a palm leaf manuscript, and two hands in the *varadā* (Skt. "gift-bestowing") and *abhaya* (Skt. "fearlessness") *mudrās*, young, with a white complexion. Bālā is also one of Lalitā's names in the *LS* (n. 965), and in the *LU* she joins the battle against Bhaṇḍa's forces as Lalitā's nine-year-old daughter born from her crown.

revealed her true form, that she "killed Bandhaka in the form of a maiden and brought him to the cave."[78] In other words, in her own recap of the story, the goddess herself dismisses her fierce form as Mahāhairava substituting the maiden in its place, and it seems that Kāmākṣī herself is de-emphasizing her fierce aspect.

But the myth still reflects the fierceness of Kāmākṣī through manifestation as Bālā. The goddess killing the demon in the form of a maiden is a motif very common in Tamil myths. As Shulman has shown, the maiden form of the goddess is potentially a highly dangerous form, as she embodies a sexuality that has not yet been unleashed (1980, 144–149). Virginity is here regarded a kind of *tapas* (Skt. "austerity"), which provides the goddess with powers (Ta. *aṇaṅku*) to create and destroy, and with ambivalence. According to Shulman, the virgin goddess is "the epitome of violent power" (1980, 140). These powers may be kept in check and made to good use through a goddess's marriage. The goddess's wifely form is an utterly auspicious form, who performs a different kind of *tapas* and thereby uses her powers differently; through devotion and chastity (Ta. *kaṟpu*) towards her husband. The two types of goddesses embody different kinds of strength, as the maiden may use her powers malevolently, be it through afflicting people with disease or killing demons.

The myth moreover reflects the popular legend of Kāmākṣī's fierce form (her black form) who dwelt in the cave (*bila*), which transformed to a benign goddess (her white or golden form; *Gaurī*) when installed in the temple. The same motif is also expressed in the stories of her taming by the Śaṅkarācārya, as mentioned in the previous chapter, in which the powers of the wild goddess were confined into the *śrīcakra*.[79]

The Priest's Version

When I asked the priests of the Kāmākṣī temple to narrate the myth of Kāmākṣī and the demon, I was told a story quite similar in content and structure as given in the *KV*. Here follows the Bandhāsura myth narrated by Mr. Satyamurti Sastrigal:[80]

> "Once, when lord Śiva was doing *tapas*, Maṉmatan (Kāma) shot arrows with flowers at Śiva to distract him. Śiva got angry and burned him to ashes with

78 [*bhandakam*] *nihatya kanyāvaṣeṇa tam ākṛṣya mahābile* (*KV* 89).

79 See Wilke 1996.

80 This is the myth in its entirety, translated from Tamil to English by my research assistant Srividya.

his 3rd eye. Vināyakar (Gaṇeśa) made an idol of the ashes. Looking at it, Śiva smiled and laughed. That doll got life and was Bandhāsura. He did tapas to Śiva who was pleased and granted him a boon. Bandhāsura asked for a life without death. Lord Śiva said that it was not possible and asked him to ask for a different boon. Bandhāsura then asked that wherever he is and whomever he thinks of, he will get their powers, and that only a child below 9 years of age not born from a man and a woman could kill him. He was granted both wishes.

After this, he harassed all the *devas* and the people. The *devas* asked lord Śiva for a solution. Lord Śiva said: "go to Kanchipuram, via the *biladvāram*. Take the form of parrots, pray to Ādiparāśakti and be in the Cenbaga tree." They did what lord Śiva said, and when they started to pray, they found a little girl who killed the *asura* and dragged him. The gods asked who she was, and the girl said: "Make a small idol and pray to it in Kanchipuram during the *Brahmamuhūrta* period. Then you will know who I am!" The next day they went and saw her in that period. She sat in the *kaṭi āsana* (hip posture) with four hands. That is who Kāmākṣī is – it is Ādiparāśakti (the supreme primordial power) who has taken the form of Bālā and killed the demon.

For this, Brahmā made an offering of lotuses, Viṣṇu gave the *sudarśanacakra*, and Śiva gave the *śrīcakra* as a pendant and put it on her. Then he took the form of Durvāsar Mūnivār and created the *Saubhāgyacintāmaṇi*. All *pūjās* that are performed here [in the Kāmākṣī temple] are performed according to the *Saubhāgyacintāmaṇi*."

Many of the elements from the *KV* reappear in this narrative, but we also notice a few differences. The oral myth is more accentuated on the origin of the demon and his granting of boons, which is hardly mentioned in the Sanskrit version. According to the priest, the demon cannot be killed by anyone but a child below the age of nine years, a boon granted to him by Śiva, along with the boon of assuming the powers of anyone he thinks of (in the *KV* myth, Bandhakāsura receives the boon of longlevity from Brahmā). This is important, because in it is lies the premise for Kāmākṣī to asume the form of Bālā to kill the demon. This is also expressed in the ritual worship of girls below the age of nine (*kanyā pūjā*), which is performed daily in the Kāmākṣī temple during Navarātri. The fierce form of Mahāhairava from the *KV* is not mentioned in the priest's narrative. Indeed, neither is the fight – narrated from the gods' perspective, we are simply told that the gods see the girl approaching with the already killed *asura*. The fight itself happens off stage, like in the classical tragedies. Again, the priest plays down Kāmākṣī's fierceness.

The priest's myth also includes a prologue according to which the god of love Maṉmatan (Kāma) disturbs the asceticism of Śiva with his arrows. Śiva then reduces Maṉmatan to ashes, who is then revived as Bandhāsura by Gaṇeśa.[81] The motif of creating Bhandāsura from the ashes of the god of love is not explicit in the *KV*. There, the demon's origin is in fact not mentioned at all. However, in a later chapter of the *KV* Kāma asks Kāmākṣī to get him his body back (*KV* 14.9–66), which may allude to this story. Kāmākṣī grants his wish and helps Kāma defeat Śiva in battle by withdrawing the *śaktis* of all Śiva temples into the cave.[82] As Śiva propositions on her, she rejects him saying: "I am not Gaurī" and creates a crore of Kāmas to fight Śiva. The goddess tells the conquered Śiva to take refuge with Maṉmatan and meditate on her, and then takes the form of Gaurī.[83]

Kāmākṣī is closely associated with the god of love, as is reflected in her name ("she whose eyes are desire"), and through her iconography – Kāmākṣī carries the weapons of Kāma; the sugarcane bow and flower arrows, on which a parrot sits (Kāma's vehicle). The myth is another hint at this close connection. As Shulman has shown, the divine marriage of the god and goddess is the central structural element of the Tamil *sthalapurāṇas* (1980, 138), and the core of many festival cycles in Hindu temples. Śiva burning Kāma to ashes is the first step towards marriage between Śiva and Pārvatī in many *purāṇas*. In Mr. Satyamurti Sastrigal's myth we learn that the demon is a Śiva devotee, who performs *tapas* towards and is granted a boon by Śiva (*dveṣabhakti*). This, too, is a common motif in South Indian demon myths. Shulman takes a step further and suggests that the demon and Śiva are in fact one and the same. The demon is identified

81 The motif of Śiva reducing Kāma to ashes is found in several *purāṇas*, including the *Matsyapurāṇa*, the *Śivapurāṇa* and the *LU*. In the latter, Kāma disturbs Śiva's meditation and shoots a flower arrow at him to help the gods destroy Tārakāsura, who could not be defeated by anyone except Śiva's son. Śiva then reduces Kāma to ashes with his third eye and sends him forth formless into the universe. Yet the unleashing of love affects Śiva and results in his union with Pārvatī, after which their son Kārttikkēyaṉ (Murukaṉ) is born, who finally defeats the demon. One of Lalitā's names in the *LS* also concerns the remedy of Kāma (n. 84). In some stories, Śiva burns Kāma who takes the form of a tree (O'Flaherty 1973, 158–159). Interestingly, the fight between the goddess and the demon is enacted in many temples with a (*vaṉṉi* or banana) tree standing for the demon (see chapter 4). According to O'Flaherty, Kāma is pictured as "a tree whose sprouts are women" and is particularly associated with pine trees (ibid.). See O'Flaherty (1973, 141–169) for more on Śiva's relation to Kāma in Hindu mythology.

82 This myth explains why there are no separate shrines for the goddess in any of Kanchipuram's Śiva temples.

83 Gaurī ('shining, brilliant') is the golden form of Kāmākṣī, who becomes Śiva's consort. In this myth Kāmākṣī is transformed to her benign from through marriage. See Shulman (1980, 170) for a full summary of Maṉmatan myth from the *KV*, which might be an elaboration of *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa* 3.4.30.59.

with Kāma as his revived ashes who is identified with Śiva, whose manifestation in Kanchipuram is known, according to the *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa*, as Kāmeśvara ("lord of desire") (Shulman 1980, 171). Shulman proposes a symbolic marriage between the goddess and the demon, substituting Śiva with the demon devotee.[84] In the *KV*, the demon sacrifices himself/is sacrificed at the hands of the maiden goddess, after which Śiva emerges from the nether world through the cave of Kāma. This cave is "the womb of the goddess, the Kāmakkoṭṭam" (Shulman 1980, 176), and Śiva later marries the goddess at the local shrine in question (see Shulman 1980, 169–176).

Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ and Makiṣāsuraṉ

While there are no written texts pertaining to the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple, there is a rich oral mythological tradition surrounding this goddess. According to Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ's priest Mr. Mahesh the goddess has had five births: as Reṇukā, as Māriyammaṉ (Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ), as Aṅkāḷa ammaṉ of Mel Maliyanur, as Kalkattā Kāḻi [sic] and as Satiyanasūyā.[85] Out of these, it is the Kalkattā Kāḻi story that forms the basis of the temple's Navarātri celebrations and the goddess's fight with the demon.

Here follows a summary of the myth of Makiṣāsuraṉ as told by Mr. Mahesh, main priest in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple:[86]

> "There was a young Brahmin boy who wanted to become a *saṃnyāsin* (Ta. *caṉṉiyāci*, an ascetic) at a young age, and a Brahmin girl who wanted to marry him. She asked if they could marry, and after a living a good life together for some years, then he could become an ascetic. But the boy was not interested in married life and denied her request. Since the girl thought his mentality resembled the *asuras* (Ta. *acurar*) who live in the forest, she cursed him to be an *asura*. He in turn was angry for being cursed for his wish, and cursed her back so that she, too, would be born in a demon family.

84 This has an interesting parrallell in a ritual described by Beck (1981), where a local goddess in the Coimbatore district marries (presumably) a demon in the form of a tree trunk, is widowed for a short period, and later marries Śiva.

85 See Ilkama (2012) for the Reṇukā, Māriyammaṉ and Satiyanūsā myths relating to the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple. The Aṅkāḷa ammaṉ myth resembles closely the one Meyer retells from Mel Malaiyanur (1986, 36–37).

86 The summary is a close retelling of the story which was translated from Tamil to English by my research assistant Mr. Subramaniyan.

The curses became true. One history says they were born brother and sister. The other says they were husband and wife. Which one is true I am not aware of, but the story that says husband and wife looks good.

They were born as Makiṣāsuraṉ (Skt. Mahiṣāsura) and Makiṣi. Both of them had the head of a buffalo and went for doing penance.[87] Makiṣāsuraṉ got a boon from Śiva that he would lead a life without death and with permanent wealth that does not diminish, and that his body could not be burnt. Makiṣi asked that she could only be killed by a child at the age of 16, born from a couple of equal sex and leading the life of a king, thinking such a death was not possible. This Makiṣāsuraṉ story is the history of Kalkattā Kāḷi, and Makiṣi is the Aiyappaṉ story.[88]

Makiṣāsuraṉ started creating a place of his own, and his wealth increased. Once he demanded a share in the *homa* (Ta. *hōmam*, fire sacrifice) of the gods, but the gods denied. He started to destroy the gods and put the sages who performed the *homa* into the fire. He increased day by day and went out of control. The gods went to lord Śiva and complained. Then Śiva created Śakti. The gods did a *homa* for 108 days, and the 108th day was a new moon day (Ta. *amāvācai*), the start date of Navarātri. Navarātri is for gathering all 3 *śaktis* – Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī and Durgā; their powers. That is why the first three days is for Lakṣmī, and so on. This is how the three *śaktis* were gathered, and every day of the Navarātri function, weapons were grouped. For this war, they gathered all weapons, and did *pūjā* (Ta. *pūcai*) for them, so on Vijayadaśamī, the 10th day, all the powers come together. All the powers put together is called Ādiśakti. She destroys Makiṣāsuraṉ. Only because *pūjā* was done this day, and next day she went for *samhāra* (Ta. *samhāram*, war). That is why the gods won the battle.

This incident happened in Kolkata, so that is the "head office" for Kāḷi temples. The demon was destroyed in a period between morning and night. So, we would have a question: why Makiṣāsuraṉ has this powerful boon, but was killed. According to his boon, he should not die at all! Moreover, his body should not be burnt, and his wealth should be permanent. And his wealth did in fact not go away at all, neither was his body burnt. What happened was this: The goddess cut off Makiṣāsuraṉ's head and wore his intestines as a

87 In Tamil, *makiṣaṉ* or *makiṭaṉ* is a Sanskritized form for buffalo (Ta. *erumai*). *Makiṣi* is the feminine form.

88 Aiyappaṉ was, according to legend, a child from a union of Viṣṇu and Śiva. To overcome the demoness's boon, Viṣṇu took birth as his female *avatāra*, the enchantress Mohinī, who united with Śiva. Aiyappaṉ was born and destroyed the demoness.

garland. And the head was under her legs. So, it is like all the criteria of the boon is satisfied: the demon did not die but took refuge [with the goddess].

During the battle different incidents happened. Makiṣāsuraṉ also tried to cheat the goddess by taking the form of Śiva; he went in that form to Kāḷi devī and they had an argument. Eventually she realizes it is not Śiva, so she assumes a ferocious form and that is why we can see some images with Śiva under the feet of Kāḷi; it is Makiṣāsuraṉ who has come in that form. In the pictures she will not have a full dress, and after being cheated, all the hands of the *asura* were cut off and tied around her waist. And there will be skulls around her neck. That is because she destroyed demons and soldiers; she took their skulls and wore as garlands. She puts Makiṣāsuraṉ down. These things happened during the Navarātri period. The last day Makiṣāsuraṉ took refuge under her feet. That is why they have the *kolu*, the goddess is in the kolu and gets the power from all the gods. Makiṣāsuraṉ was not destroyed fully but took refuge at the feet of the goddess. That is why the *pūjā* offered to the goddess is also for the *asura*."

While Kāmākṣī's myths resemble the *LU*, the myth of Mr. Mahesh shares traits with the *DM*, with additions and differences. The pattern presented in the beginning of the chapter is intact apart from the gods praising the goddess, which is absent in Mr. Mahesh's myth.

The myth starts with the demon's origin from a rather unfair curse to a pious Brahmin boy, explaining the origin of the two demons relating to two well-known myths in South India, Makiṣa and Makiṣi. As in the myth of Kāmākṣī's priest, the demon gets his boon from doing *tapas* to Śiva, whom the gods resort to once the demon gets out of control. Śiva creates Śakti to aid the gods, who perform a 108-day *homa* to empower her. The myth therefore depicts *śakti* as created from the gods' united power, like the narrative in the *DM*. In the *DM* myth the goddess is created from a brilliant light (Skt. *tejas*) emerging from the gods, but in the Kalkattā Kāḷi myth the gods gather the powers of Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī and Durgā during Navarātri, corresponding to the notion that the first three days of the festival are for Lakṣmī, and so on. The content of Pāṭavēṭṭammaṉ's myth also relates to the *kolu* and the worship of weapons on the ninth day of the festival known as *āyudha pūjā* or Sarasvatī Pūjā.[89] Severa respondents explained how the goddess on the *kolu* draws powers from the gods surrounding her in order to fight the demon.

The battle scenes and the actual killing of the demon are not described in any detail. Still, the fierce form of the goddess is more prominent in Mr. Mahesh's

89 See chapter 8.

myth than in the myths current at the Kāmākṣī temple. Kālī is known as an *ugrā* and bloodthirsty goddess, as a destroyer. She is associated with the flux and movement of existence (Kinsley 1979, 20) and can be seen as the very embodiment of *līlā*, frequently depicted dancing upon her husband's, or the demon's, corpse. The narrator is not hesitant on emphasizing this: her dress is not proper for a female, and she wears her victims' sculls and arms as ornaments.

We also note that a cosmological aspect, which is very prominent in the *KV*, is absent in the myth of Kalkattā Kāḷi: neither the goddess's transcendence nor her immanence (the *bhakti* aspect) is mentioned. Interestingly, Mr. Mahesh's myth relating to Navarātri is not at all localized in Kanchipuram, but in the distant Kolkata. This might be because of the fame of Kolkata's Durgā Pūjā, out of a desire for an association between the temple's themed *alaṃkāras* and the magnificent themed *paṇḍals* (temporary structures set up for venerating a deity) of Kolkata.[90]

I propose that both the lack of cosmology and of localization of the myth is due to the different characters of the goddesses in question, as well as the type of myth. While the benign Kāmākṣī in her myths is identified with the pan-Indian and cosmological deity Lalitā-tripurasundarī, Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ has her origin as Reṇukā, a human wife who unfairly was decapitated from transgressing a sexual norm.[91] Revived as a goddess she is placed in the tradition of more approachable village goddesses: Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ is not a cosmological deity like Kāmākṣī. Still, the priest entitles the killer of the demon Ādiśakti (Skt. "primeval power"), like Kāmākṣī's priest,[92] since localized goddesses also are perceived as parts of the primeval energy. When I say "type" of myth, I refer to the fact that the myth of Kalkattā Kāḷi is not Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ's creation myth, or a story generally associated with her. Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ's origin myth is the Reṇukā

90 Bengali *paṇḍals* are increasingly represented in Tamil media: for instance, during Navarātri 2014 there were 3 articles in the Chennai times about the Durgā Pūjās celebrated in Chennai against 6 articles on *kolu* displays. The articles encouraged the reader to "don't just make time for golus [*sic*] […] but plunge into the colors of the east with Durga Puja" and to "go pandal hopping". According to these articles, Durgā Pūjās have been organized in Chennai by Bengali associations since the 1930s, and in 2014 there were capproximately 15 grand *pūjās* with *paṇḍals* in different parts of the Tamil Nadu capital. The oldest *pūjā* in the city, the Bengali Association in T. Nagar, claimed to expect about 50 000 visitors to the 2014 *pūjā*. While I have not seen any of these *pūjās* myself and do not know how many Tamils participate in them, these articles may point towards a recent growth in the Durgā Pūjās of Chennai, and in promoting them in media. I am unaware of any Durgā Pūjās celebrated in Kanchipuram.

91 See chapter 1.

92 The exact word used in the oral Kāmākṣī myth was Ādiparāśakti, meaning "supreme (*parā*) primeval power".

story, whose decapitation transforms her into Mariyammaṉ, a story with strong elements of locality.[93] Apart from the Kāḷi myth, all the other myths associated with Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ revolve around the theme of chastity and the unfair treatment of her as a female by male characters. The Kāḷi myth does not explain anything about Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ's or the temple's origin and tells us more about popular beliefs about Kālī than about Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ.

An important motif expressed at the very end of the myth is that the demon does not die but takes refuge at the feet of the goddess. From there he still receives offerings according to his boon. According to the priest, this is why demons, represented in the arches above the deities' images, are offered food in the temple.[94] Shulman reads this mythical theme, the salvation of the demon dying at the hands of the goddess, as a model of self-surrendering to the deity: the actions of the demon leads to his purity and salvation at his "death" (1980, 320). As Shulman interprets it, this symbolizes the state of egoism (Skt. *ahaṃkāra*) as defeated, when the devotee realizes his true identity as a *bhakta*. On a more symbolic level of interpretation, the death of the demon thus forms a model for man to overcome ego and possessiveness. That ego is symbolized by the demon's severed head has been interpreted by other scholars too, such as Brenda E. F. Beck (1979, 32), who argues that in the most common four-armed iconography of Kālī, where she carries a severed head in her left hand, the head symbolizes how the devotee's ego must be slain for obtaining salvation. Curiously, but perhaps not surprisingly, such a symbolic connection or moral component was a fact several respondents in the temples stressed when asked about the meaning or significance of the fight between the goddess and the demon; that it ultimately concerns the destruction of ego, or evil, within man. These respondents' thoughts, all of whom were interviewed in the Kāmākṣī temple during the *curasaṃhāra*, the enactment of Kāmākṣī's fight with the demon, clearly illustrate this:

> "I think [the fight] is [about] getting rid of evil. Curaṉ (the demon) represents evil, and it is the destruction of that by the divine. So, then we can understand that if there is any evil within us, and we pray for these nine days, we can eradicate it".

93 See Ilkama (2012). Consult Beck (1981), Brubaker (1977), Craddock (2001), Doniger (1999), and van Voorthuizen (2001) for other versions of the Reṇukā story.

94 This food is placed outside the temple by the *triśula*, and includes puffed rice, *dāl* (lentils), cigars and biscuits, which is offered to the demon during the enactment of the fight at Navarātri.

> "*Mahiṣāsuravatam* (killing Mahiṣāsura) is the killing of a man's *ahaṅkāram*. Now Ammaṉ killed Mahiṣāsura, but the inner meaning is her destruction of man's ego. We must get rid of all that. But how can that be, when every moment we say: "I do this, I have come to see this"! […] Any *curasaṃhāra* is the destruction of evil."
>
> "Navarātri, you see, even though the tales talk about demons and all, this is like those days' masters took us as a child and narrated a story. But the demons are within us. It is the anger; it is lust; greediness. That is the demons given here, they gave a name to it, a form to it. One of the demons had a buffalo head and so on."

These quotes illustrate a clear identification of the people with the myth of the goddess and the demon, and what happens in the temple during Navarātri.[95]

Concluding Remarks

The local myths of Kāmākṣī and Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ presented here conform to a generic pattern of "demon-killing-myths" originating from the *DM*, sharing a common set of Śākta theological ideas. They can be seen as combat-as-*līlā* myths (cf. Kinsley 1979) in which the goddess is ultimately aloof from her creation, battling demons as a diversion.

In the respective myths we have met a compassionate Lalitā, who both encompasses and transcends the *ugrā-saumyā* dichotomy, and a birth of Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ as the fierce Kalkattā Kāḷi or Mahiṣāsuramardinī, killer of the Buffalo Demon. I have explored some of the myths' themes and motifs, including the burning of Kāma and reading the myth as defeating ego. While there are many similarities to the myths, there are striking differences, too: Kāmākṣī's myth is stongly anchored in Kanchipuram and concerns the very origin of her temple, whereas Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ's myth occur in Kolkata with their famed Durgā Pūjā celebrations, although the priest links the storyline to the South Indian customs of *kolu* and Sarasvatī Pūjā. The cosmological aspects prominent in the myth of Kāmākṣī are also absent in the myth of Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ as Kāḷi. Through exploring the demon-slaying manifestations of the goddess as Balā Kāmākṣī and Kāḷi, I have shown that while the fierceness of the goddess may be played down and

95 While the surrender of the demon as the goddess's (or Śiva's) devotee is not mentioned in the *KV* myth, ritual in the Kāmākṣī temple still hints at this: After the demon is defeated in battle, his head(s) are brought to the goddess, garlanded, and placed at her feet as a token of surrendering to her. The demon's heads are also marked with the common forehead marks of being a Śākta devotee, namely three horizontal lines of white ash with a dot of *kuṅkumam* in the middle.

the fight not elaborated in the myths, the goddesses are able to take on fierce forms for accomplishing their task of killing the demon.

In the following chapters, we will see how the associated myths are related to several rituals in the respective temples during Navarātri.

Chapter 3
Navarātri in the Kāmākṣī Temple

This chapter investigates the Navarātri festival in the Kāmākṣī temple by discussing the festival's ritual procedures.[96] I will emphasize the rituals that are peculiar to Navarātri; namely the daily worship of prepubescent girls and married women, the goddess's Navarātri *alaṃkāras*, the fight between Kāmākṣī and the demon which is enacted as a big spectacle for altogether eight evenings, and the Vijayadaśamī worship of a *vaṉṉi* tree, carrying a web of symbolic dimensions. Different people visit the Kāmākṣī temple during Navarātri, notably many families, and groups of women and groups of young boys. Some come daily, others come once or for a few evenings, and devotees may visit from outside of Kanchipuram. *Darśana* of the goddess in her special *alaṃkāras* as well as the enactment of the fight were huge attractions reasons for devotees during Navarātri. The goddess is considered distinctively powerful during these nine nights, and it is considered especially auspicious to visit the temple during this festival.[97]

Four Navarātris

The Śarada Navarātri (Skt. "autumnal Navarātri") celebrated in the Tamil month of Puraṭṭāci is one of the two major annual festivals in the Kāmākṣī temple, along with Brahmotsava.[98] Four Navarātri periods of nine days each are marked in the temple during the ritual year. Among these, the autumnal Navarātri is by far the most prominent, and referred to simply as "Navarātri" by most participants as well as the priests (and the one I refer to as Navarātri in the following). The autumnal Navarātri encompasses the most elaborate ritual procedures out of the four and attracts crowds of devotees to the temple every year.

Vasanta Navarātri (spring Navarātri) is celebrated in a smaller scale in the month of Paṅkuṉi (March–April), and Varāhī Navarātri (also known as Āṣāḍha

96 I wish to thank Ute Hüsken, who generously made available the material she had collected on Navarātri during the Kanchipuram research project since 2003.

97 According to the temple's website, Navarātri, Brahmotsava and full moon days are the special occasions during which the goddess is particularly powerful (http://www.kanchikamakshi.com, accessed 23.08.2022).

98 The Brahmotsava is celebrated for 11 days in the month of Māci (February–March) and includes grand processions of Kāmākṣī's festival image on the temple's *vāhanas* (vehicles) each morning and evening.

Navarātri) and Śyāmalā Navarātri are marked at the temple's shrines of these two deities[99] with special *pūjās* and *abhiṣekas*. The Varāhī and Śyāmalā Navarātris are celebrated only by the devotees of these two goddesses, Varāhī Navarātri in the month of Āṭi (July-August) and Śyāmala Navarātri in the month of Tai (January-February).

The Ritual Manual *Saubhāgyacintāmaṇi* and Contemporary Performance

As explained in chapter 2, Kāmākṣī's priests represent themselves as carrying out *Śrividyā* worship based on the Sanskrit ritual manual *Saubhāgyacintāmani* (SC), ascribed to sage Durvāsa.[100] Out of altogether 54 chapters,[101] the manual includes two chapters concerning Navarātri. Chapter 38, entitled *mahānavamī-māhātmyam* ("the greatness of the great ninth [day]"), narrates a myth of how the goddess aids the gods in defeating the demon Andhaka.[102] The myth demonstrates the auspiciousness allotted to the nine nights starting from the first day of the fortnight of the bright half of the lunar month Aśvina.[103] This corresponds

99 Varāhī and Śyāmalā are two major goddesses of the *Śrīvidyā* school. The boar faced Varāhī is Lalitā's commander-in-chief, and Śyāmalā her minister (Wilke 2010, 231).

100 To my knowledge, no critical study has been done on the *SC*, making it difficult to say anything about when it was written, etc. The date of publication is not mentioned in the printed edition I am in possession of, which is published by the Śaṅkaramaṭha.

101 The *SC* consists of two parts: *pūrvabhāgaḥ* (54 chapters) and *uttarabhāgaḥ* (2 chapters).

102 The myth of the *SC* is different from the myth of the *KV* investigated in chapter 2, which, as explained, is referred to by the priests as the underlying motif of celebrating Navarātri in the Kāmākṣī temple. In the *SC* myth, the gods are scolded by the demon Andhaka who held the world captive, and Śakti arises from a most excellent light resulting from Brahmā's meditation. Śakti first splits into three forms, and then into many forms, and tells Brahmā that she abides in the hearts of all beings and appears as their *śakti*. She tells Brahmā that the gods are to worship her on the 9th lunar day (*mahābhūtatithi*) of Aśvina. Brahmā realizes the superiority of this day and performs the vow known as *mahānavāmi* ("the great ninth") for the goddess, after which the gods do the same. The goddess is delighted and grants the gods the boon of succeeding conquering the ill-souled Andhaka (*SC* 38.1–38). Note that in this myth, Kāmākṣī does not confront the demon in battle, she "takes away his powers", so that the gods can fight him (*SC* 38.26), and her benevolent nature is maintained throughout.

103 *śṛṇu devi mahābhāge yan māṃ tvaṃ paripṛcchasi | āśvayujyām ayatnena yatphalaṃ labhate dināt || sarvamāsakṛtenāpi tatphalaṃ naiva labhate | tasmin māse 'pi deveśi pūrvapakṣe 'dhiko mataḥ || śuklapratipadādyās tu navarātryo 'tiśobhanāḥ | tatrāpi navamī ślāghyā sarvasiddhipradāyinī || SC* 38.1–4 — "Listen, goddess, most virtuous one, to what you ask me! On the full moon day of Aśvinā, what fruit one gains during that day without effort, on account of performing [the prescribed worship in] all the [other] months, one does not gain an [equal] fruit. Surely, the fortnight of the waxing moon in this month, O

to the time the festival is celebrated in the temple today. According to the myth, the 9th day (*tithi*) of this month, corresponding to today's Sarasvatī Pūjā, is considered particularly auspicious. The following chapter 39 is entitled *navarātryutsavavidhiḥ* ("precepts for the Navarātri festival") and contains in 53 *ślokas* the ritual procedures to be followed in the temple during the nine-night festival.

While the priests' performance of ritual mirrors certain aspects of the text, such as the worship of young girls and auspicious married women, the framing of the festival (beginning with sprouting auspicious seeds and ending with the ablution of Kāmākṣī's weapon), and the invocation of goddesses in *kalaśas* (Skt. "pots"), there are several noteworthy inconsistencies between the *SC* and contemporary performance. For instance, two of the central rituals that provide Navarātri with its special character in contemporary practice are not at all mentioned, namely Kāmākṣī's fight with the demon and the *vaṉṉi* tree *pūjā*, which can be interpreted as an atonement ritual for Kāmākṣī after the fight. Moreover, the text prescribes certain rituals that are not followed today, such as processions of the goddess on different vehicles (Skt. *vāhana*),[104] and even the offering of a wild animal in a forest immediately before the ablution of Kāmākṣī's weapon on Vijayadaśamī.[105] There are also inconsistencies between the text and actual performance of certain rituals, such as the number of *kalaśas* to be installed and the ingredients for the *homa*. In addition to describing the ritual procedures of the festival, the *SC* devotes several *ślokas* to the calculation of *tithis*[106] and variations in rituals thereafter (*SC* 39.31–40).

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queen of gods, is regarded superior. But the nine nights [starting] from the first day of the fortnight of the bright [half of the lunar month] are particularly auspicious. Even among them, the ninth [day] is commendable, granting universal success."

104 *Ślokas* 17–24 pertain to the worship of the 8th *yāma* (a *yāma* is a night watch of three hours, i.e. an 8th part of a day), and prescribe three processions at night of the goddess on the vehicles of sea monster (*mahāmakara*), lion's seat (*siṃhāsana*) and bull (*vṛṣa*).

105 The Kāmākṣī temple is Brahmanical and strictly vegetarian. However, the *SC* says: *tataḥ pūrṇāhutiṃ hutvā balikarma vidhāya ca | turage vā gaje vāpi yāneṣv anyatameṣu vā || āropya pūrvato gacched uttare vā yathāruci | yojanaṃ vā tadardhaṃ vā udyānaṃ ramyam āsthitaḥ || dadyād bhūtabaliṃ tatra vyāghraṃ vā vanamāhiṣam | varāha vānyasatvaṃ vā pradadyād bhūtatṛptaye || SC* 39.42–44 — "Then, after offering fire-oblations and distributing tribute to all deities, after mounting [the goddess] onto either a horse, or an elephant, or another vehicle, as before [the chief priest] should go either to the east or to the north according to desire, either one *yojana* (measure of distance) or a half, stopping at a beautiful forest. He should offer *bhūtabali* (offering of food to all beings) there: a tiger, a forest buffalo, a boar, or any other wild animal. He should offer [this] for satisfying all beings."

106 The average length of a *tithi* (lunar day) is slightly less than 24 hours. A *tithi* consists of the time the moon requires for travelling twelve degrees on the ecliptic in its passage around the earth, and this may vary in length from approximately 19–26 hours (De

It might seem puzzling that the ritual manual, supposedly presenting so-called "idealized" ritual, in fact does not correspond with many of the rituals that are performed during the festival today. The priests strongly emphasize that their worship is based on this manual which distinguishes the Kāmākṣī temple from all other temples. However, as Fuller discusses in his two volumes about the Mīnākṣī temple in Madurai (Fuller 1984; 2003), the idea of an authoritative textual manual to be reflected precisely in ritual practice is flawed. Indeed, Fuller, claims that "the idea of strict adherence to *āgamic* instruction, as if the texts provided a theoretical or discursive model to be put into practice, is illusory". In fact, he argues, it would be *impossible* to strictly follow any *āgama*. First, other texts too, inform temple rituals. Particularly festival rituals are shaped by local and *purāṇic* traditions, as is the case in the Kāmākṣī temple as well. Moreover, the length and complexity of for instance preparatory rites would require that the priests stay up all night and put ruthless demands on them. Further, one cannot *know* from observations if the *āgamas are* precisely followed, since they are as much concerned with immaterial transformations as they are with physical ritual acts. For instance, a priest should according to the *āgamic* texts himself *become* Śiva before worshipping Śiva in his temple form. Likewise, Kāmākṣī's priests should according to the *SC* fix his mind solely on her and visualize his own body as consisting of the goddess (*SC* 39. 12–14). This is accomplished through a mental process, accompanied by hand gestures and mantras, and the result is, of course, unobservable. Finally, we cannot know how the exact relationship was between the texts and temple practice at the time the *āgamas* were composed. On the one hand, Richard Davis finds it plausible that the 12th century Śaiva *patthati Mahotsavavidhi*, which today is considered authoritative throughout Tamil Nadu, played a significant role in institutionalizing and disseminating a shared pattern for temple festivals. On the other hand, the texts present *idealized* ritual practice, and we do not know if any temple festival has ever been performed such as the text prescribes. Indeed, Fuller suggests that from consulting manuscripts of these texts, which exist in more fragmented versions, the meaning of the text mainly was determined by ritual practice, and not the other way around. The priests have for generations learned to perform rituals though practice, and not from formal instruction through canonical works from an ancient past, although these are referred to as the basis of their rituals.

Fouw and Svoboda 2003, 186). This means that one *tithi* can be current on two Gregorian weekdays, and two *tithis* can be current on one weekday. Astrologers use precise calculations to determine the most auspicious moment in each *tithi*.

The performance of a text is rarely straightforward, neither is the concept of "text" itself.[107] Doniger proposes in her book "other people's myths" a performative distinction between the interior and the exterior of a text (1991, 32). To use the *inside* is to use the text in a fluid way, such as to write a commentary, discuss it, or perform it creatively. To use the *outside* is to use the text in a more rigid way, such as to read or recite a text without necessarily knowing its meaning or reciting a text from beginning to end so quickly that no one can possibly understand it, in order to gain merit.[108] In these cases, the ritual efficacy of recitation is more important than a text's contents.[109]

I propose that a similar distinction is applicable when it comes to Kāmākṣī's priests' reference to the *SC* as the authority of their ritual performances: they talk about a fluid text including its embodied and performative dimensions, rather than the physical and printed text, and thus refer to the *outside* of the text rather than its *inside*. In this way, ritual treatises can be seen as forming part of a collective habitus, a tradition transmitted by generations of priests, inherited, and applied. Thus, the role of the SC is centered on the pragmatics of fabricating identity and authority rather than the technical process of conducting the rituals.

Ritual Procedures during Navarātri

I have divided the rituals performed during Navarātri in the Kāmākṣī temple into 4 ritual cycles, modeled closely on the classification of *Brahmotsava*

107 We must also keep in mind how scripture in Hinduism has been overwhelmingly spoken rather than written. Indeed, as Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger claims, the application of the oral/written dichotomy to South Asian texts and oral traditions often leads to confusing, sometimes irrelevant, and even erroneous findings in a culture in which written texts have coexisted and interacted with oral traditions for centuries (1991, 44). Leela Prasad, who has worked on *śāstra* litterature, has convincingly argued that we should understand the concept of text in Hindu traditions as dynamically constructed, as a fluid text which engages precept and practice (Prasad, 2006).

108 Even *more* rigid is the worship of the physical text which is not necessarily opened.

109 Drawing on Doniger's terminology, Brian K. Smith has shown in his work on the Veda (1989) how an authoritative canon is not necessarily a set of printed texts, but rather a body of knowledge, incorporated in persons who have mastered it and practiced it from generation to generation, and thus a "personalized" concept of authority. In this way, post-Vedic Hindus use the "outside" of the Vedas for legitimization oblivious to the "inside" (the doctrines and practices). Smith writes that "[t]he great paradox of Hinduism […] is that although the religion is inextricably tied to the legitimizing authority of the Veda, in post-Vedic times the subject matter of the Veda was and is largely unknown by those who define themselves in relation to it" (Smith 1989, 20).

(*mahotsava*) rituals by Marie-Luce Barazer-Billoret (1999);[110] namely inaugural rites, daily observances, rites of closure[111] and subsequent rituals. The category additional ceremonies includes a small section on Sarasvatī Pūjā.

I use these categories less strictly, so that the heading daily observances includes not only the rituals commonly mentioned in the types of handbooks Barazer-Billoret worked with (processions, *homas* and *pūjās*) but also the worship of young girls and auspicious married women, the *curasaṃhāra*, the cultural program, and the goddess's *alaṃkāras*, all important and everyday parts of the contemporary Navarātri celebrations in the temple.

Although Navarātri lasts nine days, or ten days including Vijayadaśamī, the celebrations go on in the temple for altogether 12 days according to the festival program. Some rites therefore do not form part of Navarātri in the strict sense, and I have labeled these subsequent rituals.

Inaugural Rites

The Sprouting of Auspicious Seeds

The *SC* suggests two alternative openings for the festival, raising of the flag (*dhvajārohana*) or sprouting of the seeds (*aṅkura*[*arpaṇa*]).[112] In contemporary practice the flag is only raised during Brahmotsava, whereas Navarātri starts with the rituals of collecting the earth (*mṛtsaṃgrahana*) and the sprouting of auspicious seeds (*aṅkurārpaṇa*). This is done by planting nine kinds of grain (*navadhānyam*) in a lamp-shaped mud pot (Ta. *pālikai*) full of soil. The ritual is done to assure auspicious results of the festival, and if the auspicious

110 Barazer-Billoret (1999) classified the rituals of Brahmotsava in various Śaiva *āgamas* and *paddhatis* into four major ritual cycles: Inaugural rites (*rites inauguraux*), twice-daily ritual activities (ritual biquotiden; pointing to the processions of the deities' festival images held in the morning and evening, characteristic of the Brahmotsava), the *tīrtha* cycle (*cycle du tīrtha*) and 'rites of closure' (*rites de cloture*). She further identified an additional category, additional ceremonies (*rites additionnels*), consisting of rituals that fall out of the four.

111 Following Schier (2018, 49), I argue that the *tīrtha* cycle (bathing rituals) forms part of the rites of closure which mark the end of the festival and have omitted the heading of "the *tīrtha* circle" so that rites of closure include the ritual of *tīrthasnāna* or *tīrttavari*.

112 *atha vakṣyāmi deveśi mahābhūtatithau vratam | utsavaṃ kāryet tatra dhvajārohaṇapūrvakam || athavāṅkurapūrvaṃ vā yāgamaṇḍalasaṃyutam | SC* 39.1–2 — "Now I will declare the vow [to be performed] at the great lunar day, O queen of gods! [The chief priest] should perform a festival at that time, either beginning with rising the flag, or beginning with [planting] the seeds, including drawing the *yāgamaṇḍala* (preliminary rite of the *aṅkurārpaṇa*)".

continuation of the festival is disrupted by any polluting events, the sprouts are thrown away and new ones will be planted. The two rituals are performed the night before Navarātri starts. Throughout the festival, the pot is kept in the sacrificial hall (*yāgaśālā*) where *homas* are performed. *Pūjās* are done to it daily, and by the end of the festival the grains will have grown to small green sprouts. The sprouts and the mud will be immersed in the temple tank along with Kāmākṣī's main weapon at the *tīrttavari* ceremony.

Tying of Protective Cords

The tying of protective cords (*rakṣābandhana*, Ta. *kāppu*, lit. protection, caution, defense) is performed on the first day of Navarātri,[113] after a *caṇḍīhoma* and *abhiṣekas* to Vārāhī and Santānagaṇapati (a form of Gaṇeśa). A protective cord is first tied to Kāmākṣī's image in the sanctum, then to Tapaskāmākṣī and Kāmākṣī's procession image (*utsavamūrti*, lit. festival image). Next it is tied to the procession images of Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī, who accompany Kāmākṣī's procession image during Navarātri. Finally, a cord is tied to the wrist of the priest who oversees the festival. This priest, who alternates annually according to the temple's system of *muṟai*,[114] is from this point onwards in charge of the festival, and officiates at all the major rituals, assisted by other priests. He takes an oath (*saṃkalpa*) to adhere to the rules and regulations of the festival, after which he is not allowed to speak for the entire festival period (*maunabali*, tribute of silence).[115]

The cords protect the festival procedures through protecting the festival's main agents, in this case the deities and the priest, and absorb ritual impurities

113 The inaugural ritual of tying protective cords for Navarātri is not mentioned in the *SC*.

114 *Muṟai* refers to the rights of the priests and their shares in the worship of the temple. See Fuller 1984, 81–84.

115 While the practice of *maunabali* is not prescribed in the *SC*, the priest should, according to the text, perform a supreme *saṃkalpa* and visualize himself as consisting of the goddess before worshipping her: *uṣasy uthāya manasā dhyātvā devīṃ parātparām|| prakṣāḻya pādāv ācamya kuryāt saṅkalpam uttamam | tadvidhānaṃ ca vakṣyāmi yena śrīḥ sarvatomukhī || stotrais tadīyais tatsūktair dhyānais tadbhābandhanaiḥ | tadekāgramanā bhūtvā svātmānaṃ tanmayaṃ smaret || SC* 39.12–14. — "After rising at dawn, after meditating upon the goddess, superior to the best, with his mind, after cleansing the feet and sipping [water from the palm], he should perform the supreme oath. And I shall declare that precept, through which one's prosperity becomes manifold! With praises (*stotra*) relating to her, with her hymns (*sūkta*) and meditations (*dhyāna*) fully tied to her, after becoming one whose mind is fixed solely on her, he should visualize his own body as consisting of her." — This parallels the non-dualist concept in Śaiva *āgamas* that only Śiva can worship Śiva, and thus Śaiva priests become Śiva before they carry out their worship. For more on *saṃkalpa*, see Michaels (2005).

(Hüsken 2017, 71). I was told that it is tied to the goddess to "keep her in a safe place". The goddess is particularly vulnerable during festival times, usually including public prossessions, when potential pollution may occur and threaten the festival procedures. The goddess's powers are at their most potent during festivals; so are those of chaotic, negative and malevonent forces, and there is an enchanced possibility for both the deities and the oriests to attract pollution and the evil eye.[116]

Invocation and Worship of the Goddesses in kalaśas

After tying the cords, Kāmākṣī and other goddesses are invoked in twelve *kalaśas* filled with water through chanting the mūlamantra. The pots are kept in the *yāgaśālā* throughout Navarātri and worshipped twice a day. Kāmākṣī is invoked in the main *kalaśa* which is placed in the middle of a triangle of *kalaśas*, and eight *kalaśas* surround these again (figure 3.1). In the three *kalaśas* Kāmeśvarī, Varjeśvarī and Bahamani are invoked, and the eight Vāgdevatās ("deities of speech"), present in the receptacle surrounding the *śrīcakra*, are invoked in surrounding pots.[117]

According to a priest, these are "the most important goddesses", who all form part of Ampāl.[118] On the Vijayadaśamī evening, these *kalaśas* are taken to the sanctum for *abhiṣeka* of first the *śrīcakra* and then the goddess's image (*ghatasnāna*).[119] Thus, the goddesses who are honored as separate figures during

116 Many unforeseen events could happen and disrupt a festival. For instance, devotees could drown in the temple tank during ritual baths, or the deities could encounter a funeral procession during their parading through the streets. Ritual pollutions could also go on unnoticed by the performers of the ritual, such as menstruating women entering the temple. The purity of the temple, its priests and deities is highly important, as it is a precondition for fhe effective performance of ritual within the South Indian Brahmanical temple (Hüsken 2006, 11).

117 While in contemporary performance twelve *kalaśas* are deposited in the *yāgaśālā* for a total of ten days, the *SC* prescribes the installation of nine *kalaśas* to be worshipped for eight days. In these, the Vāgdevatās should be invoked: *vastraratnādisaṃyuktān nava kumbhāṃs tu vinyaset | vaśinyādisamāyuktāṃ dineṣv aṣṭasu pūjayet || SC* 39.6. — "[The chief priest] should deposit nine pots endowed with garments, gems and so on, with [the Vāgdevīs] beginning with Vaśini invoked, and worship [them] for eight days." — Since the Vāgdevīs number eight, Kāmākṣī is probably invoked the ninth *kalaśa* although this is not mentioned explicitly in the text.

118 The Vāgdevatās are popularly said to have composed the *LSN*.

119 The *SC* prescribes ablutions of the *śrīcakra* on the 9th day: *viśeṣeṇa navamyām tu śrīcakrasnapanaṃ caret || SC* 39.11 — "[The chief priest] should in particular perform ablution for the *śrīcakra* on the ninth [day]".

the festival are finally re-absorbed into the fundamental divine source in the temple (Davis 2010, 34).

Figure 3.1: *Kalaśas* and *homa* in the *yāgaśālā*. © Ute Hüsken.

Daily Observances

Pūjās and homas

As is usual in the Kāmākṣī temple, the *pañcopacāra pūjā* is performed daily for the goddess in the sanctum and this worship continues during festival times. This *pūjā* consists of five objects to please the five senses: sandal (*gandha*), flowers (*puṣpa*), inscense (*dhūpa*), the camphor flame (*dīpa*), and food (*naivedya*). Daily around noon, the priests perform a more elaborate *navāvaraṇa pūjā* for the *śrīcakra* behind closed doors in the sanctum. This is a *pūjā* done to the nine enclosures of the *śrīcakra*.[120] I was told that the daily *pūjās* performed in the temple are considered extracts of this more elaborate *navāvaraṇa pūjā*.

120 The *navāvaraṇa pūjā* is otherwise performed once a month during full moon day, and during Vasanta Navarātri. When the temple was renovated between 2015 and 2017, this *pūjā* was one of the rituals that continued despite of the festival not being celebrated in

Navarātri moreover includes daily worship of the twelve goddesses invoked in the *kalaśas* and fire rituals in the *yāgaśālā*.[121] The goddesses preside over and protect the fire rituals (cf. Davis 2010, 39), meaning there is a higher concentration of powers (*śakti*) present in the temple during Navarātri. Each morning and evening a *śrīvidyā homa* is performed, during which firewood (*samidh*), rice and ghee is put 28 times each into the fire along with dried cow dung.[122] Along with the oblations, the *pañcadaśi mūlamantra* ("fifteen syllable root mantra") is chanted 28 times, one for each offering. This *homa* is performed daily during the ritual year in the sanctum. Afterwards, *Lalītāsahasranāma*, or other *stotras* dear to the goddess, is chanted.

Worship of Prepubescent Girls and Auspicious Married Women

The *SC* prescribes the daily worship of girls and women with a (living) husband, or alternatively nine couples, during Navarātri.[123] These *pūjās* are performed

a grand manner, pointing to its importance. The chapter on Navarātri in the *SC* does not mention the *navāvaraṇa pūjā*, but a closer study of the *SC* would be necessary to find out whether it is described in other chapters.

121 The procedures in the *yāgaśālā* (*homas* and invocation and worship of goddesses in *kalaśas*) during Navarātri are very similar to those of Brahmotsava, but for Brahmotsava a total of eleven *kalaśas* (representing Kāmākṣī, Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī and the 8 Vāgdevīs) are deposited, not twelve.

122 These are the normal ingredients for *homas* in the Kāmākṣī temple. When I inquired about the *homa*, Mr. Satyamurti Sastrigal said: "Some people put sweets and all into the *homa*, but that is not the right procedure". The *SC*, however, prescribes a long list of substances to be thrown into the fire 108 times, either one ingredient each day, or all at once, along with the firewood: *apūpais saktupiṇḍaiś ca lājapiṇḍaiḥ guḷānvitaiḥ | panasair nāḷikeraiś ca tilapiṇḍaiḥ guḷānvitaiḥ || samadhuśakair āyuktaiḥ mudgapiṇḍair manoharaiḥ | dadhyannaiḥ pāyasaiś caivaṃ sasarpiṣkaiś ca saktubhiḥ || ekaikaṃ kramaśo vṛddhyā dinaṃ pratidinaṃ prati | pṛthag aṣṭottaraśataṃ juhuyāt samidhā saha || dinaśo vai kramaikaṃ vā juhuyād vā krameṇa tu | SC* 39. 7–10. — "With sweets cooked in ghee accompanied by lumps of wheat powder and water, with puffed rice mixed with jaggery, with jackfruit along with coconut, with lumps of white sesame mixed with jaggery, with lumps of green grinds mixed with honey and sugar, with curd rice and also with *pāyasam* (boiled milk, rice, ghee and sugar), and with flour mixed with ghee, gradually with increasing [the quantity] each and every day, [the chief priest] should offer [these ingredients] 108 times each day along with firewood (*samidh*). Indeed, he should offer one ingredient each day, or all at once." The 10th day, on Vijayadaśamī, the substances should be offered 28 times: *daśamyām atha saṃpūyja viśeṣavidhitā guruḥ | pratidravyaṃ ca juhuyād aṣṭāviṃśatisaṃkhyayā ||SC* 39.41 — "On the 10th [day], after worshipping, the guru should by means of special observances offer the substances 28 times."

123 *kanyāś ca pūjayen nityaṃ striyo bhartṛsamanvitāḥ || navacakreśvarīrūpaṃ navaṃ vā mithunaṃ yajet | ekaikavṛddhyā dinaśo navamyantaṃ samācaret || SC* 39.49–50 — "[The chief priest] should necessarily worship young girls [and] women who have a [living] husband. Or he could worship nine couples in the form of the Navacakreśvarīs (the

around noon each Navarātri day, after the morning rituals to the goddess in the sanctum and to the pots in the *yāgaśāla* are concluded. For eight days, the priests worship a prepubescent girl (figure 3.2) and an auspicious married woman. These *pūjās* are performed behind closed doors in the *Gāyatrī maṇḍapa* in front of the goddess's sanctum. The girls and women are worshipped as manifestations of the goddess who is invoked in them with a *mantra*: Bālā Kāmākṣī is invoked in the girls and Kāmākṣī in the women. The priests recite *mantras*, offer them sacred powders, incense and lamps, new clothes, garlands, flowers, and food. On the ninth day of Sarasvatī Pūjā the procedure changes: this morning, after the demon has been killed by Kāmākṣī on the eight evening of Navarātri, there are altogether nine *kanyās* and nine *sumaṅgalīs* worshipped, along with a *brahmacārin*, a young boy, in whom Bhairava[124] is invoked.

While *kanyā pūjās* are an integral part of Navarātri in many parts of India and Nepal,[125] worship of married women seems to be reserved to the south. In the Kāmākṣī temple these *pūjās* mirror the temple worship of the goddess, but they also share traits with similar *pūjās* held at home during Navarātri *kolu*.[126]

Women and girls will however *only* be worshipped if they are auspiciously married with a living husband (*sumaṅgali*, Ta. *cumaṅkali*) or prepubescent below the age of sexual maturity (*kanyā*, Ta. *kaṉṉi*). This makes them eligible to

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presiding deities of the *srīcakra*'s nine enclosures), day by day ending the ninth [day] he should worship [them], increasing with one and one." — The *SC* myth of the previous chapter provides the reason for this: *tasmin dine viśeṣeṇa yāḥ kāścicchāktayo bhūvi || tās sarvāsamadhiṣṭāpya pūjāṃ gṛhṇāti sāñjasā | tasmāt saṃpūjayed etā yāḥ kāścid vā varāṅganāḥ || nāvamānyā viśeṣeṇa dine tasmin śubhārthibhiḥ | tābhyas tasmin dine dattaṃ sadvāsobhūṣaṇādikam || bhaved anantaphaladaṃ parāśaktipriyaṅkaram | mahābhūtatithau ye tu nārcayanti parāmbikām || te tu mūḍhā daridrāś ca bhaveyur janmajanmani |* *SC* 38.31–55 — "On this day in particular (the 9th lunar day of Āśvina) [the great goddess] abides in all the *śaktis* that are on earth, [and] she receives the *pūjā* instantly. Therefore, one should honor them greatly, those beautiful women, who on this particular day should not be treated with disrespect by those desirous of welfare. On this day, they should be given beautiful clothes, ornaments, etc., yielding infinite fruits [and] causing pleasure to the supreme Śakti. But those who do not worship the supreme mother on the great 9th day will become poor and stupefied birth after birth."

124 Bhairava and Hanumān are repeatedly described as protectors of the goddess in Hindu mythology (2018, 302). According to Brigitte Luchesi, in Himachal Pradesh the boy's role is understood as a sort of protector and compared with Bhairava or Hanumān (ibid.).

125 See Luchesi (2018) for similar *pūjās* in Himachal Pradesh, Rodrigues (2005, 2009) for Varanasi, Allen (1975) for Nepal, Hershman (1977) for Punjab and Foulston (2009) for Calcutta. The honoring of young girls during Navarātri is also mentioned in medieval ritual texts and *purāṇas*, (see Einoo 1999, Kane 1974, 170–71).

126 See chapter 5.

represent Kāmākṣī as benevolent goddess and as virgin goddess, which is the form in which she kills the demon.

The girls should be between one and nine years old and are worshipped in increasing order. Their age is conceptually linked to Kāmākṣī's fight with the demon Bandhakāsura which is not only expressed in myth, but also enacted in the temple premises during the first eight Navarātri evenings. The myth of the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa* narrates the fight between goddess Kāmākṣī and the demon Bandhakāsura and was explored in chapter 2. Since the demon was granted a boon that only a young child below the age of nine could kill him, the goddess assumes the form of a young girl, Balā Kāmākṣī, to accomplish the task.[127]

The young girls, worshipped as manifestations of the goddess and increasing in age reaching nine years in the end, can thus be understood as the maturing goddess who is finally killing the demon in the form of Bālā Kāmākṣī. An interpretation drawn easily from knowing the mythological background is therefore to see their worship, along with the worship of Kāmākṣī in her grown-up form represented by the *sumaṅgalis*, as gradually empowering the goddess for her fight with the demon. This idea is supported by the fact that the autumnal Navarātri is the only time during the annual festival cycle that such worship is performed for young girls in the temple.[128] The change of the worship pattern to include nine girls and nine women the ninth morning, including the *brahmacārin*, can be further interpreted as a tribute to the accumulated powers of the victorious goddess. The priest Mr. Prasanna Sastrigal explained the ritual similarly:

> "The reason for doing *pūjā* to the *kaṉṉi* is, the demon asked for a boon, saying that he should not be killed by anyone who is above eight years. The *samhāram* (war) takes place on Durgāṣṭamī (the 8th day of Navarātri). When she reaches the age of eigth, she kills the demon. Daily when his head is chopped, immediately he gets another head […] Ampāḷ (Kāmākṣī) on the entire eight days tries to kill him in eight different methods."

127 However, as discussed in chapter 2, the demon's boon of being killed by a girl below the age of nine is in fact only explicit in the retelling of the priests, and not in the *KV*. In the *KV* the goddess kills the demon in the fierce form of Mahābhairava and appears before the gods as a maiden of five (*pañcavarṣikakanyakā*) – not nine – after killing him.

128 *Sumaṅgalipūjā* is performed also during *pūrṇimāpūjā* (full moon days) and *vasanta navarātri*.

Figure 3.2: *Kanyā pūjā* in the Kāmākṣī temple. © Ute Hüsken.

It is a widespread belief that *pūjās* to *kanyās* and *sumaṅgalīs* reach the goddess during Navarātri, and that the goddess will come to visit your *kolu*, and in extension your home, in the form of a young girl or married woman. The special connection between females and the goddess through the concept of *śakti*, or female creative power, is particularly pronounced during these nine days. Another priest, Mr. Sudarshan Sastrigal, emphasized this connection when he explained the worship of women:

> "[Navarātri] gives importance to *suvāsinīs* because even the [*Lalītā*]*sahasranāma* says: *suvāsinī priyāya namaḥ*. So, when *suvāsinīs* are honored, the god-

dess feels happy. When you make them [the *suvāsinīs*] happy by giving clothes and things, it is like Ampāḷ herself is happy."[129]

In contrast to the domestic setting, in the Kāmākṣī temple the goddess is ritually invoked in the females with *mantras*. Although their worship clearly recognizes their feminine *śakti*, temporarily identifying them with the goddess and acknowledging them as representing her, this is a more passive kind of agency, and a very different one from that shown by Luchesi (2018) in the corresponding rituals in Himachal Pradesh. There, girls actively seek out devotees in goddess temples during Navarātri in order to be worshipped as self-appointed *kanyās* in the public domain of the temples by visiting devotees, "playing" in the temple courtyard as representatives of the goddess's virgin aspect. When there is a high demand for girls, particularly the two last days of Navarātri, the girls can switch from one *pūjā* to the next in succession without a break (Luchesi 2018, 305).[130] In the Kāmākṣī temple, the selected females are passively acted *upon* by Brahmin priests as targets of the *pūjā*, and do not directly act themselves. However, I propose that they still have agency in that they embody the goddess and empower Kāmākṣī for her fight through being worshipped as her stand-ins.

Ornamenting the Goddess: Alaṃkāras

Navarātri is known for showing the goddess in magnificent *alaṃkāras* and many devotees come for *darśana* during the festival for this reason. While *alaṃkāras* form part of everyday temple *pūjās* and are not at all particular to Navarātri, the *alaṃkāras* during the festival are made more elaborate, often with huge canopies of flower garlands, and are among the festival's highlights and attractions for the audience.[131] This seems to have been the case at least

129 A more plausible translation of the *śloka* would be "homage to her who is dear to *suvāsinīs*", and not the way the priest interprets it.

130 Another difference between the two "types" of temple-*kanyā pūjās* is that in Himachal Pradesh they are performed in public by devotees, including locals and visitors from distant places, and not by the priests or near the sanctum. Luchesi (2018, 306) asserts that the "self-appointed" girls very likely are regarded as less appreciated compared to those of the corresponding domestic *pūjās*. In the Kāmākṣī temple it is aquaintances of the priests, as well as members of donor families, who are invited for *kanyā* and *sumaṅgalī pūjās*.

131 In the Kāmākṣī temple, the three priestly families who share the rights to worship alternate weekly throughout the year doing the *alaṃkāras* of the goddess. Each family decorates one deity for one week – if one family decorates the procession image, another decorates the image in the sanctum, and the third decorates Abhiṣeka Kāmākṣī and their turns will shift. There are no fixed donors for Navarātri *alaṃkāras* in the Kāmākṣī

since the 1980's: Fuller and Penelope Logan (1985, 82) portray *alaṃkaras* in the Mīnākṣī temple of Madurai as the "distinctive feature of Navarātri," which attracts hosts of devotees. Many devotees I spoke to in the temple praised the beauty of Kāmākṣī's *alaṃkāras*. An elderly devotee who visited the temple for Navarātri *darśana* said: "The last ten years they have been doing such lovely *alaṃkāras* [for Navarātri]. Ammaṉ looks so beautiful!"

While smaller *ammaṉ* temples may advertise their Navarātri *alaṃkaras* in the festival program and on posters to attract devotees, the *alaṃkāras* in the Kāmākṣī temple are not planned. This is apart from the Durgā *alaṃkāra* the 8th day of Durgāṣṭamī, usually featuring the goddess seated on a tiger or a lion (figure 3.3), and the Sarasvatī *alaṃkāra* the 9th day of Sarasvatī Pūjā, when the goddess carries the *vīṇā*, an emblem of Sarasvatī. The themes of these two *alaṃkāras* remain standard each year, although how the decorations are fashioned, will vary.

Such *alaṃkāras* are a ritual in which the priests may creatively and aesthetically play with the goddess in fashioning her various decorations.[132] But contrasting the *alaṃkāras* of the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple, which are planned months in advance by the temple's *alaṃkāra* specialist, this creativity is in the case of Kamākṣī attributed to the goddess herself. According to the priests, it is the goddess who decides her own *alaṃkāras*. She is the player who decorates her own image through the hands of the priest. Mr. Satyamurti Sastrigal explained:

> "It is not like each day there is one [particular] *alaṃkāra*. Whatever comes to our mind. But when I am doing [the *alaṃkāra*] on Durgāṣṭamī Ampāḷ will be sitting on a tiger, and Durgā will be on a lion. And on Sarasvatī Pūjā she will be depicted as goddess Sarasvatī. The other days it is whatever she makes us think after *abhiṣeka* is done that is depicted."

As a young and more unexperienced priest he once tried to overrun the goddess's idea and create a nice looking Sarasvatī *alaṃkāra* modeled on one which turned out very well the previous year. It did not work out as planned:

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temple (there are donors for the *navāvaraṇa pūja*, and for Brahmotsava). The priests use what is collected and draw on their large repertoire of clothes, spare limbs and jewelry, and order fresh garlands daily.

132 Archana Venkatesan (2013) captures vividly and beautifully the awe and joy with which devotees experience Srivilliputtur Āṇṭāḷ's *alaṃkāras* and relates *alaṃkāra* to the Śrīvaiṣṇava concept of *anubhāva* (enjoyment).

Figure 3.3: *Durgā alaṃkāra*, 2014.

"First time when I was doing the *alaṃkāra*, it was the first time, that day it was Sarasvatī *alaṃkāra*. Ampāḷ has only four hands, additionally four hands were kept, so [the *alaṃkāra* had] eight hands [altogether]. A donor made a *vīṇā* of Tāḻampū (screw pine, a flower) and gave. It was big, it was good, so the next year I decided we will again do [the *alaṃkāra*] like last year, with eight hands. It took nearly three to four hours, but the *alaṃkāra* could not be completed. Last year I had done, but this time I could not do it. So, from that what we understand? It was not done. So, I did it with two hands. It took three hours. That time I went with head weight. She (Ampāḷ) punished me. […] *We* are not doing anything; *she* only is doing [the *alaṃkāra*]. We do what she wants. We do not decide, what she wants only will come to our mind. Not to the mind, to the hand."

The *alaṃkāras* of Kāmākṣī are fashioned on the spot as the priests go along with their worship, inspired by the goddess's desires trough the hands of the priest. As is evident from the quote above, the priests' vision of a good *alaṃkāra* should not interrupt the process of divine inspiration.

During Navarātri the *alaṃkāras* of Kāmākṣī's procession image are on display in the Navarātri *maṇḍapam* where the goddess resides during the nine festival evenings. In 2014, her *alaṃkāras* were:

Day 1) *Kāmākṣī alaṃkāra*
Day 2) *Piṇ kocuvam alaṃkāra*[133]
Day 3) *Rājā Kāmākṣī alaṃkāra*
Day 4) *Baṅgāru Kāmākṣī alaṃkāra*
Day 5) *Mūlasthāna Kāmākṣī alaṃkāra*
Day 6) *Kāmākṣī puṣpa* (flower) *alaṃkāra* (figure 3.4)
Day 7) *Durgā alaṃkāra*
Day 8) *Durgā alaṃkāra*
Day 9) *Sarasvatī alaṃkāra*

The majority of these *alaṃkāras* are forms of Kāmākṣī herself and reflect the local history of the Kāmākṣī temple and the cult of Kāmākṣī. Rājā Kāmākṣī is the royal goddess and probably refers to Kāmākṣī as the manifestation of Rājārājeśvarī, another name of Lalitā Tripurasundarī (figure 3.5). Baṅgāru Kāmākṣī is a golden statue of Kāmākṣī in standing posture, which was originally in the Kanchipuram temple but brought to Thanjavur where a temple was inaugurated for her in 1786. Despite the absence of the Baṅgāru Kāmākṣī statue, she is still worshipped in her shrine in the Kāmākṣī temple through a pedestal bearing her two footprints.[134] Mūlasthāna Kāmākṣī is the immovable form of Kāmākṣī in the temple's sanctum.

The theme of Navarātri is represented yearly in the 8th and 9th *alaṃkāras* of Durgāṣṭamī and Sarasvatī Pūjā. In her second Navarātri Durgā *alaṃkāra*, Kāmākṣī was riding on a tiger, bejeweled and draped in a blue sari, with the *triśula* in one hand and a sword in the other (figure 3.6), accompanied by Durgā's festival image. The following day, when no battle was enacted and a peaceful atmosphere prevailed in the *maṇḍapa*, she was decorated as the peaceful Sarasvatī, goddess of music and learning, clad in a white sari with red borders (figure 3.7).

133 The *kocuvam* is the pleat that is tucked into the sari in front and the *alaṃkāra*'s name refers to a particular way of draping the sari.

134 See Schier 2018.

Figure 3.4: *Kāmākṣī puṣpa* (flower) *alaṃkāra*, 2014.

Figure 3.5: *Rājā Kāmākṣī alaṃkāra*, 2014.

Figure 3.6: Kāmākṣī in Durgā *alaṃkāra* (right) and Durgā on Durgāṣṭamī, 2014.

Figure 3.7: *Sarasvatī alaṃkāra*, 2014.

The scheme of day 8 and 9 resembles that of the Mīnākṣī temple in Madurai (Fuller and Logan, 1985). Here, Mīnākṣī is dressed as Mahiṣāsuramardinī on the 8th, and as the worshipper of a Śivaliṅga (*śivapūjā*) on the 9th.[135] According to Fuller and Logan, Mīnākṣī *must* be clad in red on the day of Durgāṣṭamī, when the goddess in addition is represented with 8 arms, indicating her vehemence. Day 9 is the only day she *must* be dressed in white, the color of widows and renouncers. The shift of colors and number of arms symbolize the goddess's transformation from sexual and destructive bride (the form in which she kills the demon) to submissive renouncer negating sexuality altogether (atoning for the killing). A similar conclusion can be drawn in the Kāmākṣī temple: the goddess's change from the fierce Durgā-looking warrior goddess riding forth on her tiger or lion with weapons in her hand to the peaceful *vīṇā* player is very much reflected in her *alaṃkāras*. Still, neither the color symbolism nor the fierceness indicated by the number of the goddess's arms are as pronounced in the Kāmākṣī temple as in the Mīnākṣī temple. Although Kāmākṣī is dressed in white as Sarasvatī, the Durgā *alaṃkāra* had only two arms, and she was clad in blue.[136] Durgās procession image, which accompanies Kāmākṣī on Durgāṣṭamī, on the other hand, wore red – and her fangs, visible at close hand, further indicate her fierceness.

As I discuss further in chapter 4, in many temples of non-Brahmin goddesses, the goddess assumes different *avatāras* (Skt. "form") each Navarātri night, expressed through her *alaṃkāra*, leading up to her fight with the demon (usually on Vijayadaśamī). This is not the case with Kāmākṣī, whose *alaṃkāras* correspond to those of the other Brahmanical goddesses in Kanchipuram in that they are mere decorations. The consorts of Varadarāja Viṣṇu and Ekāmranātha Śiva are both adorned in Navarātri *alaṃkāras*, but they are not portraying distinct forms of the goddess. In these temples, the goddess does not kill any demon

135 In the Aṇṇāmalaiyār temple of Tiruvannamalai these days are switched as the goddess Parāśakti Ammaṇ (one of the mobile forms of goddess Uṇṇamalai) is Śivapūjā on the 8th and Mahiṣāsuramardinī on the 9th (L'Hernault and Reiniche 1999, 170–171). Hernault and Reiniche propose that this is because the goddess according to mythological narratives is strengthened from the *tapas* of performing *pūjā* to Śiva and completes the killing afterwards.

136 In 2014, the Durgā *alaṃkāra* of the 7th day had 4 arms, so did the Mūlasthāna Kāmākṣī *alaṃkāra* on day 5. In contrast, Mahābhairava, the form of Kāmakṣī when she kills the demon in the *KV*, has 18 arms wielding 18 weapons (*KV* 12.34). None of Kāmākṣī's *alaṃkāras* were red, but the Rājā Kāmākṣī *alaṃkāra* was also white.

during Navarātri.[137] Therefore, she does not need to assume other forms through her *alaṃkāras*, she remains entirely peaceful during the festival, and the *alaṃkāras*' function is to adorn the goddess as is usual after her *abhiṣeka*. I propose that Kāmākṣī is in a middle position between the Brahmanical goddesses and the village goddesses of Kanchipuram: she does not transform into nine distinct *avatāras* during Navarātri, but splits into Durgā on Durgāṣṭamī. This is represented in her *alaṃkāra* as well as the Durgā image by her side. Following Brooks (1992, 70) and Biardeau (2004, 311), I argue that Kāmākṣī, as do Lalitā and Caṇḍī, rather creates ferocious forms than killing the demon herself.[138]

Kāmākṣī's Fight with the Demon

Following the evening *śrīvidyā homa*, Kāmākṣī's fight with the demon Bandhāsura, known in Tamil as *curasaṃhāram*, is enacted for the festival's first eight evenings as a large public spectacle.[139] With this, the goddess's *līlā* unravels dramatically in front of her devotee's eyes. The fight is staged in the Navarātri *maṇḍapa* in the southwestern corner of the temple courtyard, which is used only for this festival. This *maṇḍapa* is also known as the *kolu maṇḍapa* because of two *kolus* that are set up for Navarātri.

Kāmākṣī's procession image is brought in procession to the *Navarātri* pavillion each evening, adorned in her *alaṃkāra* of fresh flowers, new clothes, and shining jewelry. She is carried on a palanquin and accompanied by the procession images of Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī on either side. The procession includes

137 While no battle is enacted in the Ekāmranātha temple, in the Varadarāja temple Viṣṇu fires arrows at the demon in a *vaṉṉi* tree while the goddess undertakes a vow to secure his victory (see Hüsken 2018).

138 Looking to myth and ritual, including explanations from the priests, several interpretations are available:
1) Kāmākṣī becomes Durgā and kills the demon.
2) Kāmākṣī becomes Balā Kāmākṣi and kills the demon.
3) Kāmākṣī becomes Mahābhairava and kills the demon.
4) Kāmākṣī kills the demon after Durgā has killed another demon.
5) Kāmākṣī kills the demon in the *vaṉṉi* tree.
The final *alaṃkāra* of Kāmākṣī could also be symbolic for Mahiṣāsuramardinī, acknowledging its association with Navarātri.

139 *Curasamhāram* is used as a generic term signifying a fight between the divine and the demonic. While the Sanskrit word for demon is *asura* (Ta. *acuraṉ*; anti-god), *sura* in fact came to mean God in Sanskrit. It is likely that the term *curasamhāram* comes from the enactments of Murukaṇ slaying the demon Śūrapadma (Ta. Cūrapaṉmaṉ), called *curasaṃhāram* (the destruction of Cūra[paṉmaṉ]). Respondents used this term regardless of which demon was killed.

priests, umbrella carriers, torch and lamp bearers, temple musicians and a temple elephant, as well as a crowd of devotees. First, she stops at the *yāgaśalā* housing the *kalaśas* that are temporarily installed for the festival, where *āratī* is shown for the *kalaśas* and for Kāmākṣī before she is carried in *pradakṣiṇa* (Skt. "clockwise circumambulation") to the *maṇḍapa*.[140]

Figure 3.8: Boys and the demon, 2014.

140 *Āratī* is also shown near the flagpole and at all the corners of the temple when she passes (also on her way back into the temple).

Reaching the pavilion, Kāmākṣī is placed on a dais, opposing a man-sized effigy of the demon erected at the other end. The dais is situated amidst the two *kolus* and elaborate worship is carried out for Kāmākṣī in front of the gathered audience. The demon, facing the goddess has three interchangeable heads (red, black, and a buffalo head) that are alternated each evening. The priests remain with the goddess, while a group of young boys[141] carry out the actions of the demon (figures 3.8 and 3.9).

Figure 3.9: Boy with the demon's buffalo head, 2014.

A wire is set up between the goddess and the demon, and three sparkling fire-crackers are sent back and forth along the wire to the enthusiastic cheering of

141 In conversations with some of the boys, I learnt that they participate in the ritual for fun and in an informal way until they "grow out of it". They are loosely connected to the temple; some live nearby, and one was the son of the temple photographer. The boys take turns to hold the head of the demon.

the crowd and intense drumming (figure 3.10). The *maṇḍapa* fills with smoke and anticipation. According to one of the firecracker men,[142] the brightness and speed of the cracker is an indication of the goddess's anger. As the demon is "hit," he shakes his head, and when he is beheaded with the third firecracker, the boys who impersonate the demon run up to Kāmākṣī with his weapons and head. In this moment, the music escalates as wind instruments and bells join the drums to indicate the climax. The priests smear the head with red kuṅkumam powder, garland it, and place it at Kāmākṣī's feet as a token of his surrender. Next, the group of devotees who have witnessed the fight pushes and rushes to be blessed with *kuṅkumam* and the flame of the ritual lamp (*āratī*).

Figure 3.10: Kāmākṣī sending firecrackers towards the demon, 2014.

The fight is performed in the same manner for seven evenings, but the procedure varies slightly the final day. The eighth day of Navarātri is called Durgāṣṭamī (Durgā's eighth [day]) and is considered the day the demon dies.[143] On this day, Durgā's festival image is carried out along with Kāmākṣī and placed beside her during the fight (figure 3.6). Depending on their *alaṃkāras*, Kāmākṣī

142 The firecrackers are made and burnt by a group of men performing fireworks in the temple hereditarily. They also do fireworks for the Ekāmranātha and Varadarāja temples.

143 In contrast to the previous days, this day a fireworks man squeezes a lime and lights a camphor flame to remove the *dṛṣṭi* (Skt. "evil eye") before lighting the cracker.

may be seated on a lion and Durgā on a tiger. This evening the battle intensifies: eight firecrackers are sent along the wire between the goddesses and the demon, and the demon changes his head three times before he is beheaded, wearing the head of a buffalo, pointing to the myth of the Devī's destruction of the demon Mahiṣa recounted in the *DM*. All three demon heads are brought up to Kāmākṣī, garlanded, smeared with *kuṅkumam*, and placed at her feet.

According to the priests I spoke with, the ritual enacts Kāmākṣī's fight with the demon Bandha(ka), as expressed in the *KV*. However, Durgā's role in the fight remains unclear: Why is Durgā present when Kāmākṣī succeeds in killing the demon – or is it Durgā who kills the demon on her behalf, contrasting the mythological narratives? The priests offered two different explanations when I inquired about Durgā's presence. One priest, Mr. Chandrasekar Sastrigal, claimed that Kāmākṣī did not manage to kill the demon by herself, and the 8th day she assumes the form of *ugrā* (Skt. "fierce") Durgā and kills him. From this perspective, Kāmākṣī once a year splits in two and reassumes the ferocious form she once possessed before she was appeased and tamed into the Śrīcakra by the Śaṅkarācārya, as local legend has it. This conforms with Brooks's statement that Lalitā in the *LU* prefers to create ferocious images of herself rather than acting ferocious (even though she *can*), in order to remain predominantly benign (1992, 70). It moreover echoes the *KV* in which the goddess takes the ferocious form of Mahābhairava while killing the demon, before she returns as a five-year-old maiden carrying the dead demon. There is a tension between the benign image of Kāmākṣī and the Kāmākṣī we are confronted with not only in the mythology but also in the enactments of killing the demon in the temple during Navarātri. As explored in chapter 2, there is a reluctance of promoting the *ugrā* nature of Kāmākṣī in the *KV* as well as in the priests' recap of the story when compared to both the *LU* and *DM*. This reluctance is transferred to the ritual setting, where Kāmākṣī splits and Durgā performs the final killing. In this way, Kāmākṣī retains her predominantly benign character yet is the cause of the destruction of the demon.

However, Mr. Satyamurti Sastrigal told me that Kāmākṣī created Durgā on Durgāṣṭamī as her lieutenant, in order to drink the blood of another frightful demon, since there were in fact several demons being killed at the time. He explained that *curasaṃhāra* is a generic term for the killing of any demon, and in that way the *DM* is seen as a version of the "same story" as the one enacted in the Kāmākṣī temple. In this interpretation, Durgā joins in the battle along with Kāmākṣī to secure the burial of Bandhāsura. He explained:

Figure 3.11: Women admiring the temple *kolu*, 2014.

"Durgā has been created by Ampāḷ since it is not alone Bandhāsura, there is a big force [of demons]. Durgā is the special lieutenant to the goddess. Opposite to the office of our temple, there is a *jayasthamba* (Skt. "victory post"). The story is that after Bandhāsura was killed, his body was buried over there, when that place was dug, there was a demon called Raktabīja, his specialty was that if one drop of blood falls from his body, then from that a

thousand Raktabījas would emerge. So Ampāḷ asks Durgā to drink all the blood without even one drop falling down. Then only she kills Bandhāsura."

This recap resembles a myth from the *KV* (13.1–37): While burying Bandhaka, an *asura* by the name Mallaka did penance in the burial pit. Viṣṇu killed him, so that Bandhaka could be buried as the goddess had instructed. Then, many more *asuras* appeared, and two Śivabhūtas (attendants of Śiva) came and killed them. Intoxicated by the blood they drank, they picked a fight with Viṣṇu, who defeated them.[144] According to Kāmākṣī's priests, Durgā/Kālī takes on the role of the Śivabhūtas and secures the burial of the demon.

Cultural Program and Kolu

Each evening, following the *curasaṃharam*, a musical program is performed in front of the goddess while she resides in the Navarātri pavilion. This usually consists of classical Carnatic music. A few devotees I spoke with in the temple linked the music to cooling the goddess, who is in a ferocious state fighting with the demon these festival evenings. The temple concert is not too formal, and people come and go. During the concert, devotees hang out in the *maṇḍapa* eating their *prasāda*, some proceed to photograph Kāmākṣī in her Navarātri *alaṃkāra* with their mobile phones; others watch and talk about the two kolus that surround Kāmākṣī's dais (figure 3.11). These *kolus* are set up by the priests for the duration of the festival and consist of dolls donated to the temple by devotees who don't keep *kolu* themselves: wedding sets, "baby shower" sets and baby Kṛṣṇas dominate the lower tires, while deities of various sizes occupy the higher tiers. Other devotees go for *darśana* of the goddess in the sanctum.[145]

Additional Ceremonies

Sarasvatī Pūjā

On Sarasvatī Pūjā, the ninth day of Navarātri, Kāmākṣī is brought in procession to the *maṇḍapa* in the same manner as the eight nights before, adorned in a

144 After killing the Śivabhūtas, Viṣṇu manifested in the three postures of standing, sitting, and reclining. Since he had committed a sin against Śiva (*śivopācara*), the *pañcatīrtha* was created. Viṣṇu was free from the sin through its sanctity and the *bhūtas* appointed as its guardian. (*KV* 14.37–85). The *pañcatīrtha* probably refers to the temple tank in the Kāmākṣī temple, known as Pañcagaṅgatīrtham or Pañca kaṅkai kulam. A Viṣṇu shrine at the back of the Kāmākṣī temple faces the temple tank.

145 The ritual practices of *kolu*, including temple *kolus* and the practice of donating dolls, will be discussed in detail in chapters 5–7.

Sarasvatī *alaṃkāra* carrying the *vīṇā*. No fight is enacted this evening, but the musical program is performed as usual. The goddess is brought to peace after fighting the demon, and the atmosphere in the temple courtyard is calmer than the previous days.

Sarasvatī Pūjā is otherwise marked in the Kāmākṣī temple by worshipping the office tools and office records for a prosperous coming year.

Rites of Closure

Ablution of Kāmākṣī's Weapon

The SC prescribes a *cūrṇotsava* (festival of powder) at a water source and the ablution of the goddess along with the elephant hook (*aṃkuśa*) on the 10th day of Vijayadaśamī.[146] The ablution of Kāmākṣī's main weapon (Ta. *tīrttavāri*, Skt. *tīrthasnāna*, *avabhṛtasnāna*), the elephant hook, is performed in the temple tank around noon this day. Draped in a sari and garlanded, the hook is brought out in front of the *yāgaśālā* in a small palanquin. There, the sprouts from the *aṅkurārpaṇa* are put onto the palanquin and they are carried in procession to the temple tank, which is situated in the middle of the temple premises. Here, the main priest performs *abhiṣeka* to the elephant hook with water from the tank, milk, yoghurt and turmeric water, and the water from the pot with the green plant. The elephant hook is also offered bananas and smeared with lime. Next, the *aṅkurārpaṇa* sprouts are drenched in the tank before they are put at the base of the hook, and *pūjā* is performed. The priest then puts some of the sprouts onto his head, as well as onto the heads of some other priests and throws the rest to the attending audience. The sprouts represent a successful and prosperous festival period. The main priest dips the elephant hook thrice under the water in the temple tank before the priests themselves bathe along with it. The rite is accompanied by a decent number of devotees, some of whom also bathe in the tank themselves, before the elephant hook is carried in procession back into the temple.

146 *nivartya ca nadīṃ gatvā hradaṃ vānyanmahāsaraḥ | niveśya ca sarasas tīre kuryāc cūrṇotsavaṃ tataḥ || snapanaṃ kalpayitvā tu kṛtvāpy aṃkuśapūjanam | snāpayitvā tato devīṃ snāyād astrasaṃanvitaḥ || SC* 39.45–46 — "After returning [from the *bhūtabali* in the forest, see fn. 105], having gone to a river, pool or another pond, and after reaching the shore of the water, [the chief priest] should then perform the festival of powder. After bathing and worshipping the elephant hook, thereupon after bathing the goddess, he should bathe along with the weapon." — In 2015 the *tīrttavāri* was performed only for the elephant hook while the goddess remained inside the temple.

Modeled on a pilgrimage to a holy bathing place, *tīrttavāri* is performed to remove pollution attracted during the festival, and to induce auspicious results (Davis 2010, 33). Mr. Satyamurti Sastrigal further equated the *tīrttavāri* to a *prāyaścitta* (an atonement ritual done as corrective measure), since it is also performed during lunar and solar eclipses, known as times of inauspiciousness.

Figure 3.12. *Vaṉṉimarapūjā*, 2014.

Worship of the Vaṉṉi Tree

The worship of the *vaṉṉi* tree (*vaṉṉimarapūjā*) is performed in the evening of Vijayadaśamī. Prior to the arrival of Kāmākṣī and her procession, a branch of a *vaṉṉi* tree is tied to a grate in the Sannadhi Street, running eastwards from the main temple *gopuram*. The procession again encompasses the musicians, torch bearers, palanquin bearers and her priests. Kāmākṣī is placed about ten meters in front of the branch, and the main priest sprinkles the bush and gives Kāmākṣī a bow and three arrows wrapped in strings of jasmine flowers. He retrieves the arrows and bow from the goddess and shoots the flower arrows at the *vaṉṉi* branch on her behalf (figure 3.12). Then he gives the bow back to the goddess and *ārāti* is shown.

Very few devotees attended this ritual in 2014 compared to the numbers that show up for Kāmākṣīs fight with the demon. Indeed, the temple courtyard was filled to the brim with people eager to watch the goddess's procession in her golden chariot immediately afterward, but the worship of the *vaṉṉi* tree rather had an aura of solitude to it. The *pūjā*, performed at dusk outside of the

temple premises, is not announced in the festival program and is attended mostly by priests and other temple employees. Clearly, the *vaṉṉi* tree *pūjā* is not among the Navarātri rituals contributing to public spectacle.

Interestingly, Kāmākṣī's priests offered different explanations for *why* the *vaṉṉi* tree *pūjā* is performed. One priest, Mr. Satyamurti Sastrigal, held that this is an atonement ritual that Kāmākṣī must perform after committing the sin of killing the demon. Then she incurred a sin called *brahmahatidoṣa*.[147] He explained:

> "The *vaṉṉi* tree is the one [tree] that relieves one of all the sins[148] that one has done. Once someone is killed, you get a sin called the *brahmahatidoṣa*, Ampāḷ is not an exception, and so she also gets the sin. For getting relieved of the sin, she does the *vaṉṉimarapūjā*. *Brahmahatidoṣa* is a sin which occurs on killing […] even animals".

While it could be plausible to assume that Kāmākṣī must atone because she committed the heinous crime of brahminicide[149] (pointing to the demon as a Brahmin; the revived Kāmā [see chapter 2]), Mr. Satyamurti Sastrigal was very keen on emphasizing that she could get this sin from killing *anyone* – even an animal. In this interpretation, the ritual bears parallels with the *tīrttavāri* at the end of the festival, which also has atonement components.

Two other priests, however, did not mention atonement and told me that the demon did not die on the eighth day, he took the form of a *vaṉṉi* tree.[150]

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147 Unlike in the myth of the goddess and the demon in the *Aruṇācalamāhātmya* of Tiruvannamalai, where the goddess must atone for killing a Śiva devotee (see Shulman 1976 and 1980, 179–180), it is not stated explicitly in the *KV* that Kāmākṣī commits a sin. In the *Aruṇācalamāhātmya* a *śivaliṅga* gets stuck to Durgā's hand after the murder, and she cleaves the mountain with a sword and bathes in the water that comes forth for a month to get rid of it. Fuller and Logan (1980) discuss how the *doṣa* the goddess attains from killing a Śiva devotee is removed from the goddess's hair through a hair washing ritual in the Mīnākṣī temple.

148 The *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* (VI 9.2) connects the *vaṉṉi* (Tamil for *śamī*) tree to sins: "O śamī! Remove from us (destroy) sins and enmities" (*śamī śamayāsmad-aghā dvēṣāṃsi*) (cited by Kane 1974, 194).

149 *Brahmahatyā* (*f*) means "the murder (*hatyā*, but also *hati*) of a brahmin" while *doṣa* means "sin" or "crime" (MW). *Brahma* (in comp. for *brahman*) could however also mean a soul in general, as in the absolute spirit, which is the meaning the priest gives the word.

150 Different demons are connected to different deities and to different trees. What types of trees are connected to which gods and demons varied according to my respondents. According to the Tamil *Kantapurāṇam*, Murukaṉ killed the shape shifting *asura* Śūrapadman (Ta. Cūrapaṉmaṉ), who finally assumed the form of a gigantic mango tree, by splitting the tree in two. The two halves became the peacock that he took as his *vāhana* (vehicle) and the cock in his banner. Commemorating this, a *curasaṃhāram* is performed in the Kumarakōṭṭam Murukaṉ temple of Kanchipuram during the six-day long

Therefore, Kāmākṣī must kill the tree on Vijayadaśamī. Only the *vaṉṉi* tree *pūjā* accomplishes killing the demon Bandhāsura. Mr. Sudarshan Satrigal explained:

> "Each evening there is *curasaṃhāram* in the *kolu maṇḍapa*. It happens on nine nights [*sic*] and ends on Durgāṣṭamī. Along with Ampāḷ, Durgā comes out in procession with her. She kills him, but he takes the form of a *vaṉṉi* tree. So, on Vijayadaśamī she will kill the tree."

In this interpretation, rather than paralleling the *tīrttavāri*, the ritual resembles the cutting of the banana trees (standing for the rarer *vaṉṉi* trees, or, alternatively, banana trees with a branch of *vaṉṉi* within), a ritual that is performed in several other temples on Vijayadaśamī, such as the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple.[151] In these temples, the demon is invoked in a tree and slain by the priest on the goddess's behalf. Kāmākṣī's *vaṉṉi pūjā* also closely resembles the ritual performed in the Varadarāja temple on Vijayadaśamī, where a priest shoots ten arrows at the directions in front of a *vaṉṉi* tree on behalf of Varadarāja, in order to kill the demon.[152] As pointed out by Hiltebeitel (1991, 94), an interesting inversion has taken place between South India and the North: in North India the *śamī* or *vaṉṉi* tree is worshipped as an abode of Durgā.[153] The tree is associated with Durgā through the *Durgāstava* hymn incorporated into the epic *Mahābhārata*, in the context where the Pāṇḍavas hide their weapons inside a *śamī* tree prior to the war – while in Tamil Nadu it is identified with the demon. The rituals including the *vaṉṉi* tree hint strongly to the royal associations of

annual festival *skandhaśasti* (Ta. *kanta caṣṭi*), but the enactment does not include a tree. Moreover, in some myths describing how Śiva burnt Kāma to ashes, Kāma's wrath took the form of a tree (Beck 1981, 121). Knowing that Bandhāsura, according to some myths, was created from the ashes of Kāma (see chapter 2), these associations are intriguing. See Hiltebeitel (1991, chapter 5) for connections between trees, posts, and demons.

151 See chapter 4.

152 See Hüsken 2018. Several scholars describe such a ritual. It is performed on Vijayadaśamī in the Aruṇācaleśvara temple of Tiruvannamalai, where the arrows are fired on behalf of Subrahmaṇiya, who is accompanied by Durgā (L'Hernault and Reiniche 1999, 172–173). This ritual is known as *digvijaya* (Skt. "conquering the directions") or *ambuviḍudal* (Ta. "launch of arrows") (ibid.). In the Varadarāja temple it is known as *vaṉṉimaram pārivēṭṭai* (Ta. "*vaṉṉi* tree hunting festival") and as *mṛgayotsava* (Skt. "hunting festival") in the ritual text *Īśvarasaṃhitā*. In Chidambaram, arrows are discharged at crossroads during the Vijayadaśamī procession "to celebrate the goddess's victory" (Tanaka 1999, 130), but Tanaka gives no mention of a *vaṉṉi* tree or who discharges the arrows. Hiltebeitel reports that the ritual is performed at "some Draupadī temples" (1991, 96–96). In the ritual he describes from Muthialpet, Arjuna shoots arrows at a *vaṉṉi* tree "to prove his strength to Draupadī before marrying her", and the demonic status of the tree is barely hinted at (ibid.). See also Biardeau (2004).

153 See also Rodrigues 2012.

Navarātri: in North India, the worship of *śamī* (*śamī pūjā*) forms part of royal ceremonies of Vijayadaśamī, through its association with victorious Durgā, as a boundary ritual (cf. conquering the directions) or the honoring of weapons. Known from historical sources, the kings of Vijayanagara (Hüsken 2018, 187) and Ramnad (Breckenridge 1977, 88 in Hiltebeitel 1991, 95) shot arrows towards directions of their enemies during Vijayadaśamī (these sources are silent about the involvement of a tree). This is possibly a remnant from the royal consecration ceremony of Vedic times (*rājasūya*), where the king mounted a chariot and shot an arrow in the direction of a *kṣatriya* relative substituting for the enemy (Heesterman 1957, 129–132, 138–139, 1985, 119 in Hiltebeitel 1991, 94–95). In contemporary South Indian Hinduism, these rituals are blended and the *vaṉṉi* tree has come to represent the enemy himself (Hiltebeitel 1991, 95).[154]

Returning to Kāmākṣī, the different interpretations of the worship of the *vaṉṉi* tree, among the priests who are working alongside within the same temple complex, points to the polysemy or multi-vocality of ritual (Turner 1967, Bloch 1974). The tree is considered either an abode of the demon or a reliever of sin. Either, Kāmākṣī must atone, or she fights the demon in two different manners. Along with the different interpretations of the roles of Durgā and Kāmākṣī in the *curasaṃhāra*, we here have an instance of/series of similar looking rituals with different meanings and different looking rituals with similar meanings.

Procession in the Golden Chariot

After the *vaṉṉi* tree *pūjā*, Kāmākṣī is brought back to the temple courtyard, placed in her golden chariot (Skt. *suvarṇa ratha*) and taken in procession within the temple compound. This is a festival highlight for the devotees, and the temple is filled to the brim as Kāmākṣī circumambulates the sanctum in her shiny chariot adorned with light bulbs and led by two golden horses.[155] This event is accompanied by eleven *nādasvarams* (a wind instrument) and culminates the festival as the victorious goddess parades her temple.

154 See Biardeau (2004, 1984) for other interesting symbolisms of the tree. For instance, the *vaṉṉi* is closely connected to the Vedic sacrificial post, to which the sacrificial animal (buffalo) is tied, and to the Vedic sacrificial fire (*vaṉṉi* means fire in Tamil). *Śamīpūjās* are dealt with in *purāṇas* and other medieval ritual works. See Kane (1974, 190–194).

155 Kāmākṣī journeys in the golden chariot every Friday (unless interrupted by festivals or other special observances), an event that is very popular among her devotees.

Subsequent Rites

Ablutions from a Thousand Pots

The rituals of day 11 and 12 do not form part of Navarātri but are connected to the festival and mentioned in the festival program. In the morning of the 11th day, a *śrīvidyā homa* is performed, prior to the *sahasra svarṇa kalacastāpaṉam*. This is the invocation of the thousand names of the goddess, according to the *Lalītāsahasranāma*, into a thousand small golden *kalaśas*. These small pots are placed in four triangle-shaped receptacles, and a similar arrangement of *kalaśas* as the one in the *yāgaśāla* during Navarātri is kept in addition: the main *kalaśa* representing Kāmākṣī in the middle, with three *kalaśas* surrounding it, and the eight *vāgdevatās* surrounding those again. The priests chant the LS and invoke the goddesses, and at last *āratī* is shown for the *kalaśas*.

The next morning of the 12th day, there is again a *kanyā pūjā*, a *sumaṅgalī pūjā*, and a *vaduga pūja*, performed in front of the altogether 1012 *kalaśas*. Immediately after, the priests carry the twelve main *kalaśas* which are installed for the duration of the festival in procession around the temple, and finally they perform an *abhiṣeka* for the goddess in the sanctum with the main *kalaśas* and the thousand pots (*sahasrakalaśābhiṣeka*). With these ablutions, the goddess in her manifold temporary manifestations is once more re-absorbed into her own form in the temple. These ablutions are also considered *prāyaścittas*, or corrective atonement rituals.

Swing Festival

In the evening of the 12th day a swing festival (Ta. *ūñcal urcava*) is held at the shrine of Kāmākṣī's procession image, during which the wives of the temple priests gently push the goddess while she is seated on her swing.[156] This concludes the Navarātri festival in the Kāmākṣī temple.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter has explored the rituals that are conducted during contemporary Navarātri in the Kāmākṣī ammaṉ temple. Apart from the installation and worship of goddesses in *kalaśas*, the rituals that give this festival its special character in the Kāmākṣī temple are the Navarātri *alaṃkāras*, the fight between

156 Tanaka (1999) observes that in Chidambaram, girls from the priestly families do *āratī* for the goddess on her swing. Taken together this points to the "swing festival" in Brahmin temples during Navarātri as a largely female activity.

Kāmākṣī and the demon and the subsequent worship of the *vaṉṉi* tree, and the worship of prepubescent girls and auspicious married women.

Among these Navarātri rituals, it is particularly the *alaṃkāras* that allow for playfulness in decorating the goddess's image with elaborate flower canopies, additional limbs, cloth, jewelry, and the like. The aesthetic creativity ultimately belongs to the goddess and manifests as divine inspiration through the priests' hands. The Navarātri *alaṃkāras* of this temple give importance to the local form of the goddess Kāmākṣī, in that they display the history of the Kāmākṣī temple and the *Śrīvidyā* cult through decorating Kāmakṣī primarily as various forms of herself. At the end of the festival, she is decorated as warrior Durgā followed by the peaceful Sarasvatī on Sarasvatī Pūjā, alluding to common Navarātri motifs. An important point is that her *alaṃkāras* rather *adorn* than *transform* Kāmākṣī – as opposed to those of the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple.

During the festival, and while wearing these special decorations, Kāmākṣī sports with the demon Bandhāsura in a ritual drama enacted as a public spectacle for eight evenings in the Navarātri pavilion. Through this ritual the goddess's *līlā* is played out for her worshippers, and the rush of devotees to receive *āratī* once the demon is decapitated indicates the power of the event. Despite of a dramatic and violent fight there is reluctance towards promoting the fierce nature of Kāmākṣī in myth as well as ritual. Her form as a fierce warrior could be more pronounced in *alaṃkāras*, and the battle scenes are not elaborated on in any of the myths on Kāmākṣī and the demon – they are absent. I have shown that different interpretations prevail in myth, ritual, and explanations of different priests (and the audience)[157] on how and if Kāmākṣī kills the demon and Durgā's role in it. This connects to the ambivalent nature of Kāmākṣī as a Brahmin goddess: according to local legend, her inherently fierce powers were tamed and subdued by the Śaṅkarācarya and confined into the *śrīcakra*, which is now the recipient of *vaidika* worship in the temple. Once a year Kāmākṣī reassumes this ferocious form for the sake of conquering the demon. And succeeding she must atone by means of shooting arrows at the *vaṉṉi* tree. But this *vaṉṉi* tree carries several layers of interpretation and might also stand for the demon and his final killing. In yet another interpretation, Kāmākṣī splits into Durgā, leaves the impure task of killing the demon to her, and remains predominantly benevolent. It is important to note that all these explanations co-exist within the same tradition and environment and are apparently not contested.

157 Most devotees did not know, or were concerned about, the identity of the demon in the *curasaṃhāra*.

There is more emphasis on women during Navarātri than during the rest of the ritual year in the Kāmākṣī temple. This is despite of their rather passive role; worshipped by the priests as the goddess's representatives. The close connection between females and the goddess through their shared *śakti* is particularly evident during Navarātri and when worship of the goddess in human form reaches the Supreme Śakti. This is emphasized also in the *SC*. However, the prepubescent girl and the auspicious married woman are the two states of womanhood that are preferred to other forms, excluding unmarried and barren women, and widows.[158] As pointed out by Hüsken (2018, 189), *kanyās* and *sumaṅgalīs* are defined in terms of their state in the reproductive cycle: while *sumaṅgalīs* have enacted their fertility and are highly auspicious, *kanyās* as potential *sumaṅgalīs* are ambivalent since they have not yet realized their fertility. Navarātri can therefore be seen as celebrating women's fertile and therefore auspicious aspect. The worship of prepubescent girls points to the mythology of the *KV* as well, in that the girls should be under the age of 9, which is the age of Kāmākṣī when she kills the demon. These *pūjās* can be interpreted as empowering the goddess for her fight. Female agency is also present in the wives of the temple priests pushing the goddess's swing on the final day. Still, the predominantly female scene during Navarātri continues to be the home, where the wives of the temple priests have more clear-cut ritual roles.

Apart from the worship of prepubescent girls and auspicious married women, none of the other rituals that constitute the distinct form of the contemporary festival (Navarātri *alaṃkāras*, the fight between Kāmākṣī and the demon and the subsequent worship of the *vaṉṉi* tree) are mentioned in the ritual handbook *SC*. Although the SC contains a myth about the goddess and the demon Andhaka, the priests relate the ritual practices to the mythology of the *KV* and the killing of Bandhāsura. These Navarātri rituals are shaped by prevailing local practices and mythology which are not expressed in the ritual handbook.

In stark contrast to the domestic sphere, and also in contrast to the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple which we turn to next, devotees who come to the Kāmākṣī temple for celebrating Navarātri are a passive audience of ritual performances. Surely, people actively partake in *darśana* as a reciprocal process, but the priests perform the prescribed rituals for the goddess without any active involvement by devotees: in the Kāmākṣī temple, ritual agency belongs almost exclusively to the male Brahmin priests.

158 See also chapter 5.

Chapter 4
Navarātri in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ Temple

Despite being small and modest, the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple celebrates Navarātri grandly, and is known in Kanchipuram for its magnificent and elaborate themed Navarātri *alaṃkāras*. Vijayadaśamī culminaties the festival when Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ possesses her priest and kills the demon which is invoked in a banana tree. Through describing and discussing the temple's festival procedures, I will show how the ritual agency of women is expressed in this temple during Navarātri; explore the nature of the divine feminine; and point to how creativity and playfulness manifests in the celebrations.

The Festival Area and the Crowd

This modest roadside temple and the small road it occupies are transformed into a festive area for Navarātri. Devotional songs continually boom from huge loudspeakers, there are light bulbs and floodlights, flags saying *oṃ śakti* decorate the side of the road, and huge banners and posters announce the festival's entertainment and *alaṃkāra* programs. A stage is erected with rows of plastic chairs in front, where the evening entertainment program is held while devotees have *darśana* of the goddess in her Navarātri *alaṃkāra*. Fences are put up for regulating the *darśana* queues, and there is a provisional shoe shed to keep the footwear. When trucks or buses occasionally pass by, it takes some work to thread them through the crowd. In 2014 a bouncing castle and a small merry-go-round was set up for children along with a small stall selling sweets.

The crowd attending Navarātri celebrations in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple grows visibly from year to year. Many come every evening, and many tie protective cords (Ta. *kāppu*, Skt. *rakṣabandhana*), signifying their vows to Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ. A smaller group among the devotees who tie the *kāppu* belongs to the temple trust.[159] During Navarātri they are dressed uniformly in saffron colored clothes, and all wear a *śaktimāla* (necklace symbolizing goddess devotion) around their necks and are allotted special tasks in the temple. The tasks

159 The trustees who do temple service during Navarātri belong to the dance class of the priest's son, Mr. Sanjay, who in addition to making Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ's *alaṃkāras* works as a disco dance teacher and a headmaster at a children's school. According to the *pūjāri*'s calculations, the trust consists of approximately 30–40 people out of the couple of hundred people who altogether tie the *kāppu*.

include distributing flowers or *prasāda*, serving food, helping with ritual preparations, and handling the huge crowd of devotees. Because of the tying of protective cords, it is mainly the same people who attend the Navarātri celebrations here daily, and for those who tie it, Navarātri is a temple celebration. In contrast to the Kāmākṣī temple, I was only able to locate one single devotee in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple who kept *kolu*: a Brahmin teacher and her family who lived very close by. She did not tie *kāppu* but attended *darśana* of the goddess in her Navarātri *alaṃkāras* every evening.

While the devotees are of both genders and include families, elders and children, women outnumber the men on many ritual occasions, and several rituals are also reserved to women. The temples of village goddesses are often differently gendered than those of Brahmanical goddesses. Here, women participate in many rituals and have a more prominent and active role. The number of women was also emphasized by the *pūjāri* Mr. Mahesh, who made the sweeping statement that "anything related to the temple, only ladies mostly participate".

One reason why this small Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple is able to celebrate grandly is that donors, among them companies as well as individuals, sponsor each festival event.[160] These include the morning and evening *abhiṣekas* of the goddess, her *alaṃkāras*, the *prasāda*, and the food provided for guests (Ta. *aṉṉatāṉam*). In interviews the *pūjāri* as well as his son Mr. Sanjay, who fashions the *alaṃkāras*, played down the importance of the donors. The son rather stressed that their grand Navarātri celebration is a consequence of their temple being private, whereas the dependency of donors would be stronger in public temples.[161]

Navarātri and Āṭi

Along with the Āṭi festival (mid July-mid August), Navarātri is considered a main festival in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple. Āṭi is a festive season devoted to the worship and celebration of the goddess.[162] Navarātri is the only festival going on for a prolonged period of altogether 12 days, which makes it a

160 While some donors have sponsored Navarātri rituals for several years, others are new. The sponsors of each festival event are given in the festival program, along with the duration of their sponsoring.

161 Implied here is that since it is *their* temple, Mr. Sanjay's ideas for *alaṃkāras* come first, and then the donors come into the picture financing them without a say in Mr. Sanjay's artistic expression.

162 See Allocco (2009).

highlight of the ritual year. Moreover, many of the rituals often associated with Āṭi are performed during Navarātri in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple. These include the tying of protective cords, carrying milk pots in procession and collective piercings. The temples' Navarātri celebrations start on the day before Navarātri usually does and extend to the day after Vijayadaśamī.[163]

Ritual Procedures during Navarātri

I categorize the rituals in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple similar to those of the Kāmākṣī temple, namely inaugural rites, daily observances, additional ceremonies and subsequent rites.[164] I have, however, left out the rites of closure, as there is no *tīrtha* circle in this temple.[165] The daily Navarātri *alaṃkāras*, the goddess's fight with the demon, and the two processions beginning and ending the festival are discussed and alalysed in detail because these rituals provide Navarātri with its special character in this temple.

Inaugural Rites

Homa and Preparation of the Kalaśa

The festival is initiated with a *Kaṇapatihōmam* (Ta. "fire oblations for Gaṇeśa", remover of obstacles) in the morning of the first day. Following the *homa*, a pot is prepared and kept near the temple's Durgā shrine during Navarātri.[166] The water from this pot will be sprinkled over the devotees after their procession on the day after Vijayadaśamī.

163 This is on *amāvācai*, new moon day. The priest explained in an interview that the day after new moon (Skt. *prathama tithi*, the first lunar day) is considered inauspicious, and therefore they start the festival the day before.

164 By applying this subdivision which derives from a Brahmanical temple festival to the celebrations of the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple I do not mean to imply that the Brahmanical way of celebrating is the "standard".

165 The milk pot procession with its ablutions could fit into the category of rites of closure in that it cools down the goddess after her fight with the demon. Since it is held the day after Vijayadaśamī I label it a "subsequent ritual".

166 The worship of Vaṉaturkkaiyammaṉ's image has its own daily sponsor during Navarātri. Occasionally Durgā had special *alaṃkāras* too: one evening during Navarātri 2015 she was decorated entirely with bangles, another evening she was decorated with banknotes.

Bringing Gifts for the Mother

In the evening of the first day, the *tāy cīr koṇḍu varutal* (Ta. "bringing gifts for the mother") procession marks Navarātri's beginning for the devotees. Here, Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ's female devotees, some along with their children, carry gifts (Ta. *cīr*, lit. prosperity, wealth) in procession and offer them to their mother (Ta. *tāy*) Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ when reaching her temple. This is the first in a series of three rituals during these 12 days which are reserved to female participants, and the procession frames the festival along with the milk pot and piercing procession, which also has a strong female character to it, since only women carry milk pots. In contrast to the milk pot procession, this ritual is purely devotional, and is not related to any vow. For the *tāy cir* procession, women dress in their best saris, while in the milk pot procession, they are uniformly clad in yellow and red.

The women present items connected to femininity and auspiciousness to the goddess on a plate (figure 4.1). This is modeled on bringing gifts to the husband's family in the context of weddings: *cīr varicai* is the dowry presented and ritually displayed on the couple's wedding day (cf. Allocco 2009b, 289). In 2015, most women carried plates filled with saris, bangles, flowers, garlands, coconuts, betel leaves, *kuṅkumam* and turmeric powders and various fruits, but two women had filled their plates with sugar; and another carried a homemade sewing kit including fabrics, ribbons, and scissors. The gifts are taken by the temple and may subsequently be distributed to other devotees.[167]

The procession starts from a nearby Kaṉṉiyammaṉ temple[168] and ends at the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple. The ritual is a recent addition to the Navarātri programs of the two involved temples, as it had only been practiced for 5 years in 2015. While the women gather at the Kaṉṉiyammaṉ temple with their gifts in the early evening, some of the ritual musicians (Ta. *pampaikkārar*) who preside over several rituals during the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple's Navarātri celebrations prepare a *kalaśa* in which goddess Kaṉṉiyammaṉ is invoked.[169] This pot

167 The plates are returned to the devotees. The priest estimated that up to 70 plates were offered yearly in this ritual during the past five years.

168 The Kaṉṉiyammaṉ temple is situated about a 10-minute walk from along the Vandavasi Road towards Kanchipuram. The preparations for the *tāy cīr* procession happen while the procession image of Kaṉṉiyammaṉ is adorned in her Navarātri *alaṃkāra* prior to her swing festival (Skt. *uñjal sevā*, Ta. *ūñcal cēvai*) which is performed daily during Navarātri there.

169 On the role of the *pampaikkārar* in these rituals, see Allocco (2009, 386–187).

has a metal face fitted to a bundle of *nīm* leaves[170] sticking up from its mouth and is clad in a sari. The Kaṉṉiyammaṉ temple priest's wife will carry the pot in the procession of women bearing gifts to Paḍavēṭṭamman (figure 4.2).

After the preparations, in 2015 a performing arts group performed a tiger dance (Ta. *puliyāṭṭam*)[171] in front of Kaṉṉiyammaṉ's procession image, which by now was adorned with flowers and seated on a swing right outside the temple. Four men in tiger costumes and tiger masks mimicked the ferocious movements of tigers, accompanied by intense drumming. The tigers, the women carrying their plates, the goddess in the *kalaśa*, other devotees and the group of musicians then joined in the procession.

Reaching the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple after about half an hour, the pot embodying the goddess receives *ārātī* from Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ's *pūjāri* before he carries it into the sanctum where it is kept for the duration of the festival. The women, one after another, place their plates with gifts outside the goddess's sanctum.

Tying of Protective Cords

In the early evening, the *pūjāri* ties the protective cord to the wrist of the *mūlamūrti* of Paḍavēṭṭammaṉ.[172] This *kāppu* has a piece of turmeric tied to it and is rubbed in turmeric. He thereupon ties one to the *triśula*, one to the Durgā image in the right corner of the temple, and one to the procession image (figure 4.3). After the women have presented their gifts to Paḍavēṭṭammaṉ, he ties the *kāppu* to a group of devotees, before one of his sons finally ties it to him.

170 The *nīm* tree is considered the sacred tree of the goddess. With their cooling qualities, *nīm* leaves are prevalent in rituals related to curing chickenpox in Mariyammaṉ temples. The soothing juice from the *nīm* leaves is also used in Ayurvedic medicine.

171 The South Indian folk art of tiger dance is strongly associated with Navarātri (Dasara) in Andhra Pradesh (known there as *puli vēṣam*), but is vanishing from contemporary celebrations (see http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-andhrapradesh/lsquoPuli-veshamrsquo-a-vanishing-art/article16523511.ece, accessed 25.08.22).

172 See Allocco (2009b, 398–401), Beck (1981, 110–111), Diehl (1956, 252–253), Foulston (2002, 160–162) and Hiltebeitel (1991, 82–91) for other scholarly discussions on the *kāppu*. Diehl (1956, 253) explains the *kāppu* as a three-dimensional *yantra* which "draws a circle around the person or the thing protecting it from outside disturbances and preventing power from leaking out".

Figure 4.1: Gifts to the goddess, 2015.

Figure 4.2: Woman carrying the *kalaśa* in which the goddess is invoked, 2015.

Figure 4.3: Priest tying the *kāppu* to the *triśula*, 2015.

The tying of protective cords (Ta. *kāppu kaṭṭi*) around the wrist functions on several levels: it sets Navarātri off as an important festival, offers protection during the festival period when the distinctions between sacred and profane realms are then at their most fluid and constantly changing (Foulston 2002, 161), and symbolizes the vows (Ta. *viratam*, Skt. *vrata*) of the participants.[173] While on vow, the devotee is under certain restrictions, such as bathing twice a day, walking barefoot, sleeping on the floor,[174] eating vegetarian food, abstaining from intoxication and sexual intercourse, and not uttering any bad words. The devotee should fast on the day of the milk pot procession, and ideally not cross the borders of the *ūr* (Ta. "village, neighborhood"), meaning Kanchipuram. Since this may be difficult in practice, the rule has been relaxed not to stay overnight. The tying literally means safeguarding and protection and involves a reciprocal protection between the devotee and the goddess. The devotee is protected by adhering to the imposed restrictions of the vow, and the

173 Harman (2006), Younger (2001 [1980]), and Allocco (2008) have written about vows in the Māriyammaṉ tradition.

174 This means avoiding contact with anything that may be polluted with sexual and menstrual fluids (Allocco 2009, 400).

goddess is safeguarded from contact with polluted elements (Allocco 2009b, 399). Women who have tied the *kāppu* are allowed to enter the sanctum on the day of the milk pot procession. According to the *pūjāri*, the goddess, too, is considered taking up a vow during Navarātri, to "kill evil mentality".

Daily Observances

Worship Routines

During the total of twelve Navarātri days Paḍavēṭṭammaṉ receives a daily morning *abhiṣeka*, and the priest chants Tamil *ślokas* and mantras to bring forth the goddess, praying for the prosperity of the devotees and donors. Then Paḍavēṭṭammaṉ receives food offerings around noon, and about two o'clock in the afternoon a second *abhiṣeka* is performed for her. After this, the preparations for the evening *alaṃkāra* will start. The ornamentation of the goddess will be complete around 7–8 PM, and by then devotees have started to gather in front of the temple. Paḍavēṭṭammaṉ receives *pūjā* behind a curtain before the *alaṃkāra* is shown to an eager audience as is the climax of the *pūjā*, exposing the goddess luminous with power, transformed from a simple black stone statue to a colorful display. *Darśana* of the goddess in her *alaṃkāra* goes on for hours, after which the devotees receive the goddess's *prasāda*.

Entertainment Program

Each evening an entertainment program is performed on the stage across the street from the temple. The entertainment ranges from various dance forms to classical and contemporary music, street theatre (Ta. *kuttu*) and fancy-dress competitions for children, who will wear different costumes of gods, mythological characters or religious/political leaders and recite dialogues. In 2015 the entertainments were:

1) Tiger dance and drumbeats (*puliyāṭṭam*)
2) Tiger dance and drumbeats (*puliyāṭṭam*)
3) Confluence of arts (*kalaicaṅkamam*, that is various entertaiments of music, dance etc.)
4) Ancient drama (*purartāna nāṭakam*)
5) Puppet show of Vaḷḷi's wedding to Murukaṉ (*vaḷḷitirumana pommalāṭṭam*)
6) Music performance (*iṉṉicai kaccēri*)
7) Debate (*ciṟappu paṭṭimanṟam*)
8) Fancy dress competition (*māṟuvēṭappōṭṭi*)

9) "Nine moods" dance (*navaraca nāṭṭiyam*)
10) Competition (*taṇittiṟaṉ pōṭṭi*, competition where emerging artists may perform their skills)
11) *Uṟiyaṭi viḻā* (a competition where a pot is hung high up and should be broken)
12) Folk drumming and "water pot" dance (*naiyāṇṭi mēḷam* and *karakāṭṭam*)
13) Dance program

The stage is inaugurated on the 1st evening after tying the *kāppu*. The atmosphere is informal, as the entertainment happens simultaneously as the *darśana* of the goddess. People come and go and may watch the entertainment while standing in line for *darśana*.

Two days after Vijayadaśamī a dance show with *alaṃkāra* maker Mr. Sanjay's dance class brings the vibrant festivities to an end.

Providing Food

For the past five years, the temple has provided food for the donors and invited guests, increasing from about 50 people in the beginning to about 200 people in 2014. This is served in a back room behind the temple, in front of an image of goddess Parvatavarttiṉi seated on a lion.[175] She receives worship from the donor of the *alaṃkāra* of the evening before the food is served.

Transforming the Goddess through Alaṃkāras

Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ represents different forms of the divine each day through her evening *alaṃkāras*. The Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple has its own *alaṃkāra* maker, Mr. Sanjay, the son of the *pūjāri*. As explained, *alaṃkāras* form part of *pūjā* in temples and are not particular to Navarātri, but the more elaborate and themed series of *alaṃkāras* depicting the goddess in various forms each day, are especially made for this occasion.[176] Revealing the *alaṃkāra* for the devotees each evening by unveiling the curtain covering the goddess's sanctum is a spectacle, and devotees pine for receiving Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ's *ārati* once it is shown.

As outlined in chapter 3, the *alaṃkāras* in the famous Brahmin temples of Kanchipuram during Navarātri adorn the goddess rather than transform her

175 Parvatavarttiṉi is the consort of Irāmanātasvāmi of Rameshwaram.

176 The other occasions during the ritual year which require special *alaṃkāras* in the temple of Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ are January 1st, Cittirai (April–May) 1st, Cittirai kattiri viḻā (peak summer) and the Āṭi festival.

through the process. That is, they do not necessarily depict or imitate forms of other goddesses, and they are not planned or themed.[177] Village goddesses on the other hand more often have themed *alaṃkāras* that may be announced and advertised beforehand in the temples' festival program and on posters or banners near the temples. These *alaṃkāras* are more innovative and creatively made compared to the more traditional *alaṃkāras* in Brahmin temples.[178] They can take hours to finish, as they are elaborately made with a variety of ingredients. Mr. Sanjay usually uses sandal paste as a base, which is applied onto the stone images. He paints upon the sandal paste to change the color and contour the goddess's eyebrows, eyes, mouth, fingers, toes, and nails. Eyebrows, eyes, and mouth are finished with a thread for accuracy. Mr. Sanjay considers the face very important, as it should express the age or gender of the manifestation which is depicted. The face should look as good when viewed from up close as from a distance, and succeeding in this is, according to Mr. Sanjay, what distinguishes him from other *alaṃkāra* makers. Other ingredients that are applied to the *alaṃkāra* include flowers, buds, garlands, (*nīm*) leaves, silver and golden foil, paper, beads, bricks, clay, ornaments and jewelry, spare limbs, saris, cloth, headgear, additional images/effigies and attributes, fruits, vegetables, food, and banknotes.

In the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple the Navarātri *alaṃkāras* are the result of months of preparations and are among the highlights (if not the highlight) of the ritual year. Importantly, they also require quite substantial funds, and people sponsor them. According to the *pūjāri*, the *alaṃkāras* of Navarātri in 2014 each cost about 20,000 INR (ca. US$300; approximately an average monthly salary), and the most expensive one 50,000 INR (ca. US$780).[179] While some donors are individual people, others are silk businesses in Kanchipuram who get their brands advertised in the festival program, and have done so for

177 In the Kāmākṣī temple this is except for the Durgā *alaṃkāra* on the 8th day and the Sarasvatī *alaṃkāra* on the 9th day.

178 By "traditional," I mean that the *alaṃkāras* of Brahmin goddesses look more like *alaṃkāras* you will find in several other temples and for other occasions than Navarātri: they are not themed or planned in advance, they ornament only the goddess and not her surroundings, and fewer ingredients are used (mainly flowers, spare limbs, clothes, and jewelry). This being said, Brahmin priests take great pride in fashioning the *alaṃkāras* beautifully, and Kāmākṣī's *alaṃkāras* are equally appreciated by her devotees.

179 This was the *poṉṉiyammaṉ alaṃkāra*, a form of the goddess who is "fond of children." She was surrounded by effigies of children that were manufactured on demand by a *sthapati* (Ta. *tapati*, a temple architect/sculptor).

years.[180] The donors are also honored by the temple priest before the *alaṃkāra* is revealed.

A priest of the Varadarāja temple connected the difference in *alaṃkāra* styles and practices to the fact that independent goddesses assume ferocious forms to slay the demon, while the Brahmin goddesses, who are represented as consorts of male gods, do not. In other Brahmin temples in Tamil Nadu the ritual of conquering the demon may be enacted with either the husband or the son of the goddess shooting arrows at a *vaṉṉi* tree.[181] In contrast to the Brahmin goddesses, independent goddesses are transformed through the *alaṃkāras*; here they are not considered mere decorations. Accordingly, Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ, who has manifested in her temple as a peaceful goddess, is considered ferocious during the Navarātri period, until she has killed the demon. The *pūjāri* explained: "Day by day, one *śakti* after another is getting formed in her".

An independent goddess can be depicted as various distinct goddesses (such as Mīnākṣī, Kāmākṣī, Annapūrṇā, or the female saint Āṇṭāḷ), as different forms of herself (various Māriyammaṉs, such as *muttumāriyammaṉ*,[182] "pearl" Māriyammaṉ, figure 4.4), or as attributes of the divine (such as the *Paṉiliṅka* (ice liṅga) *mūrti*, where an ice phallus is constructed around the image, or the *Tiriculanāyaki* (lady of the trident) *alaṃkāra* (figure 4.5), where the image is depicting a trident, a main weapon of the goddess). She may also be depicted as male gods. For a period of several years, Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ was transformed into one of Viṣṇu's ten *avatāras* (Ta. *tacāvatāram*, Skt. *daśavatāra*) each Navarātri Saturday.[183]

Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ was during Navarātri 2014 ornamented in altogether 12 different *alaṃkāras*:

1) *Taṅka kavaca* (golden armor) *alaṃkāra*
2) *Cantaṉamāri* (sandal Māri[yammaṉ]) *alaṃkāra*
3) *Tīppāñciyammaṉ* (goddess jumping into the fire) *alaṃkāra*
4) *Poṉṉiyammaṉ alaṃkāra*
5) *Śrī puṟṟumāriyammaṉ* (anthill Māriyammaṉ) *alaṃkāra*
6) *Tiriculanāyaki* (lady of the trident) *alaṃkāra*

180 The eldest *alaṃkāra* donor is a Sah family who runs a well-known silk emporium in Kanchipuram. They have sponsored the Vijayadaśamī *alaṃkāra* since the beginning of the temple's Navarātri celebrations nearly 40 years ago.

181 See Hüsken 2018 and L'Hernault and Reiniche 1999.

182 Muttu or "pearls" refer to the various poxes Māriyammaṉ is believed to inflict on her devotees. She is seen as simutanously the cause and the cure of pox diseases.

183 Deities are associated with the various weekdays, and Saturdays are for Viṣṇu.

7) *Piḷḷaikaḷai kāttaruḷum pēraraci* (great queen who protects and blesses the children) *alaṃkāra*
8) *Śrī periyāyi paṭavēṭṭammaṉ* (bigger Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ) *alaṃkāra*
9) *Muttu* (pearl) *alaṃkāra*
10) *Śrī maḻaimāri* (rain-Māri[yammaṉ]) *alaṃkāra*
11) *Kalkattā kāḻi visvarūpa taricaṇam* (Calcutta Kālī viewing of the universal form) *alaṃkāra*
12) *Cānta corūpiṇi* (peaceful embodiment) *alaṃkāra*

Figure 4.4. *Muttu* (pearl) *alaṃkāra*, 2014. © V. Krishna.

Figure 4.5. *Tiriculanāyaki* (lady of the trident) *alaṃkāra*, 2014. © V. Krishna.

Figure 4.6: Tīppāñciyammaṉ (goddess jumping into the fire) alaṃkāra, 2014.

Figure 4.7: Śrī puṟṟu (anthill) Māriyammaṉ alaṃkāra, 2014. © V. Krishna.

The *Tīppāñciyammaṉ* (goddess jumping into the fire) *alaṃkāra* (figure 4.6)[184] was a new creation of 2014. Here, the goddess descends into a pot filled with what gives the impression of live, sparkling flames: the pot is filled with yellow and red paper along with a fan and a zero-watt bulb. Some of the *alaṃkāras* not only transformed the goddess, but the entire sanctum or even the temple. These included the *Śrī puṟṟu* (anthill) *Māriyammaṉ alaṃkāra*, in which the goddess is clad into a huge *kuṅkumam* dotted termite hill, with eggs and small pots of milk placed on it, under a *nīm* branch (figure 4.7).[185] The idea for this *alaṃkāra* was created 15 years back and is often used for Navarātri. It is made from about 500 bricks and hard work to construct. Mr. Sanjay said about this *alaṃkāra*: "Of all the *alaṃkāras*, this is my backbone". For the *Maḻaimāri* (rain-Māri[yammaṉ]) *alaṃkāra* the temple is turned into the scene of a rainstorm with sprinklers and thunder and lightning devices installed on the ceiling.[186] In the *Śrī periyāyi paṭavēṭṭammaṉ* (bigger Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ) *alaṃkāra*, the stone image in the sanctum is clad into a huge head, and in addition a bigger than live-size goddess is constructed out of clay, lying on a bed of *nīm* leaves and limes on the floor in between the sanctum and the *triśula* (figures 4.8 and 4.9).

184 The term *Tīppāñciyammaṉ* refers to deified women who committed *satī* (self immolation on their husbands' funeral pyre). Many such women are commemorated in South India with *satī* stones. According to the *sthalapurāṇa* of the Padaivedu Reṇukāmpāl temple from which Paṭaveṭṭammaṉ's name is derived, Reṇukā performed *satī* following her husband Jamadagni on the funeral pyre, but rain clouds prevented her from burning and she became a goddess (see Craddock 1994, 120–143).

185 Anthills are considered manifestations of the goddess as well as the dwelling place of the goddess in her snake (Skt. *nāga*) form. Milk and eggs are common offerings to snakes in temples. See Allocco (2009b, 2013b, 2013a) for discussions on snake goddess traditions in Tamil Nāḍu.

186 Rain, disease (including removal of black magic) and fertility are among the main attributes of Māriyammaṉ (Ilkama 2012, 25).

Figure 4.8: *Śrī periyāyi paṭavēṭṭammaṉ* (bigger Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ) *alaṃkāra*, sanctum, 2014. © V. Krishna.

Figure 4.9: *Śrī periyāyi paṭavēṭṭammaṉ* (bigger Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ) *alaṃkāra*, temple floor, 2014. © V. Krishna.

Figure 4.10: *Cānta corūpiṇi* (peaceful embodiment) *alaṃkāra*, 2015.

The two final Navarātri *alaṃkāras* neatly depict the goddess's transformation from ferocious to benevolent, which is expressed in ritual too. These two *alaṃkāras* are the only two that stay the same each year (the actual artistic expression, however, is subject to change). On Vijayadaśamī Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ is the fierce (*ugrā*) Kalkatta Kāḷi, slayer of the Buffalo Demon, depicted with ten arms and pointing her trident towards a figure of the demon (*visvarupa taricaṉam alaṃkāram*); the following evening she is again the peaceful Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ (*cānta corūpinī alaṃkāram*) after she has received the milk pot ablutions. In this form, the festival image of Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ is adorned with flowers and placed on a swing inside the temple, with leaves, pineapples, grapes, bananas, pomegranates, and oranges hanging from the ceiling and walls to resemble the peaceful atmosphere of a soothing forest (figure 4.10).

While this kind of fancy and creative *alaṃkāras* are done also in other temples in Kanchipuram, and, as seen in newspapers and online, across Tamil Nadu, Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ's *alaṃkāra* maker Mr. Sanjay claims to be the pioneer in

Kanchipuram when it comes to fashioning innovative *alaṃkāras*.[187] He started creating *alaṃkāras* for Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ as a 10-year-old boy in the 1990's. First, he made traditional "*kāppu alaṃkāras*" decorating the idol with sandal paste, turmeric or *kuṅkumam*. His father, the *pūjāri*, supervised him, but gradually he was allowed to let his creativity unfold while experimenting with decorating the image. Some experiments also went wrong, such as when the image was decorated with fresh jasmine buds for the *muttu* (pearl) *Māriyammaṉ alaṃkāra*, to make it look like pox pearls. The buds started to blossom in the evening and gave a different look than intended.[188]

As a kid Mr. Sanjay started out with little money, and experimented with golden and silver foil, creating the golden and silver *kavaca* (armor) *alaṃkāras*, to the cost of 10 rupees, compared to maybe 10 lacks if it were to be done with real gold and silver. For his first *visvarūpa taricaṉam alaṃkāra*, he used round-shaped incense boxes to produce the additional hands of Kālī and her feet in standing posture. Gradually his various *alaṃkāras* were well received by the devotees of the temple:

> "All devotees were happy and appreciated the efforts [of making the *alaṃkāra*]. Then I stood with the name Sanjay. Only then I realized that people always wanted some changes. Stereotypic *alaṃkāras* will not be entertaining. Then I started doing different *alaṃkāras*. […] Whatever *alaṃkāra* I imagine, the Goddess herself changes to that form. Then, I got the confidence I can do any *alaṃkāra*, whatever it may be."

Mr. Sanjay creatively responds to the desires of the audience, who wants to be entertained by the *alaṃkāras* and demands artistic changes. The devotees I met in the temple in turn praised and clearly appreciated the beauty (Ta. *aḻaku*) of Sanjay's *alaṃkāras*. He aesthetically plays with the goddess's image, turning her into an embodied display (Rodrigues 2018, 324). She should be beautiful and attractive, but importantly, recognizable. Once, he was met with the suspicion that he placed another idol in the sanctum, since the goddess was totally transformed from her usual appearance. To avoid such questioning, Mr. Sanjay tries to leave the snake on her forehead visible. He estimates: "I have about 200 different *alaṃkāras*. On seeing them, people will be spellbound. All are grand."

187 Mr. Sanjay is also hired by other temples across Tamil Nadu to fashion *alaṃkāras*, and trains people in their making. For creative *alaṃkāras* in Bangalore, including a robot Navarātri *alaṃkāra* where the goddess's arm moved as to strike a papier maché buffalo with her trident, see Srinivas (2006).

188 Today he uses buds from the creep jasmine (*nantiyārvaṭṭai*) for this *alaṃkāra*, which do not blossom after they are plucked (figure 5.9).

The temple's avant-garde *alaṃkāras* points to the importance of ritual display, which, as pointed out by Allocco (2009, 2018), characterizes much of the contemporary religious sphere in Tamil Nadu.[189] This is salient also in the *kolu* displays discussed in chapters 5–7. In her examination of the Āṭi festival in temples of snake goddesses in Chennai, Allocco recounts an "increasing incorporation of aesthetic novelties" in the celebrations (2009, 380).[190] Echoing Mr. Sanjay, the priests would express to her that devotees want "something new every year" (ibid.). Mr. Sanjay claims that the entertainment factors of his *alaṃkāras* might even overshadow the devotion of the devotees:

> "If there are a thousand people coming to this temple, only about a hundred persons come for worshipping the Goddess. The other people come to see what is the *alaṃkāra*, how we are doing it, what are the ingredients we are using. […] the major crowd in this temple is for the *alaṃkāras*. I eagerly wait for Navarātri each year, and think of how I can decorate the Goddess differently each year"

The *alaṃkāra* donors too, according to Mr. Sanjay, might have another agenda than expressing their devotion: "the donors do it for pride also. This year they have done. Next year they want to do it. It is not the matter of just devotion. It is also about their pride." However, my argument is that while fancy *alaṃkāras* unquestionably are an entertaining spectacle, they are also more: they serve to make the goddess appear at her most powerful. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, *darśana* of the goddess in her various *alaṃkāras* was emphasized by priests and laypeople alike as a primary reason for devotees to come to the temple during the festival. Similar to facemasks applied to pots (see chapter 6), the *alaṃkāras* enhance the goddess' presence for the worshippers and make her more prominent in her various forms and appearances. While divinity is present in the goddess's *mūrti* (Skt. "image"), awareness of this presence is generated through her *alaṃkāra*. As an elderly woman said to me about Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ's *alaṃkāras*: "It is like the goddess herself is walking in front of us." The goddess's change from a black stone statue to the extravaganza of Mr. Sanjay's Navarātri *alaṃkāras* is striking. As a climax of her *pūjā*, she appears to be blazing with power. This enhancement of the goddess's presence holds true

189 This relates to the visual gentrification described by Waghorne (2001, 2004), seen for instance in frequent renovations of ammaṉ temples and shrines by middle class sponsors, expressing middle class aesthetic values.

190 These include colorful light bulb displays depicting the goddess, various entertainers, speakers, tents, professional invitation cards and temple decorations (see Allocco 2009, 378-380). Apart from the light bulb goddess, such novelties have emerged at the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple, too.

for traditional *alaṃkāras* but maybe even more so in the more avant-garde and transformative *alaṃkāras* of the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple. These special decorations place form on top of form, and presence upon presence, as layers of form and presence, leading up to the Vijayadaśamī battle and the conquest of the demon.

Additional Ceremonies

Oil Lamp Pūjā

On Navarātri Fridays, women perform an oil lamp *pūjā* (Ta. *tiruviḷakku pūjai*, Skt. *dīpapūjā*) is in the temple prior to the uncovering of the *alaṃkāra*.[191] This *pūjā* is performed for the prosperity and auspiciousness of the household and well being of the women's families. It is usually performed in groups and always by women, who chant Tamil mantras to Gāyatrī and Lakṣmī while worshipping Lakṣmī in the form of their lamps.

The *pūjā* is heavy with gestures which the women perform while offering the goddess food and other auspicious items. Following Mary Elizabeth Hancock (1999, 130–131) I see this ritual as a way of reaffirming and marking one's own *cumaṅkali*hood: the women worship goddess Lakṣmī, the auspicious married form of the goddess associated with prosperity and the domestic, and *cumaṅkali*hood inscribed on their bodily habitus through the *pūjā*'s many gestures (ibid.).[192]

Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ's Fight with the Demon

Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ's fight with the demon Makiṣasuraṉ is enacted ritually on the evening of Vijayadaśamī, as a public spectacle attracting a huge crowd. In the temple program the ritual is called *Makiṣācurasaṃhāram* ("the destruction of Mahiṣāsura"), but it is referred to colloquially as *vatam* (Ta. "murder"). The *mūlamūrti* of Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ is for the occasion decorated with the *visvarūpa-*

191 The lamp *pūjā* is performed on *citrā nakṣatra* (lunar mansion). As such it is not tied to Navarātri but falls within the Navarātri period and is often performed during the months of Tāy and Āṭi. The *pūjāri* explained that they used to perform different *pūjās* each day of Navarātri in the temple up to the 1990's, including *kanyā pūjā* and *samnyāsi pūjā*, "to please the goddess". With their more and more extensive Navarātri program and the huge emphasis on *alaṃkāras* they do not have the time, and only the lamp *pūjā* has continued until present.

192 The oil lamp *pūjā* is in this manner very similar to, as I argue in chapter 5, functions of the *kolu*.

taricanam alaṃkāra, portraying the goddess as ten-armed Kalkattā Kāḷi, or Mahiṣāsuramardinī, pointing her trident towards a demon effigy.

As is common in smaller *ammaṉ* temples, the ritual is carried out by the ritualized slaying of a banana tree, which substitutes for the rarer *vaṉṉi* tree. First, the *pūjāri* performs *pūjā* to the tree, which for the occasion is set up in a dug hole in line with the sanctum just outside the temple, with a *kolam* drawn around its trunk. The *pūjāri* dresses the tree in a *dhoti*, the traditional clothing for men, and offers it an oil lamp, incense, puffed rice, a cigar, a banana, a garland, and coconuts. He performs ablutions to it, and a group of women on temple service smear the trunk and the banana flower with turmeric and dots of *kuṅkumam* powder. All the while, the musicians drum and play, while the crowd eagerly follows each step. Next, the *pūjāri* installs Makiṣa in the tree by reciting a mantra while circumambulating the tree with the *āratī* chandelier and a bell (figure 4.11). His feet are washed by his son and painted with turmeric and *kuṅkumam* dots before he enters the sanctum. Inside, to a mounting crescendo of drums, the blowing of conches and a trumpet, and the barely restrained anticipation of the crowd outside, he performs *āratī* for Paṭaveṭṭammaṉ, while the devotees join their palms. As the *pūjāri* holds a large straight-bladed knife (*katti*)[193] in front of the goddess, he silently recites another mantra, which makes him fierce and possessed by Paṭavēṭṭamaṉ. He then runs out of the sanctum wielding the sword and cuts the banana tree in two (figure 4.12) before he collapses and is carried back into the sanctum along with the cut off flower from the banana tree. The anticipation lingering in the air as the priest goes into the sanctum and until the tree is cut in two is hard to put into words, as the crowd is ecstatic and shouts repeatedly "*oṃ śakti*, *oṃ śakti*" and firecrackers burst, marking the ritual climax. In just a few seconds, the goddess, playing in the body of the *pūjāri*, kills the demon, in the form of the banana tree. Thereafter the *āratī* flame is distributed to an eager audience, and the festival goes on with *darśana* of the goddess's *alaṃkāra*, and entertainment on the stage.

193 The *katti* is one of the attributes of Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ.

Figure 4.11: Worshipping the banana tree, 2009.

Figure 4.12: Slaying the banana tree, 2009.

With this ritual, the myth of Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ as Kalkattā (Kolkata) Kāḷi[194] is dramatized, ritualized, and actualized as the *pūjāri* embodies Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ and ferociously kills the tree. The goddess's *līlā* powerfully manifests in the presence of her worshippers. The *pūjāri* explains the ritual in this way:

> "The tree represents Makiṣāsuraṉ, Makiṣāsuramartinī is Ampāḷ (Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ). Instead of Makiṣāsuraṉ, *pūjā* is performed to the tree. A Tamil *śloka* is chanted and the demon is invoked in the tree. Simultaneously a goddess *śloka* is chanted to Ampāḷ and she comes and cuts the tree. […] Since there is no *vaṉṉimaram* [available], we keep a banana tree. […] As you keep chanting the *śloka*, you will get the ferociousness."

Subsequent Rites

Milk Pot Procession and Ritual Piercings: "On Tying the kāppu I Get Peace of Mind"

The morning following Vijayadaśamī a milk pot (Ta. *pāl kuṭam*) procession is performed along with ritual piercings (Ta. *vēltarital*, *alaku*).[195] While men and women can take part in the piercing ceremony, carrying milk pots is reserved to women.[196] From 7–8 o'clock in the morning, woman clad in yellow or red, colors commonly worn by goddess devotees for ritual occasions, gather in a nearby Aiyaṉār temple for the ritual preparations of milk pots.

This small temple is situated about 200 meters down the road from the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple. There, the women fill their pots (*kuṭa*) with milk (*pāl*), apply turmeric and *kuṅkumam* onto them, and tie *nīm*, banana and mango leaves and flowers outside the pot.[197] The *pampaikkārar* prepare a *prathama kalaśa* (main pot) filled with holy water, dressed in a sari with a golden face attached onto a bundle of *nīm* leaves (figure 4.13). Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ will be

194 See chapter 2.

195 For other discussion on *pāḷ kuṭam* see Allocco (2009, 415–423) and Mines (2005); for piercing and possession rituals Allocco (2009, 401–408), Harman (2011), Kapadia (2000) and Younger (2001 [1980], chapter 8).

196 From what William Harman observed, with few exceptions, men are the ones participating in rituals where blood is shed, such as sacrifice or piercing rituals (2011, 193). Karin Kapadia reports that at her fieldwork site in Trichy district are piercings are always done to the male body (2000, 184), and all benign possessions (excluding possessions by *pēy* [Ta. "evil spirits"]), too, occured solely of men (ibid., 196). In contrast possession rituals documented by Allocco by far included most women (Allocco 2008, 267). In my case, as a broad estimate, an equal share of men and women participated in the piercing ritual, which included possession.

197 In 2015 the pots had coconuts on their mouths as well.

installed in this *kalaśa*, which is carried in the procession by one of the pierced devotees. Other men associated with the temple prepare the various piercings that are soon to be used in the piercing ritual.

Figure 4.13: Prathama (main) *kalaśa*, 2015.

Soon, for hours in the midday heat, there is a palpable tension as the devotees are pierced in front of the temples Camayapuram Māriyammaṉ shrine.[198] This goes on for hours, people stand close in the intense heat and the drumming is

198 In the context of Navarātri, it is tempting to read piercings as a kind of symbolic blood offering, substituting the buffalo sacrifice. A pumpkin substitute is cut in two and smeared with *kuṅkumam* on Vijayadaśamī outside of the temple.

deafening. Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ's priest functions as the lead singer and piercer, along with the group of musicians who sing and play *pampai* (a pair of cylindrical drums) and *cilampu* (ring shaped brass rattles). The most common piercing is a spear (Ta. *vēl*) or a trident (Ta. *culam*) through the cheeks (figure 4.14). These may be short or long, the long ones piercing both cheeks and with the ends almost touching the ground on each side. A handful devotees have more elaborate piercings such as limes sewn onto their face and upper body (figure 4.15), hooks inserted into their backs to pull a small cart housing an image of the goddess, or a "porcupine-like" (cf. Kapadia 2000, 189) structure of altogether 108 spears pierced into their upper body (figure 4.16).[199] Each person is smeared with *vibhūti* (Skt. "white ash") where the piercing is to enter, sprinkled with *vibhūti* afterwards, and a lime is put at the end of each *vēl*.

Figure 4.14: Devotee getting pierced with a *vēl*, 2011.

199 The three times I observed this ritual (2011, 2014 and 2015) women only got pierced with spears or tridents, while men had all kinds of piercings. This might have a natural explanation in that the other piercings all required a naked upper body.

Figure 4.15: Devotee getting piered with limes, 2011.

Figure 4.16: Devotee getting pierced with 108 *vēl* (spears), 2015.

With the various Tamil devotional *stotras* sung by the priest to the accompaniment of intense music and drumming, the goddess and other deities are invited to possess the people who are being pierced. Urged by the music, some devotees start to dance ecstatically prior to being pierced; a sign of a deity entering their body. It is however not only Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ who possesses her devotees this day, as this depends on the devotee. The *pūjāri* explained: "[The possession] depends on the person who is taking the piercing. If he is a person who gets the *aruḷ* (blessing, grace) of Murukaṉ, I sing a Murukaṉ song, if it is the goddess, I sing about the goddess."[200] Once possessed, the *pūjāri* engages the present deity in a short conversation, determining who has come. While possessions enable direct communication between the human and the divine, piercings are closely associated with speaking *aruḷ vākku* (Ta. "oracular speech"). Being pierced while possessed make the *aruḷ vākku* authentic, effective, and powerful. When I asked why not *all* people became possessed, as some clearly show no outer signs of being possessed, the *pūjāri* explained that his intention is to get the *aruḷ* of the god on everyone (make the deity possess them), but it does not happen to all people.[201] The *pampai* drum, common in the worship of *ammaṉs*, is connected to possessions, too: according to the *pūjāri* the goddess's favorite instrument *pampai* lures her as a snake is drawn to a flute, and she is more prone to possess people when it is played.[202]

Possessions are dramatic manifestations of the goddess, performances with the goddess herself as actor (Erndl 1993, 133). While my respondents commonly used the verb *vā* (Ta. "to come", for instance *cāmi vantutu*, the goddess comes) when talking about possessions, in other parts of India the word "play" actively forms part of the possession vocabularly.[203] This articulates posses-

200 Ritual piercings are associated with the cult of Murukaṉ. According to the *pūjāri* the ritual is modeled on how two demons offered their blood to Murukaṉ when they were defeated in war.

201 This does not conform to Kapadia's case, where possession was a precondition for being pierced. Not being possessed was interpreted as the votary did not keep his purity restrictions, or that a family member had sinned "in a big way" (Kapadia 2000, 185).

202 The *pampai* was, according to myth, created by the goddess, who stretched the skin of a female demon across a wooden cylinder and the skin of a male demon across a thinner tube of brass, and made a double drum for humans to use for dispelling demons (Nabokov 2000, 79, see also Meyer 1986, 3). The *pampaikkārar* can, by using these drums, contact any supernatural being of the Tamil pantheon (deity, demon, *pēy*). Importantly, they are not possessed themselves.

203 In Hindi, Panjabi and Kangri "playing" refers to the "creative, dynamic, and awesome activity" of the goddess *and* the woman possessed by her (Erndl 2007, 150). Hence, the woman is simultaneously the agent and the instrument of playing (ibid.): the woman plays, and the goddess/*śakti* plays in her. The word "play" also refers to the wild and

sions as expressions of divine play, the deity "playing" in the body of her human host. In Kathleen M. Erndl's words, "possession is [devī's] divine *līlā* (play) brought down to the human level" (Erndl 1993, 133). The piercings, too, increase the *śakti* of the devotee, since they are considered embodiments of goddess's *śakti* (Allocco 2009b, 404). Thus, getting pierced further strengthens the connection between goddess and devotee and the petitioners fall under her influence.

While some devotees get pierced yearly in this procession, others do it only once.[204] The vows signified by the piercing can be taken up for one's own sake, or on behalf of others, and some are also pierced as thanksgiving for a vow that has already been fulfilled. Often these vows concern disease, marriage, and childbirth. While some told me that one's vows should not be revealed to the outside, Rahul, a young man who had his body pierced with the porcupine-like spear structure in 2014, said:

> "My mother was not well and suffering from jaundice. It was severe, and the doctors could not do anything. For [her] getting cured of it, I had the piercing for the first time and my mother became all right. […] I have done it for the past five years. I prayed for my mother and on behalf of that I am getting the piercing done".

The goddess healed his mother who is well today, and helps Rahul in other matters, too: "I tie [the *kāppu*] every year. On tying [the *kāppu*] I get peace of mind, any problem I had during the year has been solved". Since Rahul never becomes possessed while he gets the piercing, he told me that it hurts, but that he does not give the pain any focus since it is done for the sake of prayer and getting his problems solved. Notably, not a single drop of blood is shed from any devotee during the ritual. The lack of blood is interpreted as the grace and powers of the Goddess.[205] I was also told that it takes longer time to heal the wound of the piercing if the person commits any wrongdoings during Navarātri, such as not upholding the requirements of tying the *kāppu*.

After the participants are pierced, the *pūjāri* invokes Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ in the *prathama kalaśa* with a mantra and performs *pūjā* for it. The musicians, the pierced devotees, the devotee carrying the pot housing the goddess, and the

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playful head and body movements of the possessed (Erndl 1993, 108). In Tamil, too, the word *cāmiyaṭṭam* ("god dance") refers to possessions because of the movements of the body (Mines 2005).

204 Although this collective piercing ritual happens once a year in this temple, devotees can come to get pierced with a *vēl* also on other occasions, such as if they need to drive away evil spirits or renew their vow.

205 See also Allocco 2009b and Kapadia 2000, 189.

women balancing milk pots on their heads join in the procession in the streets surrounding the temple (figure 4.17). Some women carry milk pots as well as piercings. The *cilampu* players dance as they move along. The procession is a dramatic element of penance on display, and some clearly have difficulties moving around with their piercings. The procession displays the powers and grace of the goddess, as well as the claims of moral status of those who are pierced (Kapadia 2000, 186).

Figure 4.17: Milk pot procession (*pāl kuṭam*), 2011.

Reaching the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple, the atmosphere is ecstatic with drumming and singing, and the women line up outside the temple waiting to pour their milk over Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ repeatedly shouting "*oṃ śakti*, *oṃ śakti*." Meanwhile the piercings are removed, and the possessing deities are called off the devotees who collapse on the ground and are carried into the temple.

The women's feet are painted with turmeric and *kuṅkumam* before they enter the sanctum one after another and perform ablutions for Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ's stone image with the milk in their pots (*pāl apiṣēkam*). Conforming to what Allocco (2009, 419) observed in Chennai, the ablutions are done with great concentration and awe. This is a rare occasion during which devotees may interact directly with the goddess's temple image without an intermediary priest.

Following the milk ablutions, the goddess receives a *śantābhiṣeka* with water from 108 conches, performed by all the men who have tied the *kāppu*. At last, she receives a final *abhiṣeka* with the water from the *prathama kalaśa* in which she was installed, and finally the water from the *kalaśa* that was kept near the Durgā shrine during Navarātri is sprinkled over the devotees. *Prasāda* is distributed to the devotees, who should fast on this day until the procession is over. This marks the end of the devotees' *vrata* period, and the *kāppu* is removed the same evening.

According to Allocco (2009, 422), two recurring motifs underlie milk pot processions: *bhakti*, devotion to the goddess, and efficacy, of the devotees' *vrata*. These *vratas* are performed privately by following the purity restrictions but recognized publicly in the piercing and milk pot rituals.[206] A third motif is how these ablutions cool the goddess and bring her back to her peaceful form. When I asked the *pūjāri* if there is any ritual for Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ after killing the demon, like Kāmākṣī's *vaṉṉimarapūjā*, he replied: "That is why the next day the piercing takes place and the *śānti abhiṣekams* are performed". In this way, he explicitly links the milk pot procession to Navarātri.[207] In contrast to Kāmākṣī, who needs to atone for killing the demon, the non-Brahmin goddess Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ must be cooled down. In this manner, she is appeased to her calm year-round state, preventing the unpredictability of the hot and fierce village goddess who was temporarily manifest during Navarātri.

We note here an interesting parallel between the goddess and her devotees: piercings are extremely heating, and the preconditions for getting pierced are tying the *kāppu* and the following restrictions, which can be considered a kind of temporary asceticism. Harman (2011) proposes that ascetic heat generated by austerities is one of the things the goddess receives in return for a *vrata*. Carrying milk pots on the head also make the devotee in contact with the heat of the goddess, which is why cooling *nīm* leaves are often placed between the pot and the head (McGilvray 1998, 61). As the goddess is cooled with her ablutions when Navarātri is over, so are the devotees: they are sprinkled with

206 As Allocco (2008, 268–270) points out, vows also have a collaborative side to them, particularly in the case of women's vows, which may include negotiations within the household to obtain money for ritual items and how cooking should be done within the dietary restrictions of the vow, negotiations with the husbands because of the sexual restrictions of the vow, and negotiations with musicians, and with other devotees.

207 The milk pot ablutions performed during Āṭi are also done to cool the heat generated by the goddess during this hot season (Narayanan 2000, 771). The goddess is considered particularly hot during Āṭi and prone to inflict people with pox.

water from a Navarātri *kalaśa* and allowed to eat cooling *prasāda* only at this point, after fasting this day.

Swing Festival

In the evening of the day after Vijayadaśamī, after the milk pot ablutions have cooled Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ, a swing festival (Ta. *ūñcal seva*) is held. The goddess's festival image is placed on a swing in front of the sanctum and the devotees who pass for *darśana* gently push her on the swing. This is considered pleasing and delighting for the goddess. The temple is, as part of the evening's *alaṃkāra* (*cānta corūpi*, peaceful embodiment) decorated as a soothing garden with fruits and leaves hanging from the ceiling, walls, and pillars, creating a relaxing scenery in stark contrast to the violence played out the previous evening. The swing festival is the ritual conclusion of Navarātri in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple, after which the protective cords are removed from the goddess's images, from Durgā, the trident, the priest and devotees, and put in a tank nearby the *pūjāri*'s home.

Concluding Remarks

The nine (or, in practice, twelve) nights of the goddess in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple are a vibrant and dynamic celebration of the goddess's powers. Devotees take part in these powers through their vows and honor them with *pūjās*, ablutions and gifts. The goddess's powers are also on display during the festival; on Vijayadaśamī as Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ ferociously kills the demon while playing in the body of her *pūjāri*, and these powers are boosted in the goddess's *alaṃkāras*.

Each Navarātri evening the devotional music booming from loudspeakers, the staged entertainment, and the huge crowds attending the festivities turn the temple area into a vivid and manifold cultural performance. Mr. Sanjay's avant-garde Navarātri *alaṃkāras* are a spectacle of their own. Through her grand and themed ornamentations, Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ transforms into various manifestations of the divine each of the twelve evenings, and sometimes the temple or sanctum is transformed with her. Fierceness is temporarily projected onto the goddess as she assumes different forms (*śakti*) each night, leading up to her battle with the demon on Vijayadaśamī. Finally, she is brought back to her calm year-round state through the final *alaṃkāra* and by means of milk pot ablutions.

Apart from transforming the goddess, the *alaṃkāras* function on several levels: they are part of the goddess's worship, they enhance the goddess's presence for the worshipper, they entertain and engage, and on a didactical level

they educate the audience about various forms of the divine.[208] In the words of the *alaṃkāra* maker, "stereotypic *alaṃkāras* are not entertaining": the devotees desire constant changes. Mr. Sanjay meets these wishes with creatively decorating the goddess's image, fashioning ideas he has planned for months.

While there is no doubt that these famed *alaṃkāras* are one of the reasons for the temple's huge attendance during Navarātri, another is very likely the active involvement of the devotees, and in particular of women. During Navarātri, devotees partake in vows, *pūjās* and processions, and some also do temple service. With the ablutions following the milk pot procession, devotees are able to interact directly with the goddess; not only as her representatives or as recipients of worship, such as the prepubescent girls and auspicious married women who are worshipped in the Kāmākṣī temple. For devotees, the Navarātri festival of Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ provides a wider scope of ritual actions for expressing devotion to the goddess than that of Brahmanical Kāmākṣī. Indeed, a triad of rituals centered on *bhakti* and efficcacy is reserved too women: the *tāy cir* and milk pot processions, and the lamp *pūjā*. The *pūjāri* points to traditional gender stereotypes when trying to explain the attendance of women:

> "The women will have more expectations and worries. Only a mother can understand the problem of their children. Men go out for work, at that time only the women pray for their safety. There are pluses and minuses for everybody, even for the women, but when they tie the *kāppu* and bring the milk pot, they will do it with full devotion. That is why there are more ladies."

Navarātri celebrations in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple demonstrate how the festival blends entertainment, play, fun, devotion, and efficacy, mainly centered on the goddess's powers. Taking the very entertaining *alaṃkāras* as an example, the anticipation of what will be the next captivating *alaṃkāra* is closely connected to *darśana* and the devotees' experiencing the goddess in her most spectacular form. The reverence is indicated in the huge rush to receive the goddess's *āratī* once the *alaṃkāra* is revealed. With the dramatic enactment of the Mahiṣāsuramardinī narrative, the goddess fulfills her Navarātri vow and kills evil mentality, to the relief of an awe-struck audience.

While the ritual system stems from the temple's beginning in the mid 1970's,[209] the staged entertainment, distribution of food and the merry go rounds and bouncing castles of the contemporary festival are more recent

208 The latter point was stressed by Mr. Sanjay in an interview: "Each goddess has a specialty. […] It is being educated to the public through the *alaṃkāra*."

209 This includes the *curasaṃhāra* (performed for 37 years in 2015) and milk pot procession/piercing rituals (performed for 31 years in 2015).

additions. Their inclusion, as well as the incorporation of a second procession (*tāy cir*) displaying plates with gifts, conforms to the growing tendency of aesthetic novelties and ritual display, including entertainment, in religious festivals as described by Waghorne (2001, 2004) and Allocco (2009, 2018).[210] Navarātri posters and banners, printed festival programs and various temple decorations also play a part here. Some rituals have been omitted from the celebrations, including *kanyā pūjās*, widely associated with Navarātri, to incorporate these changes and to promote the emphasis on grand *alaṃkāras*.

In the temple celebrations investigated until now, it is mainly the goddess who "plays" (e.g. in terms of *līlā*; in possessing people), as well as her priests/ the *alaṃkāra* makers, who "play" with decorating her image. Still, devotees clearly *enjoy* this play. Turning to domestic Navarātri celebrations, women too get to play quite a bit themselves: the *kolu* displays of dolls will be the focus in the following section on Navarātri at home.

210 For similar tendencies in Bangalore temples, see Srinivas (2006, 2018).

PART II

NAVARĀTRI AT HOME

Chapter 5
The *Kolu* as a Feminine Space

"*It is a festival that women celebrate together*"

An Introduction: Mrs. Gowri's *Kolu*

The day before new moon in the Tamil month of Puraṭṭāci, Mrs. Gowri's family[211] assembles their dolls from boxes that have been stored for the year. During Navarātri, these dolls will be carefully arranged and displayed on a structure of seven stepped levels known as *kolu* (Ta. "royal presence, *darbār*, holding court" (Tamil Lexicon), also known as *pommai kolu*, dolls holding court)[212] during Navarātri. Ranging from about a meter to the size of a finger, the dolls are placed hierarchically on the steps according to size and level of consciousness, with inanimate objects on the bottom and the deities on top. Most of their dolls represent gods and goddesses and other figures from Hindu mythology, but the Gowris' collection also includes saints, humans, animals, fruits, and vegetables, as well as two procession sets displayed on the floor in front of the *kolu*, with priests, devotees, temple musicians and elephants surrounding one deity carried in a palanquin and another pulled in a golden chariot (Ta. *tēr*). A distinctive feature of Mrs. Gowri's display is that several cardboard dolls and images relate to the Kāmākṣī temple, such as different forms of goddess Kāmākṣī, are displayed to the right of the steps. This includes a setup of a scene from the *viśvarūpadarśaṇa* (Skt. "viewing of the universal form"), a ritual performed during Brahmotsava, when Kāmākṣī's stone image and festival image are venerated along with a cow, and a self-manufacured Kāmākṣī figure (figure 5.1). Some of the *kolu* dolls date to the time of Mrs. Gowri's marriage, twenty-five years ago, and include the *marappācci* (Ta. "prepared from wood") dolls, a man and a woman carved out of wood, which are traditionally received as wedding gifts.[213] Other dolls are even older and inherited through the family, but a few

211 Mrs. Gowri's family are Brahmins connected to the Kāmākṣī temple of Kanchipuram. Although not ubiquitous, most of the practices described in the recap of her *kolu* are applicable to many households throughout town.

212 See Narayanan (2018) for connections between the *kolu* and the durbar and Ikegame (2013) for more on the Dasara *darbār* and the Mysore *bombe habba* (doll festival).

213 The *Marappācci* dolls are occasionally known as *rājā-rānī* dolls (king and queen), as they are called in the Mysore Dashara celebrations. While in Tamil Nadu these dolls generally are understood to represent the bride and groom, in Karnataka they represent the king

are brand new, as there is an obligation to buy at least one new doll each Navarātri. Accordingly, their collection has grown steadily since their marriage, and the dolls displayed on and surrounding the seven steps, now covers about half of their spacious living room, which for the festival is transformed into displaying a *līlā*.

At an auspicious time during the following new moon day, Mrs. Gowri cleans the floor in front of the *kolu* steps, which are now replete with colorful dolls, and draws a *kōlam* (geometrical drawing of ground rice flour) in front of it. This *kōlam* is made fresh every festival day and signifies and invites auspiciousness while keeping ritual pollution at bay (Nagarajan 2007, 89).

Figure 5.1: *Viśvarūpadarśaṇa* and Kāmākṣī *kolu* setup, 2015.

Next, Mrs. Gowri invokes goddess Kāmākṣī in a *kalaśa*, the form through which she will be worshipped for the duration of the festival. Inside the pot, she puts water, rice, *tōr dal* (pigeon peas), five betel nuts, five turmeric pieces, betel leaves, silver and gold.[214] Mango leaves and a coconut are placed on its mouth,

and queen (Narayanan 2018, 280). See Ikegame (2013) for connections between the *rājā-rānī* dolls and the royal exercises of kingship in Mysore.

214 The ingredients in the pot may vary between households.

and she drapes the pot with a blue cloth and decorates it with a jeweled necklace, a jeweled *bindi*, and garlands of fresh jasmine flowers. Once the pot is ornamented, Mrs. Gowri places it in the middle of the *kolu* (figure 5.2) and neither it nor the dolls can be rearranged or moved until Vijayadaśamī, when the *marappācci* dolls are laid flat (Ta. *cayaṉam*, lying down, taking rest) and the pot moved to the north. After the *kolu* is set, she places a brass image of Kāmākṣī at the foot of the *kolu*, flanked by two oil lamps, an offering of sprouts (Ta. *navatāṉiyam*, nine grains) on its side, and prepares an *ārāti* so that the *dṛṣṭi* (Ta. *tiruṣṭi*, evil eye) does not fall upon the dolls.

Figure 5.2: Mrs. Gowri placing the *kalaśa*, 2015.

During each of the Navarātri festival's nine mornings, Mrs. Gowri worships her *kolu* and the image of Kāmākṣī with fresh flowers, specially prepared food, lights and incense, and recites various goddess hymns in Sanskrit (figure 5.3). Afterwards, she eagerly awaits visits from auspicious married women and prepubescent girls, whom she has invited. Mrs. Gowri and her husband will worship them as representatives of the goddess. When the female visitors arrive, Mrs. Gowri washes their feet and offers them turmeric, a dress or a sari blouse piece, food, betel nuts, betel leaves, and butter milk. Finally, she waves the camphor flame in front of the females before she and her husband prostrate before them (figure 5.4). It is widely believed that the goddess will come to

one's house in the form of a young girl during Navarātri, so these *pūjās* directly reach the goddess.

Figure 5.3: Mrs. Gowri leading a Sanskrit recitation in front of the *kolu*, 2015.

In the evenings, women neatly dressed in their finest saris and jewelry will come, often along with their children, to view Mrs. Gowri's *kolu*, chant *stotras*, sing devotional songs, and exchange gossip and stories connected to the dolls' history and mythological background. They receive *prasāda*, the food prepared and first offered to the goddess on the *kolu*: a type of pulse (Ta. *cuṇṭal*), one for each Navarātri evening. As they leave, Mrs. Gowri presents the women with gifts on a plate (Ta. *tāmpūlam*):[215] a sari blouse piece, fresh jasmine, turmeric, vermillion, betel nuts, a coconut, an apple, bangles, a comb, and a mirror (figure 5.5). She explains: "It is like giving to the goddess herself."

215 *Tāmpūlaṅkoṭu*, or to give betel, is a signal for the dispersion or dismissal of a company. While it in general is considered good to offer guests the *tāmpūlam* (Skt. *tāmbūla*), it is considered even better during Navarātri.

Figure 5.4: Mrs. Gowri worshipping married women and young girls. © Ute Hüsken.

Figure 5.5: The *tāmpūlam*, 2015.

When the festival is over and the wooden *marappācci* dolls put to sleep, Mrs. Gowri cooks the rice from the pot along with the coconut and makes coconut

pāyacam (a sweet dessert), and offers it to Kāmākṣī.[216] Finally, this is consumed by her family as *prasāda*. Thus, they partake in the goddess's powers as she is absorbed in them through the consumption of the rice in which she was temporarily installed.

Kolu Rituals

As in the home of Mrs. Gowri, it is the married women of the household who oversee the main ritual proceedings in the homes during Navarātri. They are usually also in charge of what goes where when the *kolu* is set up, and in deciding any themes. The ritual activities following the setup include *pūjās* to the *kolu* and to the pot in which she first invokes the goddess. While Mrs. Gowri invokes Kāmākṣī in her pot, others told me that they invoke the three goddesses Durgā, Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī, corresponding to the general idea that the three first days of the festival are reserved for worshipping Durgā, slayer of the Buffalo Demon, the following three days for Lakṣmī, goddess of wealth and prosperity, and the final three for Sarasvatī, goddess of learning. The women will then worship the *kolu* for the duration of the festival by lighting oil lamps, burning incense, changing the flowers on the *kalaśa*, drawing fresh *kolams*, presenting the *āratī* flame, cooking and offering food, and reciting various *ślokas* (Skt. "verses") and singing devotional *stotras* (Skt. "hymns") and songs. Women are also hosts and guests during evening *kolu* visits, where they meet to admire the displays, chat about the dolls, sing and recite, often accompanied by their children.

Recitations and Songs

Unlike northern India, in Kanchipuram it is the *Lalitāsahasranāma* (*LS*), and not the *Devīmāhātmya* (*DM*), which is the most important Sanskrit text to recite during Navarātri, and many respondents rendered its recitation mandatory. This is at least the case for Brahmins connected to *ammaṉ* and Śaiva traditions, but some Śaivas also recite the *DM*, and in some homes, mainly those belonging to the Vaiṣṇava tradition, the *Sundarakāṇḍa* of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is recited.[217] The *Devībhāgavatapurāṇa* is also recited frequently in Brahmin households. Other

216 It is also common to make *poṅkal* (a rice dish, either sweet or salt) with the rice from the pot.

217 Vijayadaśamī is not only commemorating the day Durgā defeated the buffalo demon; it is also commemorating Rāma's defeat of the demon king Rāvaṇa, who had abducted Sītā to Lanka. In the north of India, particularly in Uttar and Madhya Pradesh, *Rām līlās* are enacted simultaneously with and overlaps the Navarātri festival.

chants during the festival include the *Lalitā triśatī* (300 names of goddess Lalitā, part of the *LO*), the *Saundaryalaharī* ("the waves of beauty", a poem dedicated to Lakṣmī ascribed to the Śaṅkarācārya), and the *Khaḍgamālā* ("the garland of the sword"), as well as general *stotras* for Durgā, Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī and other deities, including, for instance, the *Mahiṣāsuramardinī Stotram*. Non-Brahmins, with exceptions, tend to sing devotional songs and not recite Sanskrit *stotras*.

Music, recitations, and songs are important parts of Navarātri celebrations, and the audience is the goddess.[218] Guests, too, are encouraged to sing or chant in front of the *kolu*. I was told repeatedly that one can sing "anything" since everything is represented on the *kolu* – I have for instance sung Norwegian folk songs, including the national anthem, in front of a few displays. People would frequently say they sing "*cāmi pāṭṭu*" (Ta. "songs to God", meaning devotional songs in general), although songs for the goddess appeared to be most common. Some also played music from CDs and many people kept booklets with *stotras* and songs and sung from these. Children are often compelled to sing or chant in front of the *kolu*, and some women also join in *bhajan* (Skt. "devotional singing") groups to chant *stotras* together in homes or temples.

Worship of Auspicious Married Women and Prepubescent Girls

Navarātri celebrates the divine in female form, but also in human form: it is a time for worshipping the goddess, including the goddess as woman. As in the home of Mrs. Gowri, a family who keeps *kolu* may worship girls who have not yet attained puberty (Skt. *kanyā*, Ta. *kaṉṉi*), and married women, whose husband is still alive (Skt. *sumaṅgalī* or *suvasinī*, Ta. *cumaṅkali*) (figure 5.4). A couple of Śaiva families pertaining to the Ekāmranātha temple also performed a *vadugapūjā* of two *brahmacārin* boys, one before and one after the *kanyā*- and *suvasinīpūjās*. These boys represent Gaṇeśa and Bhairavar, the deities encountered when entering and leaving a temple. Hence, *pūjā* to these represent the beginning and the end of worship and is said to satisfy all the gods.

Mainly Brahmin families perform the *pūjās* for young girls and married women, although they are performed in some non-Brahmin homes as well. Brahmins would tell me they specifically invited Brahmins for these *pūjās*, while "anyone" could come to see the *kolu* in general. The procedure resembles the practice described in chapter 3, and may be more or less elaborate. An elderly Brahmin woman explained:

218 Music and performing arts have formed important parts of this festival for centuries. Travel reports from Vijayanagara Empire give prominence to describing the performing arts during Navarātri (Narayanan 2018, 286, 291).

> "They will be made to sit on the *maṇai* (Ta. "a low wooden seat") and then smeared with turmeric and *kuṅkumam* on their feet. *Āratī* will be done and one will prostrate before them. They are Ampāḷ themselves. […] We will give them everything (i.e. cloth, flowers and food), do *āratī* and we will go up to the gate to see them off. We will apply the dust from under their feet on our head."

To prostrate before the females so that your head touch their feet is a sign of utmost respect and veneration; the feet regarded unclean in Indian culture. Importantly, it is widely believed that the goddess will be present among the women visiting your *kolu* regardless if these *pūjās* are performed, so that the gifts and food presented to the women finally reach the goddess – giving to the women is equaled with giving to the goddess. Like one respondent said: "We believe that among all the guests who come here one will surely be the goddess herself. That is why we offer turmeric and bangles". Note the two levels implied here: women visit *kolus* for *darśana* of the goddess on the *kolu*, and the guests who come are received as the goddess.[219]

The *kanyā* and the *sumaṅgalī* are the two most powerful female categories in Tamil Nadu, corresponding to the two types of goddesses, the ambivalent *ammaṉ* (village goddess) and the wholly benevolent wifely goddess (such as Pārvatī and Lakṣmī). Tamil women are regarded as specific kinds of powerful beings with specific ontological statuses, corresponding and ranging from benevolent goddess to malevolent demon or spirits, depending on marital status and condition of fertility (Reynolds 1980, 36–37).[220] The ideal female status is the *sumaṅgalī*, "the archtype of Tamil beauty and domesticity" (Wilson 2015, 209). Her auspiciousness is dependent on her possessing a husband and children. Nurtured and re-affirmed by the woman's own ritual actions, such as prayers and fasts, her auspiciousness in turn ensures the husband's (and children's) long life.[221]

Kanyā pūjās are a well-known and widespread devotional practice in honor of the Goddess in many parts of India as well as Nepal, and not confined to

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219 Some even considered *me* a form of the goddess. During an interview, while speaking of how the festival is auspicious for married women, Mrs. Adhilakshmi proclaimed: "see now we have met you! We never thought we would meet you! It is like a *tēvatai* (Ta. "deity") has visited us from another country. So, the goddess will come to the house in somebody's *rūpa* (i.e. in the form of a person) only".

220 Apart from the unmarried girl and the auspicious married woman, possibilities in this scheme include unmarried mothers, barren women, women who die during childbirth and widows (see Reynolds 1980, 36).

221 For more on the *sumaṅgalī* see Hancock (2001) and Reynolds (1980).

Navarātri, although they form an important part of this festival. Young girls are considered especially suited to represent goddesses (Luchesi 2018, 308). The virgin form of the goddess is moreover portrayed frequently in myth (Logan 1980, 245), such as Balā Kāmākṣī who is associated with killing the demon Bandhāsura.[222] The worship of married women, however, is distinctive to South India.[223] While some of my priestly informants connected the worship of *sumaṅgalīs* to the *LSN*,[224] others, including lay people, mentioned *śakti* as an explanation; the power or cosmic energy shared between women and the goddess.

Rodrigues (2005, 90) makes the point that only women are venerated as embodiments of the goddess; there is no comparable ritual or religious festival where males are identified with supreme male deities. However, as explained, some families worship two *brahmacārin* boys as embodiments of Gaṇeśa and Bhairava along with the females (see also Luchesi 2018, 302).[225] Still, there are "no widespread yearly festivals […] during which ordinary men are unequivocally identified and worshipped as embodiments of a supreme male deity" (Rodrigues 2005, 90) comparable to Navarātri and its identification of females with the goddess.

The domestic worship is characterized by immediacy between the devotee and the goddess's representation in the females (Colas 2009, 54). The goddess is manifest among the evening guests, and explicitly venerated in *pūjās* (which may also be performed in the morning). The connection between females and goddess is their shared *śakti*. Like a priest of a small neighborhood temple put it: "we invite women home and see them as manifestations of *śakti*". In the temple, on the other hand, priestly invocation is required to worship the women as images of the goddess. Luchesi (2018, 307) compares the girls, as impermanent images of worship, to the elaborate images of Durgā in the Bengali Durgā Pūjā,

222 See chapters 2 and 3.

223 In Benares, married women are only implicitly identified with the goddess. There, married daughters return to their natal homes for Navarātri, modeled on how Pārvatī returned to her parents Himavat and Menā. While at home they are treated specially, encouraged not to cook and clean, and fed with sweets as if to provide them before their return to a life of austerities with their "Śiva-like husbands" after the festival (Rodrigues 2005, 88).

224 Lalitā's names include *suvāsinyarcanaprītā* (n. 971, pleased with those worshipping *sumaṅgalīs* [as her form]), *sumaṅgalī* (n. 967) and *suvāsinī* (n. 970).

225 Possession could also be listed as an exception, as both genders may be possessed by female and male deities and worshipped as such. Rodrigues (2005, 90) also mentions how spiritually elevated males may be identified with the supreme Brahman, who is perceived as transcending gender.

or Gaṇeśa Caturthī images, which are required for limited length of time and for a special occasion. To extend her argument, they may as such be compared also to the goddess's manifestations as pots on *kolu*, increasing her accessibility for worship and her presence in the material world during the festival. Like the images and pots, the girls and *sumaṅgalīs* are potential vessels for the goddess, though the actualization of this potential is enacted through rituals at a specific time.

Figure 5.6. Child dressed up as the Vaiṣṇava saint Āṇṭāḷ for *kolu*, 2015.

Evening Visits

Navarātri evenings are festive occasions during which women bring their children and visit each other's *kolus*, often dressed up in their finest saris and jewelry. Children might be dressed up as gods, blending in among the dolls on the *kolu* as living and breathing deities themselves (figure 6.6).[226] During the

226 While this reflects a potential for children to be deities, it is different than the identifications of women and goddesses during the Navarātri since both boys and girls are dressed up, and the dressed-up children are not worshipped. Boys are also dressed as female deities or saints, and vice versa.

visit the women receive consecrated food (*prasāda*), and upon their departure they receive the *tāmpūlam*.

Women visiting each other and going from home to home in the evening (what is known in English as "*kolu* hopping")[227] sets Navarātri apart from other festivals celebrated in Tamil Nadu. The access to a home is often restricted, in contrast to the public sphere of a temple. During Navarātri, homes are opened and on display along with the *kolu*. The *kolu* in this way blurs or transcends the distinction between public and domestic, as rooms "periodically [are] turned into meeting halls" (Hancock 1999, 6),[228] and even transforms the home to a temple-like space during the ten-day festival. In the words of one respondent: "a *kolu* is like a temple within the home" and another woman said: "this is not a home; it is a temple. So, it will look like a temple". A stepped *kolu* evokes the image of the towering gopurams of South Indian temples, replete with colorful figures, and many *kolus* have a small pool in front, resembling a temple tank (see also Fuller and Logan 1985, 97).

Overwhelmingly many women emphasized in interviews that having guests over was their main pleasure during Navarātri, and a common reason for starting with *kolu* in the first place. During interviews, the topic of receiving guests often came up in two contexts: when I asked respondents if or how the festival was important for them as women; or when comparing Navarātri to other festivals they celebrated. Mrs. Swathi explained:

> "We celebrate all kinds of festivals, like Diwali (Ta. Tīpāvaḷi, a festival of lights). But we celebrate [Diwali] with our family. Similarly, for Poṅkal (a harvest festival) we invite only our relatives. Only during Navarātri we invite everyone. We unite people. Among the crowd present here some are my relatives, and others are friends. As far as Navarātri goes, irrespective of whether you are invited or not, people can come. It is a festival women celebrate together".

Mrs. Archana reflected upon the topic in a similar manner:

> "This festival gives us joy because people come to visit us. We also offer them *cuṇṭal*. People in our street come home. At other times we rarely see them.

227 This term corresponds to the term "pandal hopping" used in Kolkata. The phrase was, however, not used by my respondents.

228 However, as Harlan (2007) shows in her essay on women's rituals in Rajasthan, the domestic is never entirely shut off from the public. Women travel (also between homes), get inspiration and impressions, and public rituals, such as rites of passage, are performed in the home.

> We meet them only during weddings. But now they come home every year. It gives me special joy. These ladies are our neighbors."

The social part of *kolu* should not be underestimated when discussing its appeal, a subject returned to in chapter 7: it is an arena for socializing and maintaining and even developing friendships with other women. Female friendships are marginalized in many settings in India, particularly in upper caste families with a history of seclusion (Frøystad 2005, 147). The most important social ties among the married women in North India tend to be female family members and relatives (ibid.). Here I must emphasize that acknowledging the social aspects of *kolu* was something my respondents did regardless of caste, and perhaps even more so by non-Brahmin women. Most of my female respondents were housewives, and for those who lived in nuclear families (a fair amount, although I estimate the majority lived in joint families) there would be no other women to socialize with in the household (cf. Waldrop 2011, 173). Navarātri is embraced by many women as a festive occasion to meet up with other women, chat, enjoy the displays, sing and chant together, and dress up nicely. For many, this is precisely what makes Navarātri special, compared to other festivals. As one respondent put it:

> "It is my favorite [festival] actually, because lots of people come home. For other festivals, few people come home, or we wish [them well] over the phone. But for *kolu* a lot of people come home. During this festival […] we invite even unknown people into the house. We celebrate Navarātri to know new people and encourage friendships."

As this quote shows, people may also come to a *kolu* unannounced, and even strangers are welcomed. Taking this into account, opening the homes as domestic templesfor fellow women, and possibly also strangers, Navarātri may be characterized as even more public than weddings and other "functions". It should also be pointed out how women, whose movements are usually restricted after darkness, claim the neighborhood streets while *kolu* hopping in the evenings, without their husbands (cf. Wilson 2015, 20, 2018, 246).

Kolu, the Feminine and the Auspicious

Women are often prominent participants in domestic ritual practices. *Kolu*, too, exemplifies the ritual agency of women within the domestic sphere. To make a broad generalization, women's rituals in India often take place in the private, domestic sphere rather than the public (such as in temples or politics); they are based on *pūjā* and devotional rites rather than the Vedic fire sacrifice, and they

are informal rather than formal, seen, for instance, in the lack of written invitations (Wadley 1995, Hüsken 2013). Women's ritual knowledge has traditionally been transmitted orally and through performance, contrasting the sanctioning of Brahmin men's rituals through Sanskrit scriptures (ibid.).[229] It should be mentioned that we for this reason find no references to *kolu* in Sanskrit texts, or in early modern vernacular literature (Narayanan 2018, 279).[230] Today, women's rituals are appearing in writing including in new media such as web sites, leaflets and magazines, for example outlining Navarātri rituals. These mark a shift in the transmission of tradition and point towards a formalization and standardization of these rituals.[231] Such magazines explain everything from which goddess to worship at what day to what bath powder to use. Knowing what food to make, which *kolam* to draw and which songs are to be sung is crucial for the performance of any ritual. Songs, stories, food recipes, as well as female ritual behavior, are all considered specific female knowledge, all of which are expressed in *kolu*. Very often such rituals are performed in the background, alongside and accompanying (Brahmin) men's rituals (such as *saṃskāras*, life cycle rituals), but during Navarātri they take center stage.

The *kolu* and its auspicious rituals performed domestically by women emphasize so-called female values such as generosity, hospitality, and fecundity, as well as female domesticity and beauty. However, while *kolu* celebrates femininity and a set of female values is expressed in its relation, the festival gives prominence to and celebrates certain states of womanhood: the *sumaṅgalī* and the *kanyā*, a potential *sumaṅgalī*. The *sumaṅgalī* maintains her auspicious identity through vows and fasts, rituals strongly associated with women.[232] *Kolu* too is particularly linked to the auspiciousness of the *sumaṅgalī* (lit. "she who is auspicious"), who may acknowledge and re-affirm her auspiciousness by keeping *kolu* and through evening visits to other *kolus*. The Tamil woman is considered the power that holds the family together and is regarded "the embodiment of family relation itself" (Egnor 1980, 26). The desired outcomes of women's rituals are therefore frequently revolving around one's family, such as

229 Non-Brahmanical rituals also lack this textual authority provided by the elite Sanskrit tradition and have in scholarly literature suffered the same fate along women's rituals of being overlooked as "lower" and "less important".

230 To date *kolu* as a ritual practice is therefore impossible. Narayanan holds that *kolu* was prevalent in Tamil Nadu at least by the mid-nineteenth century, based on her own childhood experiences of *kolu* and conversations with friends and family (2018, 279).

231 See Hüsken (2013) for interesting discussions on the role of textual media in female ritual agency.

232 See, for instance, McGee 1987; Pearson 1996.

the husband's longevity, getting children, and favorable marriages for your offspring.[233] This is also the case with *kolu*, which is closely associated with marriage and fertility. As Mrs. Purnima put it: "It is mainly the ladies in the house who are more concerned about the family. It the lady who stands beside the man in the house during times of happiness or sorrow. Śiva is not full without Śakti. So, women are given importance during Navarātri." Many respondents spoke about the connections between *kolu* and *sumaṅgalīs* during interviews. Sivasubramanian Gurukkal, the priest of a small Śiva temple explained: "It is believed that if you keep *kolu*, women will have long life and be a *sumaṅgalī*." Another woman, Bhagyalakshmi, said: "We invite people and give them *mañjal* (turmeric) and *kuṅkumam*. They come home because of *kolu* and we give them things. This will protect our *māṅkaliyam* (marriage necklace; symbolic of marriage)." Some respondents claimed that if an unmarried young woman did *pūjā* to a *kolu* and received *prasāda*, or if she merely *saw* a *kolu*, she would get married within the next year. As an elderly woman enthusiastically proclaimed during an interview: "Even if unmarried girls were to see the *kolu*, then by the following year they will get married. It is true!" The *pūjās* to the goddess in female human form, the gifts the women receive, and the attendance of mainly women and children during *kolu* visits all point to an emphasis on women's fertility, which is to be realized during marriage and making her a "proper" *sumaṅgalī*. Her auspiciousness depends not only on her possessing a (living) husband but also her ability to bear children, and the *kanyā* is a potential future *sumaṅgalī*. Although none of my respondents mentioned it, Logan (1980, 256) finds that Navarātri is considered a good time to "come of age". Rodrigues (2009) connects the worship of young girls in the tantric *pūjā* to the coming of their menstruation and their transforming into fertile women.[234] The link between *kolus*, fertility and marriage is pronounced even further in non-Brahmin environments, where specific *kolu* dolls are connected to the desire for conception and marriage (see chapter 7).

The gifts women and girls receive during *kolu* visits commonly include flowers, turmeric, *kuṅkumam*, betel nuts, bangles, a sari blouse piece, a coconut, and a plastic utensil, among other things connected to female beauty, auspiciousness, and domesticity (cf. Hancock 1999, 3). While many of these objects point

233 Male oriented outcomes may include maintaining purity (for Brahmins), secure a good wheat crop, rid the village of disease (Wadley 1995, Hüsken 2013), economic success, acquisition of personal power and defeat of rivals (Rodrigues 2005, 75).

234 In the Bengali *pūjā* the worship of young girls (*kumārī pūjā*) coincides with the blood sacrifice (*bali dāna*) performed on day 9 (see Rodrigues 2009, 268, 273–277 and 2005, 98–99), making this connection explicit.

to feminine beauty (including pocket mirrors, mehendi cones and flowers to put in the hair), they are also symbolic of fertility (Narayanan 2012). The blouse piece that is to be sewn for a sari, represent the dress commonly worn after marriage. In accordance, the *tāmpūlam* is commonly presented exclusively to young women and *sumaṅgalīs*, and not to men, children, or widows (children may receive a pencil and a notebook, particularly on the 9th day of Sarasvatī Pūjā).

Some women invited widows (Ta. *amaṅkali*, lit. "inauspicious") and gave them the *tāmpūlam*, but with certain restrictions, such as without turmeric, *kuṅkumam* and bangles.[235]Mrs. Bhagyalakshmi stated: "I will give [*tāmpūlam*] to everyone. I do not see such differences, because [*amaṅgalis*] should not feel hurt. We are all women after all." Another woman said: "Mostly only *sumaṅgalīs* come. Even if *amaṅgalīs* come, we give them [*tāmpūlam*] without turmeric. My *guru* is one, so I will give her. There is nothing wrong. The only thing is that turmeric should not be given [to *amaṅgalīs*]." Other respondents avoided going to hoseholds where they knew widows took part in the celebration. I heard a sad story of a widow who once offered *kuṅkumam* to her daughter-in-law's *kolu* guests. Her neighbor proudly told me that she refused to receive it, and afterwards all others who had received *kuṅkumam* from the widow were plagued by misfortune. The widow's own son almost lost his life in a traffic accident. After this incident, the woman who told me the anecdote does not visit her neighbors *kolu* anymore, and the distribution of *kuṅkumam* caused a split in their community. Clearly, there are mixed opinions in Kanchipuram on the participation of widows during *kolu*. And importantly, the efficacy which is attributed to certain ritual acts is most explicitly visible when these rituals *go wrong* – or when one does not follow the rules. As in this case, negative events are attributed as negative consequences to these ritual mistakes or wrongdoings.[236]

Based on the ritual roles of women during Navarātri and the images of the feminine expressed during *kolu*, I agree with Rodrigues (2005) who in his analysis on women's roles during the Banarsi celebrations suggests that Navarātri temporarily "elevates the feminine, in all its dimensions, to a high level of purity and auspiciousness" (2005, 98). Clearly, the festival gives primacy to the *kanyā* and *sumaṅgalī*, with its emphasis on fertility and fecundity as outlined

235 *Kuṅkumam* is given to female guests when they leave as a blessing or sign of respect, but it is not presented to widows.

236 For more on the breaking of ritual rules and failed ritual performances, see Hüsken (2007b).

above.[237] But while Rodrigues's argument is that inauspicious states of womanhood are venerated too, through the encompassing image of the Great Goddess,[238] there is simultaneously a contrast when looking at the celebrations, as widows and (in the case of high caste households) outcastes are explicitly excluded or not invited.

Men and *Kolu*

Husbands and other male family members may be present in the home while receiving guests during Navarātri evenings, but they rarely go *kolu* hopping, which is considered a female activity. When I inquired about the different roles of men and women in her family during Navarātri, Purnima, a woman in her 40's explained:

> "Men do not have much to do during Navarātri. […] So as far as the Navarātri period is concerned, it is the ladies who do much work. The role of men is mainly in the initial stage of arrangements, dismantling [the *kolu*] in the end, and some house related stuff like buying things required for *pūjā* etc. If the *sumaṅgalīs* start coming by 5 or 5.30 in the evening, one or the other will be coming till 8 or 8.30. So, women will have continuous work."

Indeed, I recall *no* memory of men showing up during any of my *kolu* visits (that is, of course, apart from those who lived in the households in question). On the contrary, rooms could be filled to the brim with women and children. I did, however, encounter several men with huge interest and pride in their doll collections. In addition, in the homes of male Brahmin priests, the priest, and not their wives, often had the strongest opinions on how to arrange their *kolu*. Generally, the married women of the family arrange or set up the *kolu*, or it is a family activity. However, when I watched the *kolu* being arranged in Mrs. Gowri's family, whose *kolu* was described as introcuction to this second part of the book, her husband (who was then the eldest priest in the household) gave instructions on where to place the dolls after the women had unpacked and dusted

237 In Rodrigues's case, the pre-menstrual virgin, the post-menopausal mother, and married woman are the states of womanhood giving primacy during Navarātri (2005, 98). In Tamil Nadu, the two latter categories come together in the auspicious *sumaṅgalī*.

238 Epithets in Durgā hymns that are recited during Navarātri praise the goddess in inauspicious forms, including an outcaste (Mātaṅgī) or a widow (Kātyāyanī and Dhūmavati) (Rodrigues 2005, 96). However, as explained, the *DM* and other Durgā texts do not play important parts in Navarātri in Kanchipuram to the extent they do in Norh India. Here, the popularly recited *LSN* overshadows the *DM*, which on the contrary is not often recited.

them, and they had hired a workman to place the heavy dolls on the *kolu* and to install the steps. Hüsken (2012, 189) similarly notes that in the homes of the temple priests of the Varadarāja temple the priests arrange the *kolu*, not their wives, or they monitor its arrangement closely. She suggests that this might be due to the priest's expertise and pride in doing the *alaṃkāras* of the temple deity. Thus, the *kolu* display reflects the priests' skills and field of expertise. Males, or the whole household, often also partake in the worship of prepubescent girls and auspicious married women and may partake in recitations. But it is the women who perform the ritual proceedings for the *kolu*, offer *tāmpūlam* to the visitors, and go for evening visits. Despite occasional male interest, *kolu* predominantly remains a scene for female ritual agency and revolves around female values.

Who is the Goddess on the *Kolu*?

The *kolu* praises the feminine aspect of the divine in its benevolent form. Through inviting the goddess home, on the *kolu* and in the form of prepubescent girls and married women, she showers auspiciousness, fecundity, and prosperity to the household. The desire for auspiciousness and blessings over the home was repeatedly given in interviews as one of the main reasons why respondents kept *kolu*. As Jyotika replied when asked why she kept *kolu*: "Because it is good for the house (*vīṭukku nallatu*) and the house will prosper." Mrs. Srividya outlined in more detail:

> "Keeping Navarātri *kolu* gives us peace of mind and makes us feel that all gods are blessing our house. When people see Navarātri *kolu*, their vibrations will be good and that will become part of the house. All their wishes and prayers will reverberate through the house. For this, we celebrate *kolu*."

Although the Navarātri festival is widely associated with Mahiṣāsuramardinī, women do not pray specifically to Durgā. Rather, they pray to Ampāḷ (the Tamil equivalent of the generic Devī, "Goddess", the feminine aspect of the divine). If people were to name the goddess, they would talk of the three *śaktis* whom the festival popularly honors; Lakṣmī, Durgā and Sarasvatī. Logan too, explains how the goddess is worshipped as "*śakti*" during *kolu* (1980, 254, see also Fuller and Logan 1985, 98). It should be stressed here that in Kanchipuram, the *Lalitāsahasranāma*, and not the *Devīmāhātmya*, is by far considered the mandatory text to recite during Navarātri. In accordance with identifying Lalitā with Kāmākṣī, I understood some women to talk about Kāmākṣī (particularly those I recognized as ardent Kāmākṣī worshippers, such as Mrs. Gowri), when they addressed the

goddess as Ampāḷ. On day 9, the goddess is worshipped as Sarasvatī, goddess of learning and music.

Kolu rituals heavily revolve around female auspiciousness and make up a sacred female space. The goddess on the *kolu* is a Lakṣmī-like goddess, who confers prosperity to the household, fertility, well-being of the family, and particularly ensures women long lives as *sumaṅgalīs*. She is not the demon-fighter from the *Devīmāhātmya* and the other myths narrating the demonic fight. Indeed, there is little in the domestic rituals during Navarātri that points to the goddess' violence.

The Symbolism of "Hot" and "Cool" and Women's Religious Agency

One thing that *does* evoke the theme of fierceness is the distribution of "hot" *cuṇṭal*, dishes of pulses and legumes, to the goddess in the pot and to the visiting women (figure 5.7).[239] This particular food makes the goddess as well as the women, among whom the goddess will be manifest, "hot" for the duration of the festival increasing their *śakti* day by day and regenerating their powers.

This not only enhances the fierceness of the goddess in her fight with the demon, but further strengthens the connection between the devotee and the goddess (Logan 1980, Fuller and Logan 1985, Tanaka 1999.) In response to this increased energy level of the women, the ingredients in the pot are used for making "cool" *pāyacam* or *poṅkal* when the festival is over, not only conferring the goddess's powers to the family who consumes this dish as *prasāda*, but also cooling the women when the battle is over. The *cuṇṭal* offered during Sarasvatī Pūjā is accompanied by sweets or cooling dishes, "signaling the need to balance heating and cooling food" (Fuller and Logan 1985, 98).

Masakazu Tanaka (1999, 134–135), Logan (1980, 254–258) and Fuller and Logan (1985, 98) have all used the symbolism reflected in the food, "hot" food symbolizing independence and cool food symbolizing restraint to argue how the festival re-affirms patriarchal structures and "demonstrates the limitations of women" (Tanaka 1999, 134). After being "hot" and acting alone during the festival, including going for evening visits unaccompanied by their husbands, women are in the end "cooled" and remain under the control of their spouse. This pattern is also reflected in other aspects of Navarātri celebrations such as

239 *Cuṇṭal* is also offered to goddesses in temples during Navarātri, as an energizer for her fights with the demon. See Beck (1969) for typologies of Tamil food, which are divided into the two basic categories of hot and cool.

(in the Mīnākṣī temple) the color of the temple images clothes (red the 8th day and white the 9th day (Fuller and Logan 1985, 89–92), and the sequence of worshipping goddesses beginning with the destructive Durgā and ending with the submissive Sarasvatī on day 9.[240] We must remember that the *sumaṅgalī* depends upon her husband for maintaining her status; it is through marriage that she channels her benevolent powers, which would otherwise be considered ambivalent and unpredictable. Within marriage the woman's *śakti* is used productively and creatively, such as with begetting children. It is therefore no surprise that *kolu*, a ritual which revolves so heavily around the *sumaṅgalī*, confirms these stereotypical social patterns of which she is part.

Figure 5.7: Eating *cuṇṭal* (pulses) as *prasāda*, 2015.

Importantly, this does not mean that women do not or cannot exhibit agency or experience empowerment through the course of Navarātri. Several of my

240 Fuller and Logan (1985, 98) and Tanaka (1999, 134) also stress that it is men who officiate the Sarasvatī Pūjā rituals and thus the "normal order" is restored at the end of Navarātri. However, out of the three Sarasvatī Pūjās I witnessed domestically in Kanchipuram during 2014 and 2015 two were performed by women and one by the husband and wife together. Through interviews I also learnt that many housewives perform the Sarasvatī Pūjā themselves.

respondents perceived the festival as giving importance to women in association with the divine feminine and expressed this in interviews. Mrs. Srividya said:

> "Śiva has one night, Śivaratri, but Ampāḷ has nine nights, that is Navarātri. Ampāḷ takes *avatār* (descends) to bring glory to womanhood. Only a woman can do anything she wants. Men have muscle power, but women have mental strength. The *asura* mistakes that a woman will not be able to kill him, but the Goddess proves him wrong. She is actually the combination of the power of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. So, women are given importance in this festival."

While many women expressed this notion in one way or another, it was not uniform, and others, such as Mrs. Gowri, focused solely on her devotion to the goddess and its effects on her:

> "I: Do you view Navarātri as a time when women are given importance?
> G: No, I don't see it that way. I feel happy and content doing it (keeping *kolu*) for the goddess."

Concluding Remarks

Kolu creates a sacred space where women are intermediaries between the goddess and the worshippers. They perform and embody the divine, appropriate the goddess's powers, and act as ritual specialists, as hosts, and as guests. Navarātri celebrates the feminine aspects of the divine, including woman-as-the goddess. However, not all "types" of women, but rather *sumaṅgalī*-hood, the status of the auspicious and child-bearing married woman, is elevated during the domestic festival. Although some include widows in their celebrations, this is not the general rule. It is therefore legitimate to ask wether the general claim of a "shared *śakti*" among women and goddesses holds true if it only mainfests with reference to specific women. However, *śakti* as female power may also manifest in other female forms who are equated with lesser spirit-being and noted for their threats and interference with a family's or individual's well-being (Reynolds 1980, 37).[241] And while other women have other powers, Navarātri celebrates the goddess's unconditional benevolent powers, embodied in fertility and auspiciousness and the idea of the *sumaṅgalī*.

The goddess on the *kolu* is not the violent demon fighter from the myths associated with Navarātri. Rather, she represents auspiciousness, fertility,

241 Such beings may be known as *pēy*, *pūtam*, *picācu* and *puccaṇṭi*, and can through appropriation change character so that they become more *ammaṉ*-like and more prone to bless (Reynolds 1980, 37).

prosperity of the household, and the well-being of the family. This confirms stereotypical female religiosity, which, as Pintchman (2007, 6) points out, tends to emphasize women's important relationships and the domestic realm; something their everyday life heavily revolves around, and connects to their role as wives and mothers, and the wish to gain and maintain the status of the auspicious married *sumaṅgalī*. By many, Navarātri is regarded a special period for women and girls. One informant explained: "[…] it is like the joy I get in these ten days is the joy of the entire year put together." Many respondents connected the feminine association of Navarātri to women's association with the goddess. As Mrs. Ragi said: "I feel [Navarātri] is a nice way to be connected to the goddess, especially when my daughter is called to sit for [*kanyā*] *pūjā*." To take Rodrigues's argument of how Navarātri elevates the feminine to a temporary "high level of purity and auspiciousness" further, I label Navarātri, and particularly *kolu*, a "power event" in which women ritually renew their auspiciousness and appropriate the powers of the goddess.[242]

This concept of feminine power feeds into female religious agency. This agency is understood here as relating to the lives and concerns of the women performing these rituals. Agency thus might even contribute to maintain the status quo by affirming the *sumaṅgalī*'s dependence on her husband. This is no contradiction. *Kolu* not only exemplifies ritual agency with its varied ritual roles of women and girls, but importantly also urges an aesthetic agency, where women display their world views through the set up and fashioning of doll dioramas and scenery (chapter 6); as well as an economic agency, in buying dolls and other requirements, most prominent when deciding to start a *kolu* from scratch (chapter 7).

242 This argument follows Reynolds (1980, 50) who have have termed *nōṉpus* "power events".

Chapter 6
Creativity and Playfulness in *Kolu*

"*Kolu is all about imagination*"

Displaying the Play of the Deities

The *kolu* is populated with numerous colorful dolls, depicting gods, goddesses, demons, sages, human beings, and animals (figure 6.1). Durgā on top of her lion kills the buffalo demon, Lakṣmī showers money and Sarasvatī plays her *vīṇā* (figure 6.2). Viṣṇu is resting on his snake, Kāmākṣī embraces the Śivaliṅga under a mango tree, Śiva dances in his wheel of fire and Narasiṃha ferociously emerges out of a pillar. Śiva sits on Mt. Kailāsa with his family and a towering Viṣṇu with 19 colorful heads reveals his true form to a kneeling Arjuna in the *Viśvarūpadarśana* scene from the *Bhagavadgītā* (figure 6.3). Kṛṣṇa sports with his *gopis*, plays the flute, eats butter and dances on a snake's head. The gods and *asuras* churn the ocean together, with a mountain and a snake as churning stick and rope. Hanumān sits on his coiled-up tail in audience with demon king Rāvaṇa, and the huge demon Ghaṭotkaca eats from bowls of food. The female poet saints Mira Bai and Āṇṭāḷ sign their praises, orange robed Sai Baba shows the *abhaya mudrā* (Skt. "gesture of fearlessness") and the Buddha is meditating. There is the head of decapitated Māriyammaṉ, Viṣṇu's ten incarnations, the eight forms of goddess Lakṣmī, wish-fulfilling cows (Skt. *kāmadhenu*), potbellied Ganeshas, four-headed Brahmās, green Mīnākṣīs and blue baby Kṛṣṇas. Mahārājas ride on elephants followed by their entourage, and humans perform various *pūjās* and *homas*. Some engage in processions of deities on *tērs* and *vahanas* (vehicles used for processions of deities), others eat from palm leaves or dance Bharatanātyam (classical south Indian dance). There are cricket teams and people playing carrom, cinemas, shops and children studying in schools. The Cēṭṭiyar merchant dolls sell everything from chickpeas and grains to fruits and vegetables, toiletries, pottery, bangles and saris (figure 6.4). Villagers are grinding food, carrying water-pots and vegetables, and women are cooking *idly* (pillowy lentil rice cakes) (figure 6.5). There are smiths, weavers, potters, fishermen and farmers harvesting. The wooden *Marappācci* couple is dressed up yearly in new cloths and ornaments by their owners and stand amidst the dolls (figure 6.6). In joint families, several *Marappācci* dolls can be seen. Alongside huts and wells rise temples with *gopurams* and tanks, and pilgrimage sites

such as Mammalapuram, Sabrimala, Tirupati and Trichy. There are beaches, forests, jungles, villages, cities and roads, as well as various animals. A lion is caught in a net and a mouse stand outside hovering, a crow tries stealing a *vadai* (savory fried doughnut). Amongst the dolls stand porcelain figures, souvenirs from India and abroad and other trinkets, such as paw-waving Japanese cats (*maneki*-neko), and Chinese money toads (*jin chan*), Eiffel Towers and Twin Towers, conches and seashells, plastic insects, fruits, and vegetables. Often kids have arranged their toys, including cartoon figures, Barbie dolls, toy vehicles, plastic animals, stuffed animals, toy furniture and dish sets (figure 6.7).

Figure 6.1: A *kolu*, 2014.

Figure 6.2: Lakṣmī, Durgā and Sarasvatī dolls, 2015.

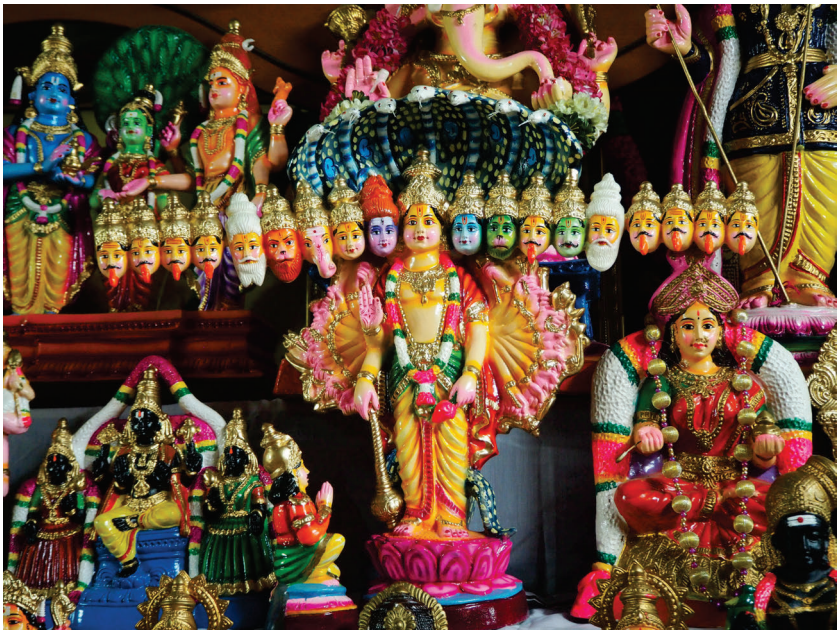

Figure 6.3: *Viśvarūpadarśaṇa* scene from the *Bhagavadgītā*, 2015.

Figure 6.4: Cēṭṭiyār merchant dolls, 2015.

Figure 6.5: Village scenes in front of *kolu* steps, 2014.

Figure 6.6. Marappācci dolls, 2015.

Figure 6.7: Toys as *kolu*, 2015.

While a *kolu* ideally should consist of nine steps (Ta. *paṭi*), corresponding to the nine nights of the Navarātri festival, an odd number of at least three steps is the minimum; odd numbers considered auspicious in Indian culture. The *kolu* frequently extends from the steps to the floor and may transform entire rooms into depicting the play or *līlā* of the deities (Narayanan 2016, 341; 2018, 281). The *kolu* forms a miniature world visually unfolding on the steps, unveiling the richness and colors of Hindu mythology mixed with South Indian culture. Stories vividly come alive through the *kolu* display. As an elderly priest of the Kāmākṣī temple said: "We get to know the *pattatikaḷ* (Ta. "scriptures") through this. Reading is one thing; seeing and hearing are other things. We can *see* it during this time (my emphasis)."

Usually less is *not* more when it comes to *kolu*: there will be gold, glitter, plastic garlands, an overabundance of colorful dolls, and the *kolus* are illuminated with light chains. One of the biggest *kolus* I saw was the one of a silk merchant's family. Their *kolu* was like a visual explosion: the freshly painted dolls stood so close that there was no room in between, and it was hard to catch the details. But there is much variation, since *kolus* are arranged according to convenience, income, and interest. While some *kolus* are extremely elaborate and cover the space of entire rooms from floor to ceiling, others are more modest and consist of merely a dozen dolls displayed.

The dolls are usually displayed hierarchically on the steps with the gods on top and the inanimate or decorative objects on the bottom. Some say this is to illustrate the idealized order of the universe, a 'life cycle' with gods above sages, sages above humans, humans above animals, and animals above insects and plants (Logan 1980, 250; Fuller and Logan 1985, 97; Tanaka 1999, 127). Most of my responden tsexplained that the steps relate to the figures' different levels of consciousness or senses (Ta. *aṟivu*). Despite the hierarchical rules regarding what goes on which step, *kolu* arrangements are not strictly fixed. Personal taste, creativity and imagination all play part in displaying the dolls, and no two *kolus* are alike. While some dolls are fashionable and will be found on almost all kolus, others are one of a kind: manufactured on demand, or old and rare. *People* also frequently add to their sets and dolls with creative or personal details, such as cotton ball mountain tops where gods and sages pop up from the "snow" (figure 6.8). Sand or earth is applied for making villages, beaches and cricket fields, sprouts for forests and jungles, and stones for mountains. Thermacol, cardboard or paper and the like may be used for making buildings, streets, cities, and signs, and ice-lollies for fences. Mrs. Srividya explained: "A lot of imagination is involved in keeping the *kolu*. You can do different kinds of set-

tings. For example, you can do the "Ārupaṭai vīṭu" (the six abodes of Murukaṉ) on thermacol to give the impression of water. *Kolu* is all about imagination."

Figure 6.8: Cotton ball Mt. Kailāsa, 2015.

The Dolls and Their Makers

The three goddesses Durgā, Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī, whom the festival honors, are all but compulsory on a *kolu*, alongside Ganeśa, who should be kept in addition to the goddesses when first starting with *kolu* (Hancock 1999, 248). Ganeśa is the god of beginnings and commonly prayed to before any new undertaking. Apart from innumerable independent deities and figures, sets flourish, depicting scenes of Kṛṣṇa *līlā* (the play of Kṛṣṇa), from the epics *Mahābhārata* and *Ramāyaṇa*, the *purāṇas*, fables from Hitopadeśa, and the Tamil epic *Cilappatikāram* as well as various cultural and religious scenes such as weddings and processions, and village scenes. Hancock (2001) has shown how *kolu* balance heritage with the modern, with its rural scenes evoking a "glorified past", blended with judgments of present and future (for instance in themed *kolus* commenting upon societal issues, but also in more modern dolls and toys).

Kolu dolls are ideally made from terracotta, but some doll makers also use papier-mâché, which is preferred by some buyers. While clay lasts longer and is said to be infused with divinity (*śakti*),[243] papier-mâché dolls are easier to handle as they are not as heavy (there are also dolls of plastic and plaster of Paris). In Kanchipuram, *kolu* dolls are available in a particular neighborhood known as the Pommaikkāraṉ (Ta. "doll maker") Street,[244] where several doll makers live and have their workshops (figures 6.9 and 6.10). They mainly belong to the Kulālar (Ta. potter) or Uṭaiyār community, known for pottery, but have started to train other people in the trade as well. This is the livelihood for these doll makers, with the peak season in the months preceding Navarātri. Other occasions during which people buy dolls include Vināyakar Catūrthī and Kṛṣṇa Jayantī, celebrated close to Navarātri. The doll makers also supply shops such as religious supermarkets and send dolls abroad. Most dolls are mass-produced from molds and then painted by hand, but the doll makers also take special orders from customers who desire one-of-a-kind dolls. While Pommaikkāraṉ Street is located very close to the Varadarāja temple, people from all over Kanchipuram come here to buy dolls before the festival. Indeed, *everyone* I visited and interviewed in Kanchipuram, without a single exception, had bought some of their dolls directly from the show rooms of the doll makers in Pommaikkāraṉ Street.

243 Susan S. Bean makes the argument that only "*unfired* clay contains life; [and that] images made from it are supremely suited as vessels to contain divine power." (2011, 608, my emphasis) Teracotta is fired, but its sanctity, coming from the earth, was emphasized by one of the doll makers as well as by a few respondents.

244 Pommaikāraṉ Street is a nickname for Astakiri Street, received because of all the doll makers who hereditarily live and work here.

Figure 6.9: Doll maker's workshop, 2015.

Figure 6.10: Doll maker's workshop, 2015.

Kolu dolls are traditionally collected from the time a couple gets married, when the bride and groom receive the *Marappācci* dolls. Others take up the practice some time after marriage, and do not necessarily keep this wooden couple. Many *kolu* dolls are inherited through generations in the family from mother to daughter and re-painted to freshen them up as they grow old. Tradition says it is compulsory to buy at least one new doll each Navarātri. In this way, a collection of *kolu* dolls grows steadily along with the effort and money each family puts into it. The three doll makers I interviewed and whose workshops I went to see reported an increasing interest in dolls and a bigger demand from customers over the past few decades. Still, they told me there is no competition between them as they sell their dolls at same standardized rate, and there is market for everyone due to the increasing demand of dolls (in fact, when I returned immediately after Navarātri and wanted to buy dolls to bring home, they were completely sold out!).[245]

But why display dolls, and what is their connection to Navarātri? Many respondents connected the *kolu* to the goddess' fight with the demon and regarded the dolls the army of Durgā helping her in the cosmic battle, or they regarded them sources of empowerment during the nine days of battle, so that the goddess would draw on the doll's powers. According to Tanaka (1999, 124), the *kolu* dolls are said to be the forms assumed by the goddess in her fight. Some respondents explained how the gods had become "mere dolls" to display on the *kolu* while their powers had all gone to Durgā fighting the demon, or that the goddess killed the demon with such ferocity that the world stood still "like dolls." Others held that the goddess converted the rest of the gods to dolls and took their powers to kill the *asura*. Despite these notrions, the dolls are not mere shells: they are imbued with powers and divinity. As one respondent phrased it: "these are not dolls, but gods." The dolls are considered to be alive during the festival; hence the need to put them to sleep the final day. A woman explained: "During *kolu* time at night [the dolls] will come alive and talk about our family's good and bad. So, if we look after them well, they will bless us". Importantly, *kolu* dolls are not used for any other occasions, and stored in boxes for the rest of the year.

245 Interestingly, contrasting the words of doll makers in Chennai who report that the next generation is wary of continuing the livelihood of making dolls (not because of the demand, but because of profit), one of the doll makers in Kanchipuram who had a huge workshop and several employees told me their occupation was sought after and popular, and that they trained many people into the trade. See https://www.rediff.com/getahead/report/slide-show-1-specials-dying-a-slow-death-a-peek-into-the-life-of-kolu-doll-makers/20131009.htm (accessed 30.08.2022).

Another reason for keeping *kolu* during Navarātri was proposed in Fuller and Logan's 1985 article on Navarātri in Madurai. The two scholars point to a complementary plane between the Mīnākṣī temple and homes during Navarātri: in their analysis, a *kolu* represents the ideal Hindu world order which during Navarātri is threatened by Mahiṣāsura; created domestically as a counterpart to the "battlefield" within the Mīnakṣī temple (Fuller and Logan 1985, 97, see also Logan 1980). This, they claim, is for example reflected in the fact that only benevolent deities are displayed on *kolus*.[246] Thus, the domestic *kolu* represents a recreation of the usually pure interior of the temple, which for these nine days is threatened by demons (who do not feature on the *kolu*). However, nowadays demons from mythological stories are frequently found on *kolus*. This might, of course, mean that *purāṇic* sets are a more recent development, Fuller and Logan conducting research in the 1980s.[247] But generally, bloodthirsty deities such as Kālī are not very common on *kolus*, although she, too, will appear. The village deity Māriyammaṉ is on the other hand quite popular. In general, people opt for benevolent and auspicious deities on their *kolu*.

Fashioning the Goddess

In many homes with elaborate *kolus*, which respondents would label as "good" *kolus*, the *kolu* was an extension of the women's interest in crafts, such as making sand arts, decorated plates, embroidery, crochet and other crafts. The aesthetic agency of women is not only expressed in the arrangements and compositions of the *kolu* dolls, but also in the pots that become goddesses in their hands, decorated and consecrated as the goddess and placed on the *kolu* (figure 6.11). Often elaborately dressed up elaborately as the goddess, the pot may draw the attention as the focal point in the *kolu*. Some also keep a metal face on the pot or put a small *bimba* (Skt. "image") of the goddess inside, and it is decorated with flowers. Some pots are totally transformed to resemble dolls themselves, with spare limbs attached to their pot "body", adorned with sari replicas and ornaments, and jewel-filled hair and faces (Ta. *ammaṉ mukham*)

246 "[T]here are never any models of demons, evil spirits, and ancestors on the *kolus*, even though these are also part of the totality of the world" (Fuller and Logan 1985, 97). In my view, the general lack of malevolence is also connected to the wholly auspicious nature of the *kolu* and its associations with fertility and prosperity (although this might be a chicken-egg-argument, as the *kolu* might be linked to fertility and prosperity exactly because it is a display of and embodiment of auspicious forces).

247 Though unusual, Deeksha Sivakumar (2018, 329) even describes a *kolu* displaying pictures of dead ancestors.

attached to the coconut "head". As Haberman (2013, 149–152) has argued in his research on tree worship in North India, the application of faces on aniconic forms makes a more intimate connection between the divine and the worshipper, as *darśana* becomes easier within an anthropomorphic form. These decorations of the pot thus enhance the goddess' presence for the worshipper (much like the *alaṃkāras* in temples) and brings the goddess forth in a more recognizable form. Another aspect of this practice is that the goddess *should* be adorned beautifully, being a fine woman, enhancing her feminine nature and desires.

Figure 6.11: The goddess in the form of a pot, 2015.

For those who have the practice of installing the goddess in a pot, the pot is said to be the heart of the *kolu*. Importantly, once it is placed among the dolls, they cannot be rearranged, and the *kolu* display is fixed for the duration of the

festival. However, the tradition of installing the goddess in a pot between families and communities. Some also keep the pot in their *pūjā* room during Navarātri, and not on the *kolu*, or only for Sarasvatī Pūjā. But whether or not the pot is kept, the *kolu* is regarded as an object of worship.

In addition to or as an alternative to the pot, an oil lamp (Ta. *viḷakku*) may be fashioned and decorated as the goddess in the same manner as the pot and kept near the *kolu*. The elaborate decorations by women of pots and oil lamps, which transform domestic items into idols, are commonly known as Varalakṣmī *nōṉpu* decorations. Varalakṣmī *nōṉpu* (Ta. "vow to Lakṣmī as the wielder of boons") is a *pūjā* performed by married (usually Brahmin) women in South India on the Friday before full moon during the month of Āṭi (July-August).[248] This *pūjā* is performed for the well-being and prosperity of the family and therefore it has many similarities with Navarātri. In fact, some women equated them, when asked about the most important time during the year to venerate the goddess. Much like Navarātri, this occasion also fosters the community of women as well as focusing on worship, as mothers and daughters visit each other during the evening viewing the decorated pots, singing songs, and receiving the *tāmpūlam*.[249]

Competition, Didactics, Sentiments, and Social Commentary

Displaying dolls during Navarātri is not just about having a memorable *kolu* for entertaining and pleasing the guests: competition is made explicit as *kolu* competitions[250] are announced by newspapers and TV channels. Here, innovative and spectacular and often theme-based *kolus* are featured. Still, those which adhere to religious tradition, win.[251] A priestly family of the Ekāmranātha temple once won "best *kolu* of Kanchipuram" in such a competition run by Vijay

248 *Nōṉpus* are mainly performed by Brahmin and other high caste women (Reynolds 1980, 59). For a detailed description of the *pūjā*, see Reynolds (1978, 268-303).

249 https://bommalattum.com/2012/07/30/vowing-and-showing/ (accessed 22.08. 2022).

250 Similarly, Durgā Pūjā *paṇḍals* win prizes in the north. Indeed, McDermott (2011, 137) says that in 2008 there were so many prize awarders in Kolkata (among companies, media, and charities) that it was difficult to keep count. In Chennai, papers have hosted competitions since the 1980s (Narayanan 2016, 342).

251 When the scholar Hancock partook in judging a *kolu* competition held by the Chennai based newspaper Adyar Times in 1996, she described the criteria for evaluating a good *kolu* as: 1) the theme or message that unified the display, 2) the neatness and artistry in the display, 3) the extent to which the religious basis of the festival is communicated, and 4) originality. However, originality needed not point to a creative display, but rather that a display invoked the "original" form of the festival, with reference to the three goddesses. (Hancock 1999, 249)

TV and received a prize of 10.000 INR. Their winning *kolu* was themed as the *kumbhābhiṣeka* (Skt. "inauguration") of the Ekāmranatha temple, and they had depicted the temple's allegedly 3500-year-old mango tree, famous beyond Kanchipuram. When I visited in 2015, they had themed their *kolu* as the Thiruthani *teppoccavam* (Ta. "float festival")[252], an annual temple festival when the festival image is displayed on a float in the temple tank. They had fashioned a replica of the temple tank on the floor, with a motorized float constantly spinning around in it (figure 6.12), in addition to their 15-step *kolu,* which was lavish with dolls. Originally, they had fish in the tank as well, but released them in the real temple tank afraid that they were going to die, which would bring inauspiciousness. Mrs. Nirmala's representation of these annual festivals in her *kolu* shows how *kolu* is often used to display memories from travels or pilgrimage as well as religious affiliations.

Figure 6.12: Replica of temple tank with motorized float, 2015.

252 Tiruthani is one of the six abodes of Lord Murukaṉ, situated in Northern Tamil Nadu, and home to a well-known Murukaṉ temple.

Figure 6.13: Replica of a Kanchipuram preschool, 2015.

Another interesting aspect of the *kolu* celebration is how several families represent their own family lineages in their setup. Among them were several schools with signs representing the educational institutions of children (figure 6.13), and signs with family names of fictive silk shops, restaurants, cinemas, and cricket teams. As with the popular Cēṭṭiyar merchant dolls (a fat couple usually displayed selling fruits and vegetables) may be interpreted as representing a successful agricultural outcome (Logan 1980, 250), some of these personal expressions were probably created to symbolize or to wish for prosperity and successful endeavors. The *kolu* dolls and their history, where they are from, who bought them, episodes connected to them, as well as their affiliated mythological narratives, are all subjects for discussion among the visitors viewing the *kolu*. Thus, as Hüsken (2012, 191) points out, the dolls themselves also form parts of family or individual narratives, as the worldviews of the women and families are creatively on display on the *kolu*.[253]

A lot can be read in a *kolu*, as we saw in the above examples: travels, religious affiliations, and personal narratives. As Bado-Fralick and Norris remind us, toys and play have educational value (2010, 130–131). *Kolu* displays are moreover

253 Shivakumar (2018) analyzes in more detail how *kolu* preserves and displays life histories and memories (Sivakumar 2018).

infused with mythology and thus serve as a natural arena to teach children about Hindu religion.[254] *Kolus* are very popular with children, who often arrange their own parts, usually the floor or lower steps. Often kids engage with the dolls while receiving guests or while visiting *kolus*. Like Srividya, who is a teacher, explained: "The *kolu* is a good way to teach kids of this generation about our *purāṇas* and *itihāsas*". In 2015, she had themed her *kolu* with traditional stories, and the floor in front of her *kolu* was filled with scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* on the right side and from the *Mahābhārata* on the left, interspersed with scenes from *purāṇic* stories and moral tales such as the *Hitopadeśa*. Her son and daughter, aged about 8–10, proudly explained most of the scenes on the floor to me once when I visited in her absence.[255]

For many, there is much sentiment attached to the dolls. Mrs. Kamala, for instance, had a huge collection of very personal and unique dolls, displayed across two floors (figures 6.14, 6.15 and 6.16). It mainly consisted of dolls inherited from her mother: old ones that are no longer available at the market. A lady who was visiting Mrs. Kamala told me that in her previous house they had to regulate the visitors with a que-system because of the crowd of guests and number of dolls. Unlike most others, Kamala had not repainted any of her dolls, and their faded colors added to the beauty of her *kolu*. Her doll collection was a collection of memories. She expressed a sentimental relationship to the dolls, which she regarded as more than just dolls, and addressed in terms of family relations:

> "So far, we have never missed a *kolu*. All these 65 years (her age) we have never had to stop for any reason. These [dolls] are like my relatives. I cannot think of them as dolls. I cannot be without seeing them.
> I: Through the year we celebrate many festivals, how do you compare Navarātri with those?
> K: But this is more than that. I told you, isn't it? This doll is my *citappa* (Ta. "uncle"). That doll was given by my mother when I was three years old. When I see it, I become a three-year-old child again."

254 See also Hancock 2001, 6.

255 I also learned several mythological stories while *kolu* hopping with my assistant Ms. Vaishnavi and benefited substantially from her knowledge.

Figure 6.14: Mrs. Kamala's *kolu*, steps, 2015.

Figure 6.15: Mrs. Kamala's *kolu*, floor scene, 2015.

Through her *kolu*, Mrs. Kamala is brought back to her childhood memories of playing with dolls. In connection with memories of the past, a woman in her 50's explained how she let an old dream be expressed in her *kolu*, as she had arranged an *araṅkēṟṟam* set[256] of dancers together with a Nātarājā figure on a separate podium (figure 6.17). She said: "As a child I wanted to learn dance. I was not allowed to. Even if I had learnt it on my own, no one would have married me. So, I kept this set instead. I got the cloth specially stitched." Here we see that *kolu* can be used as an arena for expressing and displaying hopes and dreams, and how personal sentiments are manifested not only in the dolls themselves, but also in their display.

Figure 6.16: Old *kolu* doll in Mrs. Kamala's collection, 2015.

256 *Araṅkēṟṟam* is the debut performance of a dance or drama student after undertaking years of training.

Figure 6.17: *Araṅkēṟṟam* set, 2015.

As mentioned previously, *kolus* may also be unified by an overall theme. Most themed *kolus* in Kānchipuram were either based on mythological stories (very often Kṛṣṇa *līlās*), or on temple or cultural events such as weddings and processions. In the big cities such as Chennai, and in newspapers and websites, controversial themes are more common. Some of these themes, such as women's rights or equality rights[257] reminds one of the theme-based *paṇḍals* of the Bengali and Benarsi Durgā Pūjās, which may be quite controversial.[258] As with

257 One such campaign is Occupy Navaratri, which use Navarātri dolls for "challenging stereotypes and creating awareness". This web page is also on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter and uses the doll display to comment upon issues like gay marriage, menstruating women's prohibition in going to temples, body shapes, skin color and men as primary care takers for children. See http://www.womensweb.in/2016/10/occupy-navratri-challenging-stereotypes-creating-awareness. (Accessed 22.08.2022).

258 Themes in Bengali *paṇḍals* span from social issues such as child marriage and bride burning through spaceships and monumental sites to popular media themes such as Harry Potter, Titanic, and Jurassic Park. See McDermott (2011) for a review of *paṇḍals*

the *paṇḍals*, some of these themes may also be interpreted as social commentary, although the scope of *kolu* is not nearly as spectacular as the public circus of the Bengali *pūjā*. Social commentaries may be part of *kolus* intentionally or unintentionally, whether or not they are themed. Not just once would I, for instance, spot white-skinned dolls among the tourist site sets; particularly the Mahabalipuram set had white, scantily clad Barbie-like dolls representing tourists spread across the five *rathas* (*pañcharatha*), the rock-cut stone monuments in this beach town. Mahabalipuram (also known as Mammalapuram) is a place that sees many western (as well as Indian) tourists (figure 6.18).

Figure 6.18: Mahabalipuram set, 2014.

Mr. Gopinath's Handcrafted *Kolu*[259]

Mr. Gopinath is a retired government official, about 70 years old. He is a Vaiṣṇava Brahmin who lives very close to the Varadarāja temple along with his wife. After he retired, he is continuing the *kolu* tradition after his mother, who used to make small dolls of stuffed cotton with attached faces, as well as of clay, and display as *kolu*.

from the 1920s until present. See, for example, McDermott (2011), Thakurta (2015), Einarsen (2018), Sen (2018).

259 See also Hüsken (2012, 2021).

What is special about Mr. Gopinath's *kolu* is that he handcrafts human-sized *kolu* figures by using old waste materials, such as plastic containers, cardboard cartons, plastic bottles, cans, steel wire, old clothes and thermocole packing materials. Each Navarātri the figures he crafts depict the festival image of Varadarāja Viṣṇu, who is seated on a new *vāhana* (Skt. "vehicle") each Navarātri. The *vāhanas* represent those used for processions during the 10-day Brahmotsava in the Varadarāja temple of Kanchi-puram.[260] Starting in 2009 with fashioning the idol of Varadarāja Viṣṇu, the *vāhana* of 2015 was the Yāḷi *vāhana*, the 7th in line (figure 6.19). Yāḷi is a mythical creature, frequently seen carved into the pillars of South Indian temples, and looks like a hybrid of a lion, elephant, and horse. Fashioned by Gopinath, Yāḷi is covered in golden foil, with his characteristic long elephant trunk and tusks, a fierce-looking appearance, wide-open eyes, and his arms in front of him and palms up. The figure is quite a bit taller than Mr. Gopinath himself and has the Vaṭakalai sect mark on his chest.[261] On top sits a garlanded and bejeweled replica of the festival image of Varadarāja and surrounding the *vāhana* are three man-sized figures resembling Vaiṣṇava temple priests, clad in *dhotis* with the Vaṭakalai sect marks drawn on their foreheads, chest and arms. Above the *vāhana* towers a huge umbrella, and in front a small baby elephant, garlanded and covered in silver foil.

Mr. Gopinath takes great pride in fashioning his images and figures so that they closely resemble the temple images they represent. Since he lives across the street from the temple, he knows it very well. His house holds several such handcrafted dolls, all related to Varadarāja Viṣṇu and the festivals and history of the Varadarāja temple. For instance, he has the crafted sanctum image of Perumāḷ (Viṣṇu) and Peruntēvi (Lakṣmī) placed on the stairs leading to the 1st floor, and Mr. Gopinath joked that I did not need to visit the sanctum of the temple to see these images, now that I had seen his replicas (as a non-Hindu I am forbidden to enter the sanctum of the Varadarāja temple). One *vāhana* takes approximately 3–4 months to finish.

260 These processional Brahmotsava *vāhanas* are also sold as clay doll sets in Pommaikaraṉ Street and found in several traditional *kolus*.

261 Teṉkalai and Vaṭakalai are the two main sub-sects of Vaiṣṇavism, who strongly disagree on certain theological and ritual issues. The Varadarāja temple of Kanchipuram affiliates to Vaṭakalai and hence their sect mark is seen several places in the temple, such as on walls and the main *goupram*, but a group of Teṉkalai priests also has rights here. See Hüsken (2007a) for more on the dispute.

Figure 6.19: Yāḷi *vāhana*, 2015.

While Mr. Gopinath's wife does not perform any *pūjās* for the *kolu* in his household, she does present their Navarātri guests with the *tāmpūlam* when they leave. For Sarasvatī Pūjā, the couple keep the *vīṇā* and some books in front of the *vāhana* and the wife prepares a pot which she places near the display, but I am told it is merely decorative, since as orthodox Vaiṣṇavas they do not offer any separate *pūjā* to Sarasvatī, only their daily *pūjā* to the *śāligrāma*.[262]

262 The *śāligrāma* is a fossilized shell used in the worship of Viṣṇu.

The idea of using waste materials for making God's image is innovative and out of the ordinary. On the one hand, it is eco-friendly to use things and household materials that would otherwise have gone into the garbage, showing concerns for the environment and the future. Parts of his *kolu* are also re-used yearly or occasionally and freshened up, such as the umbrella, Varadarāja's image and the (now three) priests. However, many residents of Kanchipuram found his concept of fashioning God out of waste difficult to accept, and when I asked about its reception, Mr. Gopinath told me that most of his acquaintances were not at all interested in his *kolu*. This was apart from children and some guests from Chennai who are exposed to art and handicrafts.

The *kolu* of Mr. Gopinath is a special and creatively made *kolu*. The yearly images of Varadarāja on different *vāhanas* form a more art-like *kolu* than the standard display, and neither is it worshipped as an altar. He himself terms his Navarātri display "craft".[263] Still, Gopinath regards it a *kolu*, and he and his wife are devoted and practicing Hindus. The *kolu* does however not interrupt their regular *pūjā*. In that it contains only Varadarāja, his *kolu* has strong sectarian affiliations, but it is rejected by orthodox Vaishnavas, because of its material. This *kolu* is thus an example of a male Brahmin who challenges the notion of what a *kolu* is, in that it involves no steps, no traditional dolls, not a single goddess, and finally in the material with its movement from divinity-embedded clay to impure garbage. In the next section I will show how the purity dimensions of kolu were stressed by many respondents as a prerequisite for a successful ritual, so it should come as no surprise that using waste for fashioning a *kolu* display is contested and not straightforwardly appreciated. In being eco-friendly and recycled, his *kolu* is a social commentary on the huge garbage crisis India is facing and a step in the direction of creating awareness about recycling. Mr. Gopinath plays with the *kolu* in several ways. He plays with its very notion, and he plays while making it – as it is his hobby.

Playfulness, Entertainment, and Contemporary Trends

As with the case of Mr. Gopinath, the sometimes-blurred distinctions between play and ritual are particularly evident in *kolu* (see also Hüsken 2012). It is an occasion for fun and leisure, which encourages creativity, playfulness, competition, and entertainment, but it is at the same time serious and demanding.

Some of the dolls themselves are playful by nature and point to the inherent fun of *kolu*. These dolls liven up the displays and are among the conversation

263 The interview with Mr. Gopinath was one of a very few interviews conducted in English.

pieces for guests and owners. These include sets depicting scenes from Kṛṣṇa *līlā*, and crawling baby Gaṇeśa and Murukaṉ along with the very common doll of crawling baby Kṛṣṇa. But the most amusing forms of deities will include various types of Gaṇeśas, such as Chaplin Gaṇeśas, Gaṇeśas playing cricket (figure 6.20), Gaṇeśas playing various instruments while his rat is dancing, and on one *kolu* I saw Gaṇeśa typing on a laptop, with his mouse transformed to a computer device. As Vasudha Narayanan (2000, 774) points out, while iconographies tend to be dynamic in nature, it is usually Gaṇeśa who takes the playful role and is particularily progressive in his iconography.[264] Perhaps Gaṇeśa has a particularly playful iconography because he is not a sectarian Godhead, but still so beloved by the people, allowing for more freedom in depicting him? Of course, he is also easily identifiable in any situation and any position with his elephant head, as opposed to most other deities.

There are mixed opinions about the prominent aspects of entertainment and commercialization, as well as the increasing popularity of *kolu* in today's Tamil Nadu. Some respondents thought that contemporary society sees more devotion and were pleased that *kolu* is so popular. Others believed devotion is in decline and that *kolu* was practiced more authentically in the past. Mrs. Adhilakshmi, a non-Brahmin devotee I met in the Ādi Kāmākṣī temple, complained:

> "Times have changed. Previously it used to be a really grand affair. Now everybody does it (keep *kolu*). Even now in households that have celebrated Navarātri traditionally, they continue to practice it with purity (Ta. *cuttam*), but others do it as it pleases them. But that is not right. If you do it, you have to do it the right way".

264 The progressive iconography of Gaṇeśa is also seen during the annual Vināyakar Caturthi festival. In Chennai during 1999 and 2000 he was depicted as various other deities as well as politicians, but attracting most attention were the "Kargil Vinayakas", depicting Gaṇeśa sitting on a tank or a field gun, commemorating the Kargil war between India and Pakistan which took place in Kashmir in 1999 (Fuller 2001). One of my respondents, Mrs. Purnima, had around the millennium seen a Kargil Gaṇeśa on a *kolu* as well, holding a gun. When asked about her opinion of the doll, she replied: "it cannot be told as wrong. The children these days will not sit and hear stories regarding Navarātri. To make them listen, we must think in this new way and make them concentrate on these stories and tradition.".

Figure 6.20: Gaṇeśa cricket set, 2015.

Her words point to the rapid increase in newly started *kolus* by communities other than Brahmin, who are the ones who have kept it hereditarily. Several respondents stressed the purity dimensions of *kolu*. Purity here is probably understood as being able to bring about the appropriate conditions for carrying out worship.[265] My impression is, more specifically, that respondents used the term "purity" to refer to a quality embodied by Brahmins (enabled, for instance, by their diet, behavior, their avoiding of contact with things considered polluting, etc.). However, they were not explicit about the meaning of the word, and although I see in retrospect that I should have, I unfortunately did not enquire further about it. The importance of purity in practicing *kolu* is confirmed also by the findings of Fuller and Logan in Madurai in the 80's, who state that many of those who did not keep *kolus* near the Mīnākṣī temple explained that they

265 See Malinar 2012.

"could not guarantee the high state of purity" (Fuller and Logan 1985, 84). When I asked if Mrs. Adhilakshmi kept *kolu*, she replied: "We do not, but we come to the temple regularly. Keeping *kolu* means you must be orthodox; you can't be slipshod about it".

Mrs. Adhilakshmi's notion that *kolu* must be practiced "the right way" can also indicate skepticism towards the commercialization of *kolu*, and/or its entertainment aspects, being increasingly represented in the media and extending from homes to the public. From being a purely domestic festival, *kolu* slowly changes its sphere not only to more and more temples, but also to secular public spaces such as schools and banks and is also facing a media rush in newspapers and on television through *kolu* competitions. In Kanchipuram in 2015, I even found a kolu at a petrol station (!). My initial thought was that a petrol station was a rather unexpected location, since *kolus* should be set up at a pure place, being an object of worship. However, as my colleague Guro W. Samuelsen pointed out in a personal conversation: "Why is this strange? Roadside shrines are everywhere." Still, *kolus* are now emerging in very different spheres, and while they are governed by rules of purity in controlled environments within homes (and to a certain degree also in temples, where devotees must take off their shoes, for instance), it appears to be more "casual" with *kolus* on the street or in shops. Perhaps a legitimate distinction is if, as in a home, if a *kolu* takes the center stage, or if it functions more like a decoration (although it may still be an object of worship) in the public?

Recently the practice of *kolu* also attracts people from outside Hinduism,[266] and the doll makers have started to make Jesus images in addition to the more mainstream *kolu* dolls. Although it was not very common, I have seen nativity scenes, Jesus figures as well as Virgin Marys on some *kolus* (figure 6.21). The doll maker Chinnaraj said:

> "Now it is not so that people of one particular caste have to keep [*kolu*]. Now everybody has started keeping it. I know a Christian who had started keeping *kolu*.
>
> I: does he keep Jesus, or these dolls (pointing to the Hindu deities in his showroom)?
>
> C: They keep Jesus as well as these dolls."

266 I also once went *kolu* hopping with my Muslim tailor, who offered to show me *kolus* in her work neighborhood. She took me to three different households, and it was clearly not the first time she visited their *kolus*. This was after I had watched the *āyudha pūjā* in the tailor shop where she works together with a Hindu and a Christian. *Kolu* clearly has appeal across religious boundaries.

Figure 6.21: Christian dolls and nativity set on the *kolu*, 2015.

The doll maker told how he has also started to produce nativity scenes (Ta. "*kuṭil* sets") for Christmas (and in western culture, nativity scenes are quite similar to *kolu*). In an online article Shobha Warrier (2013) similarly reports that doll makers in Chennai have started preparing biblical characters because the Christian community has adopted the tradition of *kolu* for Christmas.[267] This confirms the tendency of appeal of *kolu* dolls throughout religious communities also in other parts of Tamil Nadu.

An elderly Brahmin lady I visited, lamented that *kolu* has become a kind of exhibition display and how its religious aspect are getting sidelined. She said: "It has become a kind of show, with lights and all. It is more important to build parks and zoos than to give *tāmpūlam*." Her own *kolu* was small and low-key, and consisted of about a dozen dolls displayed on a small arrangement of steps in the corner of her kitchen. It was surrounded by ritual equipment such as oil lamps, food, holy water and *Rāmāyaṇa* books she recites from during the festival (Mrs. Indumathi is a *śloka* teacher), as well as plates and trays with gifts

267 http://www.rediff.com/getahead/report/slide-show-1-specials-dying-a-slow-death-a-peek-into-the-life-of-kolu-doll-makers/20131009.htm (accessed 22.08.2022).

for visitors. The pot in which Durgā, Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī were installed was festooned with flowers, leaves and sacred powders. It was clear that her *kolu* was a devotional tool rather than arranged for impressing guests. Mrs. Indumathi's modest *kolu* was however memorable in its humbleness.

Purnima, a female respondent in her 40's, had similar concerns, when she said:

> "Now the dolls have all changed. They have started selling everything in sets. Nowadays it is more of fashion and fancy. In some houses they keep *kolu* with science as theme. If asked, they [would] say that someone in their family is a scientist and hence they have set up this way. Now *kolu* and Navarātri is more about innovative thinking and presenting such skills. It is kind of a competition between the houses that have kolu. The newspapers and media are one most important factor for this mindset, as they promote this by giving gifts and prizes for the best *kolu.* It has now become Navarātri *kolu* plus a science and innovation exhibition."

As is evident from these women, some are of the opinion that there is a contradiction between the purity of ritual and the show-off, commercialization, and entertainment aspects of *kolu*. As explained, I understand their concern about purity to concern the proper conditions for worshipping the *kolu*, which again relates to the social standing of people in terms of ritual purity, or that Brahmins are those most fit for keeping *kolu*. But their skepticism also includes the trend of themes and competitions in *kolu*, which they regard as diminishing the devotional aspects. Contrasting the opinions that show overshadows the religious, or that the consequences of the contemporary popularity of *kolu* reduce the purity of the ritual, I argue that devotion and playfulness are by no means mutually exclusive. They can co-exist, and *kolu* is a perfect example of this intermingling of various sentiments and modes attached to ritual. Playfulness here is considered a mode or an attitude that people may have when they delve into the ritual (cf. Bado-Fralick and Norris 2010, 132), as Mr. Gopinath when he fashions his dolls, and others when they employ their creative skills in fashioning the display of dolls and in fashioning the goddesses-as-pots or oil lamps. This mode of playfulness includes creativity, competition, and aesthetic expression, as I outlined in the introduction. Moreover, as Rodrigues (2018, 409) points out, *kolu* represents "a paradigmatic act of girls' play", namely playing with dolls. Since the goddess is embodied and installed on the display, the devotee can be considered playing with the goddess herself (ibid.).

It should not be underestimated that *kolu* is a ritual practice, although it concerns (also secular, but consecrated) dolls and toys. *Kolu* is a religious ritual,

and its efficacy brings about auspicious results if practiced correctly (which, according to many respondents, is with purity). The people whose *kolus* I visited all appeared pious and sincere about venerating the goddess through keeping *kolu*, while simultaneously many were obviously proud of showing me a good display. There is, importantly, also a "low-key" competition going on apart from the explisit ones in the media: the women who visit each other also judge the different *kolus*.

As explained earlier, people often emphasized how they appreciated having female guests over, that is, they enjoyed the social aspects of an event both religious and joyful. Many also told me how sad they were once they have to part with the dolls. It became clear to me early on that the dolls are considered *more* than just dolls. People would address the dolls in terms of gods or close family relations and consider them to embody powers. As Mrs. Nirmala expressed: "These nine days give me so much joy. For two or three days after keeping back the dolls I will feel very sad, since I will see them only after a year". The anticipation attached to the festival was even followed by fear for some women. An elderly non-Brahmin lady said "if Navarātri is approaching in 9 or 10 days, we get scared. You must take out the dolls, paint them, set [the *kolu*], pay people, and spend money. So, there is fear (Ta. *payam*). We do it because we have to." The general notion is that keeping *kolu* is serious business: you cannot discontinue once you have started, and it should be practiced properly. You are either all in, or you should not keep one – there are no half measures.

Concluding Remarks

A *kolu* displays a *līlā* of the deities: a miniature world played out on a stepped altar, confirming the often-fluid borders between sacred and secular in Hinduism, as secular dolls, like Barbies, are consecrated and become sacred alongside the gods. This is "work done playfully" (Driver 1998, 8, cited in Raj and Dempsey 2010, 5). The ritual of keeping a *kolu* includes a set of "unwritten rules", such as the hierarchy of the steps; the need to buy doll(s) annually; and certain components should be present for what is considered a "proper" *kolu*. The most important would be the steps, keeping the three goddesses Lakṣmī, Durgā and Sarasvatī, as well as presenting the *tāmpūlam* to visitors. In fact, the ritual of presenting the *tāmpūlam* seems to be the one omnipresent element wherever *kolu* is practiced domestically – I have never once visited a *kolu* without being bestowed with gifts on my departure (but importantly, this practice dissapears when *kolus* are set up in temples and other public spaces).

Most respondents also emphasized the importance of giving *tāmpūlam* during *kolu* in interviews.

But the rules may be bent, such as in the case of Gopinath's man-sized figures. He is a Brahmin man who expresses his devotion to Varadarāja Viṣṇu through crafting Varadarāja figures of domestic waste items as *kolu*. Simultaneously, this *kolu* enacts a specific attitude towards environmentalism, and it might even be regarded a failed *kolu*, being largely ignored by orthodox Vaiṣṇavas. Hancock (1999, 252; 2001, 12–13) describes a *kolu* where the dolls and objects were placed on piles of books. Even the dolls may be omitted: for instance, the Tamil newspaper Dinamalar featured in 2015 a *kolu* where various cacti were displayed in flowerpots on the steps, and the Chennai paper Mylapore times featured in 2011 a *kolu* of only framed pictures and one of only miniature silver toys.[268]

I have shown in this chapter how *kolu* comes with a set of varieties through a specific frame, and how people may creatively "push" the frame and interpret its contents. While some dolls are found in nearly every kolu, others display unique dolls and have one-of-a-kind collections. And while some welcome and embrace contemporary changes such as themed *kolus*, spectacle and other commercial aspects, others do not.

268 http://www.mylaporetimes.com/2011/10/navaratri-kolu-gallery-2/ (accessed 23.08.22).

Chapter 7
Newly Started *Kolus*, Brahminization and Adaptions

"*If it were not for our non-vegetarian food habits,*
we'd be like Brahmins in our devotion"

To keep (Ta. *vai*) a *kolu* has predominantly been a practice of Brahmins and other higher castes.[269] The practice has traditionally run hereditarily in the family and been maintained as a life-long commitment. Many non-Brahmin respondents who did not keep *kolu* themselves were still under the opinion that *kolu* is predominantly a Brahmin ritual.

I have shown how keeping *kolu* requires certain orthodox rules of purity, but it also requires a solid income. This is not only to buy new dolls yearly and repaint the old ones to make them look fresh, but also to provide gifts and food for a considerable number of guests, as well as necessities for *pūjās*. One of my standard questions when visiting a *kolu* was which among the dolls were new that particular year. I learned that very few families had bought only a single doll; rather, people bought several, including independent dolls and sets (one of the doll makers in Pommaikaraṉ Street estimated the price range of his dolls from INR 20–10 000). Keeping *kolu* thus demands dedication as well as time and money. However, from being a high caste ritual practice, *kolu* is currently in the process of being taken up by non-Brahmin families who have not kept *kolu* hereditarily, and *kolu* is rapidly increasing in popularity.[270] According to my findings in the field, this has happened in Kanchipuram for the past two decades or so.

During fieldwork I visited several families who had started keeping *kolu* recently. In general, people gave three reasons for why they had started with *kolu*: Some had witnessed Brahmins' *kolus*, after which they (or their children) desired to imitate the same; others had witnessed people in their community

269 See Chettiyar (1973, 100), Reiniche (1979, 51, fn.16) Logan (1980) Tanaka (1999), Hancock (1999), Wilson (2015; 2018), Narayanan (2018), Sivakumar (2018). In Karnataka, however, *goṃbe habba* (Kannada: "festival of dolls") was practiced by many castes (Narayanan 2018, 278).

270 I was told during fieldwork in 2014 that *kolu* in Kanchipuram mainly had been the practice of Brahmins and Chettiyars, as well as a well-known Sah family who had kept for 78 years in 2014 (the owners of a prominent silk emporium in Kanchipuram and, curiously, sponsors of the Vijayadaśamī *alaṃkāra* in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple).

who had recently started with *kolu* and prospered. A third reason was starting with *kolu* as a votive practice; donating or keeping dolls in connections with a vow. Often people also gave a mix of these three reasons. I will discuss newly started *kolus* through detailing a case, before turning to the question of Brahminization, and how *kolu* is appropriated when adopted by non-Brahmins.

An Example: The *Kolus* of Kavitha and Ponnamal

Kavitha, a housewife in her early fourties from the silk worker community Pattunooli (Sah), started with *kolu* in 2010. Initially she bought five sets, before she bought the stairs the second year. In 2014 she had an impressive collection of colorful and freshly painted dolls, covering her entire living room and the hallway. In 2015 it had grown even further, with several Kṛṣṇā *līlā* sets and a huge set of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna from the *Bhagavadgītā* added, among others. On the seven *kolu* steps she keeps quite large dolls depicting deities, but several mythological sets, various pilgrimage places and cultural scenes as well as a cricket set surround the steps on the floor. More dolls are placed on and under a table, and on one of her livingroom walls that is shaped like a shelf. Kavitha's eye-catching Kumbhakarṇa demon doll was manufactured on demand, since she wanted a doll not everyone else had, and her *kolu* was indeed referred to as "the one with the Kumbhakarṇa doll" by others I visited from the same community (see figure 7.1). In the hallway, she keeps village, forest and market scenes, surrounded by light bulbs. She had added to some of the sets using sand, stones and cotton balls, and handwritten signs describing what was depicted. Kavitha prepares for Navarātri 15 days in advance, when she dusts, wipes, and airs her dolls, and repaints their gold. When I asked why she started with *kolu*, she explained that she had watched her Brahmin tenants:

> "We did not have the habit [of keeping *kolu*]. But our Brahmin tenants downstairs used to have *kolu* and at that time a lot of people would come and visit them. After they vacated, I too felt the desire to keep *kolu*, and this desire was there for four years or so. My husband was initially saying that we do not have the habit, but later gave permission. My father-in-law was also for it. […] We had God's permission[271] and our family's permission to keep *kolu*."

271 "God's permission" probably refers to a dream of Kavitha Bhai's daughter. During Navarātri the year before they started keeping *kolu*, Kāmākṣī appeared in the dream and placed *kolu* dolls on their table. After hearing about this dream, Kavitha's husband agreed to keep the *kolu*.

The first time I visited, in 2014, her living room was filled to the brim with women dressed up in beautiful saris and strings of jasmine in their hair, as well as some children. The women were admiring the dolls and photographing them with their cell phones, and Kavitha proudly pointed out specialties in her collection (figure 7.2). Particularly the pink clad Vastugrāhalakṣmī, which was one of the new dolls this year, received much attention. Two elderly women sat down and sang *stotras* before the *kolu* and Kavitha's teenage daughter, neatly dressed in a purple silk sari, distributed chickpeas to all the women who showed up. People came and went while we had an informal interview in midst of the *kolu* arrangements. Kavitha explained that her daughter, too, was keen on starting with *kolu*, before she continued:

> "I had this desire for a long time. I wanted to keep *kolu* grandly and give people things. There is a joy in that. I do not go to temples much, but my husband does. He goes to three or four temples before sitting down to eat *tiffin*. But I cannot go because I do not have the time. […] So, it is like the joy I get in these ten days is the joy of the entire year put together."

On Vijayadaśamī Kavitha moves one of her *kolu* dolls forward (instead of laying it flat), "so that next year more people will come to our house". This day, Kavitha, her husband, and their two children celebrate Sarasvatī Pūjā by placing books and worshipping them in front of the *kolu*. The same day they offer goat meat and whiskey in the *pūjā* room right behind the *kolu*, to honor their family deity Tuljapur Bhavanī, who is installed among the dolls on their *kolu*. This is a caste specific part of their celebrations prevalent among the Sahs and will be discussed further as we proceed.

Kavitha's huge number of dolls only four and five years into her practice indicates her passion for the festival as well as and her household's financial status (her husband works as an electrician). When asked if celebrating Navarātri with such grandeur was not a hassle, she again emphasized her huge interest in the dolls as she replied:

> "It is a big job. People who come home say that once my daughter marries, I will have trouble keeping it. Of course, it is difficult! But I say as long as I have strength in my body, I will do it, because I have a lot of interest in it. The days we did not keep *kolu* at home, I bought dolls for Rs. 5000 and gave [to other's *kolus*]. I did not know that I was going to keep [*kolu*], but I bought dolls for different people. I took so much of interest."

Figure 7.1: Mrs. Kavitha in front of her *kolu*. Kumbhakarṇa doll on the table, 2015.

Figure 7.2: Mrs. Kavitha showing dolls to her guests.
Vastugrāhalakṣmī somewhat in front of the other dolls, 2015.

Figure 7.3: Mrs. Ponnamal's *kolu*, 2014.

Kavitha has eight siblings and tells me three of them keep *kolu*: "they saw me and started keeping, because we don't have the habit at [our natal] home." Her older sister, Ponnamal, was in her second year keeping *kolu* when I visited in 2014. Ponnamal's *kolu* was significantly smaller than her sister's, but consisted of 7 seps displaying deities, with several wedding sets, a village scene and two pairs of Chettiyar dolls on the side (figure 7.3). Ponnamal explained that she had watched Kavitha's *kolu* as well as others, but simultaneously she had the desire to fulfill a vow (Ta. *vēṇṭutal*):[272]

> "I saw lots of others keeping it and then I thought it would be nice too. Also, it is worshipping God for 10 days. […] Some people keep it because they have the practice. In our house we did not have the practice, but I thought: 'let us keep it and see'. I had a vow that if my prayers were fulfilled, I would keep *kolu*, and then I liked it, so I kept it."

To initiate the *kolu* as a vow to the goddess, as Ponnamal did, is a common practice in Kanchipuram today, along with watching Brahmins, as Kavitha, or watching others who have recently started with *kolu*. If the vow is fulfilled, the family will continue the *kolu* tradition. Or, if the family has no desire to keep a *kolu* themselves and meet the financial and ritual requirements, another option is to buy a single doll or a set either for a temple *kolu* or the kolu of friends and relatives to fulfill the vow. Votive dolls like these are also kept on one's *own* kolus once one starts keeping one. Kavitha had, for instance, prayed that a skin problem would improve, and bought a Ramanuja doll for her *kolu* once it did.

272 The word my respondents used for this votive practice was usually a form of the Tamil word for prayer, *vēṇṭutal* (to want, desire, request), such as *nāṅkaḷ vēṇṭitu vāyccōm* (we prayed and kept [the doll]) or *vēṇṭi kuḍukkṟatu* (she prayed and gave [the doll]). As Harman (2006) remarks, the Tamil language has several and more nuanced words denoting the English "vow", and he tracked down no less than 104 Tamil terms referring to vows, many of which are very specific (206, 32).

Figure 7.4: Kalyāna set, 2015.

Figure 7.5: *Sīmanta* set, 2015.

Votive Dolls and the Increasing Popularity of *Kolu*

The votive dolls available on the market are usually wedding sets (Skt. *kalyāna*, Ta. *kalyāṇam*) for marriage, and what respondents would refer to in English as "baby shower" sets (Skt. *sīmanta*, Ta. *cīmantam*, the prenatal *saṃskāra* rite of parting the hair)[273] for conceiving a child (figures 7.4 and 7.5). In addition, Kṛṣṇa baby dolls are popular as prayers for conceiving.[274] Balasubramanian, a hereditary professional doll maker in his mid-fifties working in Pommaikāraṉ Street, told me these sets currently are among the most popular ones among his customers:

> "If people buy a *kalyāna* set and give it to the temple *kolu* then by next year they will surely get married. Or they can keep it in their own house *kolu* and pray. […] Previously the *sīmanta* set was not known but now it is very popular. Those who did not have kids keep the dolls in their own *kolu* or give it to temples. So, the next year they come to us and say that they now have a child."

These types of dolls are usually made in clay, preferably terracotta, as they are then created by earthen clay "with sanctity and good wishes", and the doll makers charge only a token amount, according to Balasubramanian. Once I started inquiring about these dolls, many families told me they had received such sets and dolls from friends and relatives, in particular praying for children and marriage. However, my field interviews indicate that votive dolls are by far most common among non-Brahmin families, among whom many had started recently to keep *kolu*, or do not keep *kolus* themselves. Only a few Brahmin families had heard of it or received such dolls.

On the question of whether the habit of keeping a *kolu* has increased the recent years, the doll maker continued:

> "It has increased. Previously Brahmins used to have the habit of keeping *kolu* and they would be pure and orthodox in the way they practice. But now it has become a fancy thing. Everyone wants to keep it because they see others

273 Interestingly, the *sīmanta* sets depict the rituals of women surrounding this Brahmanical ritual, and not the actual parting of the hair of the pregnant woman, which is performed by male Brahmins and the husband. This reflects the common image of the *kolu* as a female scene.

274 Other sets I encountered that were given to other people's *kolus* as a prayer for conceiving included the golden cradle set and the baby Murukaṉ set (Ta. *caravaṇa poykai*). Although donating dolls for getting children or marriage by far was most common, I also encountered dolls given for curing diseases (Ramanuja), for getting a house (Skt. *gṛhapraveśa*, Ta. *kirahappiravēcam* or "housewarming" set), opening a shop (Gaṇeśa) and for children to study well (Sarasvatī).

> keeping it. You see, unlike other festivals that are just for a day or so, Navarātri is for nine days when people are invited home, *cuṇṭal* is made, children are dressed up. Through these dolls, we understand that there is still divinity and power in this world. We are very happy that we are the instruments of this. We learnt this art [of making dolls] from our parents and we are not very educated. So, we see this as both a commercial venture and a spiritual exercise. Some people come to us and tell us about their problems. We give them dolls and then the following year they come back to us and say that their problems are now solved."

Another doll maker, Chinnaraj, confirmed the tendency: "Now it is not so that people of one particular caste has to keep [*kolu*]. Now everybody has started keeping it." As demonstrated through the case of Mrs. Kavitha, *kolu* is frequently taken up as a ritual practice among non-Brahmin families on the initiatives of their women. While there are probably many reasons for the ongoing popularity of *kolu*, the social aspects at play here should not be underestimated: the fun and joy, the play, and the entertainment and amusement surrounding *kolu*, the receiving of guests, sharing food, gossiping, and dressing up nicely probably all contribute to the appeal of celebrating Navarātri grandly at home with keeping *kolu*, and in particular for women. I therefore suggest that the domestic festival sees a growth in popularity because it is a potential arena for women to meet up and to have fun together and appeals to women because it is a highly auspicious event, revolving around female values and desires. As was explained, several respondents would emphasize having guests over and socializing as a key reason for enjoying *kolu*, or among their reasons for wanting to start with *kolu*, and Kavitha was no exception when she declared:

> "See how many people come home! Yesterday we had guests until 10 in the night. People both known and unknown to us. […] I tell my husband just as I do not interfere in your temple visits, please do not interfere in what I do during these nine days. Let me feel happy at least doing these things."

Some respondents attributed the increase in people who keep *kolu* on the introduction of new media, such as TV shows on religious discourse. Along with spiritual magazines or pamphlets, these create awareness of ritual practices, and, according to some, increased *bhakti*. Non-Brahmin women frequently confront these magazines or pamphlets when adopting the practice of *kolu*, as they explain how to perform certain rituals and which goddess to worship at what day and contain songs and recipes. Mrs. Meena, a non-Brahmin woman who had kept *kolu* for several years, explained:

> "I have a book issued by *cakti vikaṭaṉ*[275] which mentions how each goddess is to be worshipped with *prasāda*, mixed rice, *kolam* etc. We will follow whatever we can from this."

The explosive sale of *kolu* dolls reported by the doll makers might also have increased due to a growth in nuclear families, which means there is a need of more dolls to complete the *kolu*. Finally, keeping *kolu* and its conspicuous display and consumption may contribute to social mobility, which may be another reason for (or consequence of) its appeal.

Kolus, Brahminization and Class Mobility

Once restricted to Brahmins and upper castes, now being adopted by families from communities of various social standing, can the *kolu* be seen as part of a Brahminization or Sanskritization process? After all, many respondents told me, like Mrs. Kavitha did, that they had started keeping *kolu* because they had watched Brahmins do it. Moreover, among those with newly started *kolus*, people would frequently consult with Brahmins when they had questions about their *kolu* and gave reasons like "some things only the Iyers will know" or "there is supposedly an order in keeping the dolls, but only the Iyers know it" in interviews. These women express a hierarchy of knowledge, namely that Brahmins are the carriers of correct ritual knowledge, and when fresh in partaking in this knowledge, they need their guidance. Brahmins would in turn tell me how they were approached by non-Brahmins regarding newly started *kolus*, like the wife of a temple priest in the Ekāmranatha temple: "Our neighbors who are Mudaliars keep *kolu*. They came yesterday and they asked if they could throw the *ārati* on the floor. I told them that they must throw it on the ground." Another Brahmin woman said: "They (non-Brahmins) ask us what kind of *cuṇṭal* to offer, and what they should and should not do." These women also express that caste, and in particular the categories of Brahmin and non-Brahmin, continue to be of great importance when it comes to ritual practices in contemporary society.

In contemporary Tamil Nadu, Brahmin religious practices and the piety attached to them construct a middle-class ideal (Wilson 2015, 26, see also Fuller 1999, Kapadia 1995). Fuller has argued that the appeal of Brahmin cultural capital to a large extent lies in the association between Brahmins and the

275 *Cakti vikaṭaṉ* are spiritual magazines published by the *Ananda Vikaṭaṉ* magazine group, who publish magazines covering several topics. This particular magazine that Mrs. Meena showed me was a Navarātri special that followed a 2012 issue (the full online version can be accessed at http://www.vikatan.com/sakthivikatan/2012-oct-16/navarathiri-special/24388.html (accessed 22.08.2022).

Sanskritic pan-Indian tradition: in particular Sanskritic Hinduism, but also classical music and dance (Fuller 1999, 36).[276] The refinement associated with Brahmins also include appearance and behavior, seen for instance in diet and skin color (1999, 35). Fuller says:

> "There is a consistent tendency to identify Sanskritic Brahminical culture as the core of Tamil 'civilized' high culture, which in many respects is deemed Brahminical because it is high, rather than high because it is Brahminical. For this reason, members of the socio-economic elite, both Brahmin and non-Brahmin, are predisposed to identify their own cultural values as Brahminical, and upwardly mobile non-Brahmins are attracted to those values. Thus we find the modern adoption of Brahminical values by castes attempting 'to appropriate a prestigious cultural style that enhances their change in class status'.'" (Fuller 1999, 36)

Since emulating Brahmanical values in this manner concerns class mobility rather than a rise in caste status, scholars have emphasized that this type of Brahminization is not strict Sanskritization in the sense of Srinivas' definition (Kapadia 1995, 11, 47).[277] It is, however, a concept of social mobility which "is quite prevalent in the social milieu of Tamilnadu" (Wilson 2018, 240). In the following, I employ the concept of Brahminization in a very generic way, indicating a rise in social mobility through emulating Brahmin habits.

As in India in general, there is currently a growing middle class in Tamil Nadu, and a powerful desire to acquire middle class status. This is referred to by scholars as the "new middle class," resulting from economic growth during the 1990's.[278] Today most scholars hold that middle class identity not only

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276 It is, however, important to point out that while high status is considered as Brahmin, there is also much anti-Brahmin rhetoric going on in Tamil Nadu politics.

277 The term "Sanskritization" was introduced in the 1950's by Srinivas (1952, 1956), and indicates a hierarchical movement where people from the lower strata of society attempt to move upwards by adopting the practice, ideas, and beliefs of Brahmins. Srinivas chose the term Sanskritization over Brahminization, since some Vedic rituals are confined to the "twice-born" castes (1952, 30), but the two are used to denote the same process (Staal on the other hand, demonstrates the weaknesses of the term "Sanskritization" in an article from 1963). The concept of Sanskritization has been criticized on various grounds. Srinivas himself recognized its complexity and continued to modify and work on its development. In 1966, he defined Sanskritization broadly as "a process by which a 'low' Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high caste." (Srinivas 1966)

278 Socio-economically between working class and elite, the "old middle class" consists of upper castes (mostly Brahmins) who under British colonial rule and after the independence had access to high education and employment. The "new middle class" is lower in caste, partly because of the Mandal Commission of the 1980's which gave the OBC

concerns economy, but that it also culturally constructed (Fernandes 2000). Middle class identification concerns how people take up values and practices, and how they employ their income to preserve a particular worldview (Wilson 2015, 27). Middle class may thus be viewed as an ongoing "project", something one "performs" through emulating certain values and practices (including ritual), upper class behavior being perceived as Brahmanic; and also through consumption and the use and display of purchases.

Scholars have shown how an increased religiosity focused on showing off one's Hindu identity is spreading through a particular segment of society, namely in middle class households, who are prone to put money into rituals.[279] Minna Säävälä, who has done research on middle class in Hyderabad, argues that middle class religion is closely connected to auspiciousness and earthly success, and that Hinduism particularly provides space for interpreting the sacred in connection with economic success (2010, 174). Sara Dickey has shown how in particular weddings, but also various domestic rituals become arenas to enact middle-class standing and demonstrate financial possibilities (see Dickey 2016, chapter 6). This is very similar to the conspicuous display and consumption of the *kolu*: the number of dolls, the number of steps and the associated gifts communicates a family's ability to finance rituals that are visually rich in their materiality. As Deeksha Sivakumar puts it, the *kolu* "provides a grammar through which displayed materiality can be understood as auspiciousness and wealth" (Sivakumar 2018, 270). Through celebrating the boons a family has received from Lakṣmī with an abundant and prosperous *kolu* display, future prosperity is aspired for, too. Prosperity is reflected in some of the more popular *kolu* dolls themselves these days also, such as Kubera, God of wealth, and Vastugrāhalakṣmī (figure 7.6).[280] This doll, depicting money showering Lakṣmī with her right leg posed as if she is entering the house, should be kept facing the house and not its entrance, as to allow wealth to enter, according to instructions from the doll makers.

(Other Backward Castes) permission to government jobs and education. (Wilson 2015, 28)

279 See, for example, Säävälä 2001, 2010; Dickey 2016. For a discussion on class, caste and gender during Navarātri in Rajasthan, see Ortgren 2018.

280 According to the estimates of the doll maker Balasubramanian, the Vastugrahalakṣmī was one of his two most sold dolls in 2014, along with the Viśvarūpadarśana (Viṣṇu revealing his true form to Arjuna).

Figure 7.6: Vastugrāhalakṣmī, 2015.

Other scholars have pointed out how a household's ability to keep *kolu* may play part in communicating social status (see Hancock 2001, 2, Sivakumar 2018, Wilson 2015, 2018). In her PhD thesis entitled "Middle-Class Identity and Hindu Women's Ritual Practice in South India" (2015), Nicole Wilson locates *kolu* as a crucial site for social change in contemporary South India.[281] Very similar to my own findings in Kanchipuram, Wilson observes how *kolu* currently is adopted by non-Brahmin households in Madurai. In her work she shows how the

281 See also Wilson 2018.

conspicuous consumption of *kolu* contributes to negotiate and communicate the middle-classness[282] and socio-economic standing of families, stating that:

> "While traditionally *kolu*-constructing and viewing has been a higher caste practice, those of the middle class, but perhaps of lower castes, are now locating the festival of Navarātri as a time during which caste stereotypes and practices can be challenged, but class stereotypes can be reaffirmed and class identities can be constructed." (Wilson 2015, 210)

As emphasized earlier, women visiting each other and going from home to home in the evening distinguishes Navarātri from other festivals celebrated in Tamil Nadu. Through *kolu* visits guests easily draw conclusions about other people's social identity, when homes are opened and on display through the creativity of women. Competition is both in the open as well as subtler: people compare and discuss the size of the *kolu*, the number of dolls and the gifts they receive (Hancock 1999, 247, 2001, 2, Wilson 2015, 210), and which *kolus* are "good" *kolus* and with a high number of steps.

Not only the *kolu*, but also a family's interiors are on display, and class status and level of income become easily identifiable for visitors. For example, Hancock (1999, 248) tells of how women during *kolu* viewings "scrutinized the cleanliness and furnishings of each other's home, and the quality of clothing, jewelry, and cosmetics." My field assistant Ms. Vaishnavi would easily identify most homes we visited as upper and lower middle class based on their layout and furnishings, looking for "class identity markers" such as TVs, refrigerators, and other goods. Items such as TVs would sometimes blend in with the *kolu* itself (figure 7.7).

It should also be mentioned that while none of my respondents mentioned class (and I did not ask specifically about it), some women expressed openly, without my asking, how much they had spent on *kolu* dolls and gifts for Navarātri, emphasizing that they were wealthy enough to keep *kolu* in a grand manner.

282 The concept of "middle-classness" was proposed by Fernandes (2006) in order to consider the experience and imagination connected with the middle class. (Brosius 2010, 14)

Figure 7.7: TV forming part of the *kolu*, 2015.

Temple Kolus and Brahminization

Several *ammaṉ* temples may be said to undergo Brahminization, in that more and more temples keep *kolu* during Navarātri, a practice communicating higher forms of Hindu religion.[283] *Kolus* in temples of goddesses served by non-Brahmin priests is a recent phenomenon,[284] and while they have had a *kolu* in the Kāmākṣī temple at least since 2003,[285] it rapidly grew and expaned from one to two *kolus* between my visits in 2009–2015. Since also the Brahmanical Kāmākṣī temple sees a growth in dolls, perhaps *kolus* in temples should not necessarily be interpreted as attempts of Brahminization, but rather seen as an effect of how the general growth in *kolu* now also expands from the domestic

283 See also Wilson 2018, 244.

284 I did not see a single *kolu* during Navarātri in 2011 when I frequented non-Brahmin *ammaṉ* temples in Kanchipuram during fieldwork for my MA thesis on Reṇukā-Māriyammaṉ.

285 My main informant in the Kāmākṣī temple Mr. Sathyamurti Sastrigal could not tell exactly how long the temple had kept *kolu*. A picture from 2003 reveals a small *kolu* which appears to be in its very beginning, consisting of eight dolls on two steps with a stuffed tiger in front.

sphere to the public (of course, these explanations do not rule each other out). As mentioned previously, I for instance saw a *kolu* at a petrol station, hardly a scene for potential Brahminization. Moreover, the growth in votive dolls discussed in previous sections means that more and more dolls are donated to temples. This is a ritual practice following the recent popularity of *kolu* among non-Brahmin households, and people who do not keep *kolu* may engage in the tradition through buying votive dolls to temples or families. Temples could also put up *kolus* to attract people to *their* temple. The two *kolus* of the Kāmākṣī temple were, for instance, huge conversation pieces among devotees, especially families visiting with children. However, further research on *kolus* in temples is required to draw conclusions.

Appropriating the *Kolu*

Does *kolu* change when moving from Brahmin to non-Brahmin hands? What happens to the *kolu* when it is started in households that until now had no share in this tradition? What is consistent in *kolu*, and what changes? Through the case of Mrs. Madhumita's *kolu* and drawing also on the newly started *kolus* of Kavitha and her sister in the discussion, I will demonstrate how this ritual may be appropriated when adopted by non-Brahmins.

Mrs. Madhumita is 32 years old and teaches computer science at an engineering college in Kanchipuram. She got married a couple of years ago and keeps a modest *kolu* in the home she shares with her husband, but the main celebrations take place in her natal home, situated within a walking distance from the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple. Here, she assists her mother in arranging the *kolu* and performing the rituals.

Figure 7.8: Mrs. Madhumita's *kolu*, 2015.

The small living room in Madhumita's natal home is abundant with dolls for Navarātri, and a *kolu* of 7 steps rises in the middle of the room (figure 7.8). The steps are clad with a white and a purple saree and filled with deities, such as the ten descendants of Viṣṇu, the eight forms of goddess Lakṣmī, Māriyammaṉ and Lakṣmīnarasiṃha. On the floor on each side of the steps as well as on a table in the corner are several more dolls, including the *Marappācci* dolls, wedding sets and procession sets, Gaṇeśas and three dominating dolls depicting Aiyappaṉ, Ardhanareśvara (half Śiva, half Śakti) and Rajarajeśvari, which the family had constructed themselves (see figure 7.9). The latter dolls change every year; the previous year they had fashioned the saptakaṉṉikaḷ (the seven sisters). The floor in front of the three dolls is spread with baby dolls, plastic fruits and stuffed animals, and their hallway as well is decorated with children's toys such as trains, Disney figures and a traffic junction with toy rickshaws and cars, as well as a cricket set, the Chettiyar dolls and a village scene. Some of the *kolu* dolls, such as the wedding set, some baby Kṛṣṇas and the Kṛṣṇa *uñcal* (depicting Kṛṣṇas on a swing), have been donated by guests wanting to get married or to conceive a child. In front of the *kolu* on top of the drawn up *kōlam*, stands the *prasāda* offered to the goddess, as well as the *tāmpūlam* plate, prepared with sari, a blouse piece, bananas, jasmines, betel leaves and coconut, and a lit oil lamp. On top of the *kolu* stands the pot in which the goddess is invoked, flanked by images of Mīnākṣī and Kāmākṣī.

But the pot is not the only representation of the goddess in this home during Navarātri. Madhumita is possessed by the goddess during the evening *kolu* visits and speaks *aruḷ vākku* (Ta. "prophecy") for her visitors. One evening when I visited, as Madhumita's mother chanted the *Mahiṣāsuramardinī Stotram*, Madhumita's body suddenly started to gently rock back and forth, her eyes closed, a blissful expression fell over her face, and her tongue occasionally slipped out of her mouth like a lizard searching for an insect. The goddess was quickly welcomed into Madhumita's body as her mother sprinkled her with sacred water, smeared her face, arms and feet with turmeric and vermillion powders, and presented her a plate filled with fruits, a sari, and a spear (Ta. *vēl*) which Madhumita placed near her chest tucked inside her sari blouse. She was thereupon garlanded and received a bunch of *nīm* leaves, and her mother sang some Tamil devotional songs to Māriyammaṉ and waved the *āratī* lamp before Madhumita. Next, a woman among the guests approached the goddess with another plate filled with bananas, apples, a coconut, betel leaves, incense and a sari, which Madhumita as the goddess draped around herself as she continued rocking peacefully back and forth. The woman then joined in a conversation

Figure 7.9: *Kanyā pūjā* in front of Mrs. Madhumita's self-manufactured *kolu* dolls, 2015.

with the goddess, all the while looking deeply moved, joining her palms, almost inaudibly whispering her questions and replies to the goddess (figure 7.10).

It turned out she had trouble with her husband and wanted her family to stick together, and that this was her second approach to the goddess for a solution to this problem. They discussed back and forth how the husband had little time to go to the temple, which was the remedy previously described by the goddess. The goddess stood her ground: "If you follow whatever I say without failure, you will get whatever you want! […] When I say a remedy for someone, they must follow it. If you do not, what can I do? Once you do, come, and tell me!" The woman continued asking for the well-being of her brother and his wife who do not live together anymore, and a baby on behalf of an acquaintance. The goddess seized the opportunity to campaign for more visitors and replied that they had to come and see her themselves: "if she is hungry, can you eat for her?!" And the session continued.

On Vijayadaśamī, the festival's 10th day, Madhumita's mother will perform an *abhiṣeka* for Madhumita as the goddess, with the water from *kalaśa* on the *kolu* in which the goddess has been ritually installed. Madhumita explained in an interview how this ablution is related to the goddess's fight with Mahiṣa:

> "That will be the very grand day, the last day (i.e. Vijayadaśamī). The last day was Mahṣāsuramardini (the killing of the buffalo demon), so ampāḷ (the goddess) will be very angry. To destroy [Mahiṣa], she will be getting more anger, and she will be in an *ugram* state. So, to reduce that, we will have the *kalaca apiṣēkam* (Ta. "ablution from the pot")."

According to Madhumita, people mainly approach her for issues regarding fertility, marriage, disease and getting rid of evil spirits. During Navarātri she receives one family each evening, who sponsor *the* pūjā and brings gifts for the goddess, such as saris, bangles, fruits, flowers, mirrors and vermillion powder. "So many people will come. From abroad also they will come. Dubai and Chennai, and Kanchipuram" Madhumita explained. "That is very special here when comparing to other homes and other *kolus*. Here, Ampāḷ is lively coming, telling *aruḷ vākku* to all those fellows".

Indeed, it was the goddess, possessing Mrs. Madhumita, who told the family to keep *kolu* in the first place: "After getting Ampāḷ on my body (i.e. after getting possessed), Ampāḷ told [us] to keep *kolu*. We have to keep the *kolu*. This is not a home; it is a temple. So, it will look like a temple". This happened 7 or 8 years back. The deities possessing her are Aṅkāḷa Paramēcuvari, Karumāriyammaṉ and Lakṣmīnarasiṃha, and apart from Navarātri evenings, she sometime gets

possessed on full moon days and Tuesdays.[286] The possessions are controlled by Madhumita's mother,[287] and invoked in her through devotional songs.

Figure 7.10: The goddess as Madhumita in session with a client, 2015.

Daily during Navarātri, Madhumita performs a *kanyā pūjā* for her seven-year-old niece who is encouraged to practice yoga or *Bharatanātyam* in front of the display. Once during the festival, she also performs an oil lamp *pūjā* for Lakṣmī in front of the kolu, telling me "I want to get money". Sarasvatī Pūjā is celebrated

286 Madhumita told me she first got possessed after being sick for a several months while in college. It turned out she was affected by black magic (Ta. *ceyviṇai*), which after about 6 months was driven away as the fierce Aṅkāḷa Paramēcuvari entered her body. Later, to balance the goddess's fierceness, which, as she claimed, made Madhumita lust for non-veg, death and blood each time she left the house, the peaceful Karumāriyammaṉ also entered her body. Finally, after Madhumita's mother was told in a dream to bring her daughter to the Lakṣmīnarasiṃha temple in Palayasevaram, Lakṣmīnarasiṃha possessed Madhumita and finally balanced the female deities with a male deity. However, Madhumita told that Lakṣmīnarasiṃha "will also be manifested [in me] as Ampāḷ, because this house is the goddess's. After all, [goddess] Lakṣmī is also there in Lakshmīnarasiṃha".

287 Madhumita's mother also gets possessed occasionally and and gives *aruḷ vākku* as Murukaṉ and *Ugra* Lakṣmīnarasiṃha.

by worshipping a statue of Sarasvatī and distributing pens to the guests. The *pūjās*, the possessions, dancing (Madhumita is a former dancer) and singing goes on through all Navarātri evenings in this household. Madhumita volunteered estimates that she spends INR 50–60 000 yearly for the *kolu*: for decorations, dolls, food, gifts for visitors, for ingredients in *pūjās*. Like so many others, she also shares a particular love for the Navarātri festival and the dolls: "The 10 days will happen very fast. After the 10th day we used to cry because [the dolls] are all like relatives. After putting them to sleep, we will cry."

While Madhumita and her family perform many of the more standard *kolu* rituals, such as the *kanyā pūjā*, which was not very common among people who had recently started with *kolu* but rather among Brahmins, she has also taken a creative turn in incorporating goddess possession and prophecy speaking in her performance of *kolu*, where Madhumita performs as a mediator between other people and the goddess. Deity or spirit possession is a practice commonly associated with lower castes.[288] Unfortunately, I do not know which community Madhumita belongs to. It is, however, plausible to assume she is non-Brahmin, due to the practices of her household (such as possession), their family deity being Aṅkāḷa Paramēcuvari Ammaṉ of Mel Malayanoor (a deity associated with lower castes), and the fact that her father and her husband wore no sacred threads (the sacred thread indicates initiation in Vedic studies). Also, the goddesses possessing her, Aṅkāḷa Paramēcuvari and Karumāriyammaṉ, albeit powerful goddesses, are lower in hierarchy than the Brahmanical goddesses, and associated with lower castes and possession.[289]

Adaptions and Appropriations

We have seen how Madhumita integrates possession and prophecy speaking, practices associated with lower castes, in her performance of *kolu*, traditionally associated with higher castes. If people Brahminize and intend to climb up a social ladder through keeping *kolu*, the ritual itself may rather said to be de-Brahmanized. When people of non-Brahmin communities adopt the practice of *kolu*, they may, as Madhumita, integrate ritual elements rooted in non-Brahmin practice in their performance of this ritual, and adapt the ritual to heir respective caste backgrounds. The most widespread example is the votive *kolu* dolls explored earlier in this section. Keeping or gifting such dolls is a prevalent

288 See Osella and Osella 1999, Ram 2013, Trawick 1992. For Brahmin possession, see Hancock (1999, 144 ff.) and Osella and Osella (2000).

289 And increasingly also the middle class (see Waghorne 2001).

practice among non-Brahmins, and nearly *all* newly started *kolus* I visited had such dolls on them, either bought by the *kolu* owners themselves, or donated by others. On the contrary, very few Brahmin households had such dolls, and many Brahmins did not know that this was a common practice. To keep or gift votive dolls can be seen as extending the auspiciousness generally ascribed to the *kolu* through connecting specific dolls to specific vows.

The offering of meat and alcohol to the goddess, described while discussing Kavitha's *kolu*, is another example of such appropriation. Others I visited from the same community, the Sah's (pattunooli), would also tell me that they offered meat in front of the *kalaśa* or in the *pūjā* room on Vijayadaśamī. Mr. Muthukumar held that this was because the goddess fasts for nine days and is unable to kill the demon until the 10th day when she, in the form of Caṇḍī, drinks the blood of the new demons that emerge from the demon's blood drops. He explained:

> "On the night of the 9th day [of Navarātri] we keep a pot in the *pūjā* room and on the 10th day at noon we offer it meat. Normally, on *amāvācai*, Kārttikai[290] and Fridays we will not eat meat. But if the 10th day is even [on one of these days] we go ahead and eat meat."

The *kolu* of Muthukumar's family, which was in its 7th year in 2015, consisted almost only of deities and included very few "secular" sets. He considered himself a devoted and pious man and said during our interview: "if it were not for our non-vegetarian habits, we'd be like Brahmins in our devotion". Mrs. Meena, another Sah woman, told me that the offering of goat's lungs and liver on Vijayadaśamī equaled the killing (Ta. *pali*) of a sacrificial animal, which they had performed at home in earlier years. She said:

> "We used to kill the animal at home long back but stopped because it is messy. It is a *pali* for Durgā. We also offer *puri*, *vadai* and the like, along with a quarter of liquor, so unlike the Tamils[291] all our people will be happy and drunk that day!"

Kavitha, however, does not install a *kalaśa*, and her offerings are given in front of the images in her *pūjā* room before they are brought out and shown to the kolu.

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290 Kārttikai (Skt. Kṛttikā) is a monthly observance when Kṛttikā is the prevailing *nakṣatra* (Skt. "lunar mansion"). Most significant is Kārttikai tīpam in the moth of Kārttikai, marking how lord Śiva converted himself to an endless flame to prove his supremacy to Brahmā and Viṣṇu.

291 The Sah community immigrated to Tamil Nadu from Maharashtra.

Based on the above examples of possession and prophecy speaking, offering of meat and alcohol, and a votive cult as part of celebrations of *kolu*, I argue that *kolu* does not simply play part in a Brahminization process, which indicates more of a one-way process, that people become more "Brahmin-like" in devotion and habits. Non-Brahmins frequently *add* to the "standard" Brahmin practice and appropriate the ritual. *Kolu* itself may thus be termed as de-Brahmanized; associated with rituals associated with lower castes. Whether or not to term the processes of adopting *kolu* as described here Brahminization or Sanskritization is not crucial; rather, we should acknowledge that adapting a ritual like *kolu* is a creative and dynamic process – not a pure desire to equal or mimic others. The process is more complex, as what we speak of as two separate "strains" do in fact intertwine and influence each other and stand in a reciprocal relationship. Rituals are not static and formalized (Bado-Fralick and Norris 2010, 166); people frequently appropriate rituals, re-interpret them, and make tradition their own, which is what we see in the performance of *kolu*.

Concluding Remarks

Alongside ritual agency, an economic agency becomes visible when it comes to *kolu* as an increasingly popular ritual among non-Brahmin families, on the initiatives of women. Many respondents said they were imitating Brahmins' *kolus*, as *kolu* until recently was, and according to many many still is, a Brahmin tradition. Several scholars have shown how lower castes appropriate ritual practices of higher castes to accumulate cultural capital. Wilson (2015, 2018) has explored the role of *kolu* in this process. Data from Kanchipuram show the same tendency in that people from lower strata of society currently take up *kolu* and exercise a conspicuous display of values through their dolls and associated gift giving.

Going beyond this, I have also explored the dynamics of *kolu* in this setting of change; meaning how *kolu* is appropriated when adopted by non-Brahmin families. Clearly, non-Brahmin women frequently *add* to the ritual, and may incorporate practices derived from their own cultural resources and categories (Säävälä 2001, 316). This includes possession, prophecy speaking, offering of meat and alcohol, and very often votive dolls, particularly connected to marriage and fertility. While *kolu* may be said to take part in a Brahminization process, the ritual itself is not merely mimicked, rather, it is frequently de-Brahmanized. The data presented here thus suggest a multidimensional change beyond, but including, upward caste mobility. Säävälä, too, argues that "high-caste religious practices do not remain untouched by change […] and that to

account for religious changes as manifestations of Sanskritization, or as a flow of practices from the higher to the lower in a simplistic sense only partly accounts for the process" (2010, 173). Although Brahmins are not likely to include possession or non-vegetarian offerings in their practice of *kolu* any time soon, the votive dolls are one aspect of ritual change which is now very widespread in Kanchipuram. This has triggered a change in the doll makers' production due to heavy demand and has very likely contributed to the recent growth of the *kolus* in temples, such as the Kāmākṣī temple.

Chapter 8
Sarasvatī Pūjā: A Festival within the Festival

The morning of Navarātri's ninth day, Mrs. Srividya places a pile of books with pens on top in front of her home altar, housing pictures of Lakṣmī, Māriyammaṉ and Sarasvatī, and brings a plate filled with puffed rice, nine limes and an apple, since Sarasvatī "should be given white *prasāda*". Soon, the room is filled with incense and "*om namaḥ śivāya*" sounds repeatedly from loudspeakers, as Mrs. Srividya, who works as a teacher, starts reciting Tamil *stotras* while throwing rice on the book pile and pens. After continuing this for a while, she blesses a pair of compasses and a pencil, a vegetable cutter (Ta. *aruvāmaṇai*), and a sewing machine, as well as the door into the *pūjā* room, by marking them with turmeric and vermillion. She then recites a *stotra* to Sarasvatī, while throwing rice on Sarasvatī's picture on the altar. After calling her husband and two children in, her son throws rice at the book pile as well, while uttering a silent prayer. These books must not be opened today, but he should read from them tomorrow, on Vijayadaśamī, when all activities that are started are considered particularly prosperous. Mrs. Srividya explains: "Vijayadaśamī is [the day] when all three Śaktis are together, so things begun that day will grow. Since evil was destroyed that day and good was established, it is very good for education." The family throws rice at the picture of Sarasvatī while Mrs. Srividya rings a bell and waves the *āratī* flame in front of the book pile and the altar, and thereupon in front of their spacious *kolu* in the living room next door, their entrance door, and their motor bike and car which are parked right outside. The family then returns to the *pūjā* room, and they all prostrate before the altar.

This *pūjā*, which occurs during Navarātri's ninth day, is known as Sarasvatī Pūjā (Ta. *Caracuvati pūcai*), or *āyudha pūjā* (Ta. *āyuta pūcai*, "blessing of weapons or instruments").

It includes the worship or veneration of books, musical instruments (figure 8.1), and work equipment – indeed all possible tools and instruments may be worshipped – and signifies and brings forth the prosperity of work and learning in the coming year by the grace of the goddess, in tune with her recent victory over evil. After the worship, the books should not be opened and the instruments not played until the next day of Vijayadaśamī, which is considered a "clean slate" and the most auspicious day to start any new undertaking. This,

however, appears not to be the case of rickshaws and other vehicles, which frequently are used the evening of their worship (figure 8.2).

Figure 8.1: *Vīṇā* in front of the *kolu* for Sarasvatī Pūjā, 2014.

Āyudha pūjā and Sarasvatī Pūjā are strictly speaking two different *pūjās* (Diehl 1956), but in contemporary Kanchipuram people may use both terms for this sub-festival. The *āyudha pūjā*, previously a weapon *pūjā* encompassing the worship of the king's weapons, marked the time the king and his armies rode out for war.[292] Today it marks the onset of the fiscal year, and is generally performed in stores and work environments in the evening. Garlanded rickshaws (even "wearing" banana tree trunks) drive through the streets (figure 8.2), and everything from elevators to fire extinguishers, cash registers and sewing machines are painted with *tilakas* (Ta. "marks") of sacred ashes and vermillion powder. Sarasvatī Pūjā is generally performed at home in the morning, when tools related to learning and music are put in front of the home altar or the *kolu*,

292 Some also connect the *āyudha pūjā* to Arjuna's retrival of weapons from a *śamī* tree before the Mahābhārata war (see Biardau 1984 for interesting interpretations in this regard). This link was not made explicit by my respondents, with the exception of one priest of the Āṭi Kāmākṣī temple.

so that Sarasvatī, goddess of knowledge, music, and art, blesses the artifacts. This traditionally marks the beginning of the school year (Skt. *vidyārambha*), and many encourage their children to write their first letters this day.[293] However, as in the home of Mrs. Srividya, objects that could fall into both categories of *pūjā*, may be worshipped simultaneously, despite of the terminology of the *pūjā*.

Figure 8.2: Rickshaw decorated for *āyudha pūjā*, 2014.

293 This day many schools and preschools start their immatriculation, and papers are filled with ads for Vijayadaśamī admissions.

Sarasvatī Pūjā is not limited to *kolu* households. It is tremendously popular, and seems to have been for a long time, and celebrated across class and caste (Sonnerat 1782, Logan 1980, 246, Wilson, 2015, 201).[294] My field interviews too confirm its popularity. A priest explained: "Some people have the habit of keeping *kolu*. It is part of their tradition, and only they keep. But everyone does Sarasvatī Pūjā or *āyudha pūjā*. What they do is, all the tools that are used are kept and worshipped. *Kiyāṉam* (Ta. "wisdom") is Sarasvatī, and that is also important."

As alluded to, Fuller and Logan (1985), Tanaka (1999) and Wilson (2015, 202) all write that Sarasvatī Pūjā is commonly performed by men, and with these rituals, the women's leadership roles in worship during Navarātri is again returned to the hands of men. In my experience from Kanchipuram, domestic Sarasvatī Pūjā is on the contrary more often performed by women or the married couple together, and thus rather prolonging the ritual agency of women than reducing it. *Āyudha pūjā* on the other hand, is more often performed by men, at least this is the case in male dominated work environments.

294 The ritual has its background as a royal ritual that signalized the onset of war after the rainy season (see Gengnagel 2013, Kane 1974, 190).

Concluding Remarks: The Play of the Feminine

The Navarātri festival is a manifold and complex cultural performance, viewed here as a celebration of feminine powers in association with the goddess, and as a festival intimately connected to female religious agency. I have focused on three broader themes which intersect and play into each other: first, the goddess's *līlā* in mythological narratives and ritual performance; second, roles, agency, and images of the feminine as expressed during the festival; and third, playfulness of Navarātri rituals, as articulated in competition, creativity, and aesthetic and dramatic expressions. In the following, I link my main findings to some final reflections.

This book offers only a snapshot of a tremendously diverse festival at a particular space and time. Many themes which are mentioned only briefly in here would benefit from closer investigation and analysis, including, for instance, the transformation of *kolu* from domestic to public spaces and the *kolu* doll makers' livelihood and production. Also, a bigger project on transformations in *alaṃkāra*, a topic which along with *kolu* is under-researched, would be fruitful and inspiring. Moreover, the texts pertaining to Kāmākṣī temple, the *KV* and the *SC*, yields full translations into English.

While Navarātri is celebrated wherever Hindus settle in the diaspora, research on Tamil Navarātri in the South Asian diaspora is scarce.[295] Festivals play important parts in establishing an identity in a new country, and it seems to be a strong demand for an "authentic" Tamil festival (Jacobsen 2008, 197–200). Still, Navarātri transforms rapidly both in India and abroad, and calls for future research.

The Nature of the Divine Feminine

We encounter several manifestations of the goddess in Navarātri myths and rituals. She is a warrior and conqueror of demons, but she is also the goddess of domestic concerns and fertility. *Kolu* rituals revolve around the goddess's auspicious powers, particularly concerning fertility, *sumaṅgalī*-hood, and domestic wellbeing. Navarātri is popularly said to honor Lakṣmī, goddess of wealth and fortune, Sarasvatī, goddess of learning, and the warrior goddess Durgā as

295 The examples I am aware of are Logan 1988 and Sivakumar 2018.

Mahiṣasuramardinī. The goddess is encountered in all these forms during the festival, at different times and in different contexts. The goddess's fierce powers are not very pronounced in the domestic celebrations yet reflected in the offering of "hot" *cuṇṭal* to women (and the goddess) as to increase their *śakti* and identify them with the divine feminine. In temples where the fight between the goddess and the demon is enacted ritually, as in the Kāmākṣī and Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temples, the benevolent goddess is destined to fight.

Slaying demons is the purpose of the goddess's manifestation in myth after myth; and a necessity for restoring the world order.[296] The goddess's inclination for violence is treated in different ways in the two temples, where Kāmākṣī and Pāṭavēṭṭammaṉ are manifest in peaceful forms. In the Brahmin Kāmākṣī Ammaṉ temple an anxiety over the goddess's destructive purpose lingers, and it seems important for the priests to maintain Kāmākṣī's benign nature. Here, even though Kāmākṣī fights the demon on Navarātri evenings as a public spectacle in the temple courtyard, the goddess's fierceness is not made too pronounced. For instance, the battle scenes are absent in Kāmākṣī's myths, and myth and ritual offer varied interpretations as to if and how Kāmākṣī kills the demon. For this deed she must atone, and one role of the *vaṉṉi* tree, which also serves as the demon's vegetable double, is to relieve the goddess from sin. The ritual handbook *Saubhāgyacintāmaṇi* mentions no ritual killing of the demon or any *vaṉṉi* tree. This handbook does, however, prescribe a Vijayadaśamī ritual sacrifice in a forest outside the city borders.[297] This reflects how violence encroaches upon civilized life and belongs to the *araṇya* (wilderness).

The more ambivalent Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ on the other hand, manifests in her non-Brahmin priest and undeniably kills the demon as a ritually infused banana tree in front of everyone's eyes. Suitably, the ritual is colloquially referred to as *vatam* (Ta. "murder"). The following day, the goddess's heat and wrath is cooled and appeased and she re-assumes her calm year-round state; no atonement is needed. The two temples therefore deal with the goddess's violence quite differently.

While the goddess's violence is baffling in the context of the temples, in the Brahmanical Kāmākṣi temple more so than in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple,

296 I wish to thank Raj Balkaran for bringing to my attention the Brahmin versus non-Brahmin treatments of violence in his response to my presentation during a Navarātri workshop in Paris, August 20–22, 2015. Some reflections in this paragraph and the next are modeled on his response.

297 This parallells the scene at the end of the *DM* where King Suratha worships the goddess in the forest and sacrifices the blood of his own limbs to receive the goddess's grace (*DM* 13.10–11).

ultimately, the goddess assuming fierce forms for accomplishing the task of killing demons does not contradict her manifestations as peaceful. The goddess's identity is strong precisely because she has infinitely diverse forms (see Michaels 2004, 224) and this is both an expression and a consequence of her powers. The goddess, as the supreme creator, transcends the boundaries of forms and characteristics.[298] Thus in myth and ritual we meet Kāmākṣī as Lalitātripurasundarī, Mahābhairava, as maiden (Balā), and even as the warrior goddess Durgā, and Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ as the fierce Kāḷi, dancing on the corpse of Śiva. Furthermore, through her varied Navarātri *alaṃkāras*, the supreme *śakti* is distinguished as one Great Goddess and a myriad of forms (L'Hernault and Reiniche 1999, 170). Through this ritual, the goddess, like the buffalo demon of the *Devīmāhātmya*, is shapeshifting during the nine-day battle.

After sketching an impression of domestic Navarātri rituals as accomodating an auspicious goddess and temple rituals accomodating a (temporarily) fierce goddess, I discuss here the distinction proposed by Fuller and Logan in their influential article on Navarātri in Madurai (1985): the Mīnākṣī temple and the surrounding homes form complimentary spheres during the Navarātri festival. While goddess Mīnākṣī battles demons within the temple premises, the world order is maintained at home with the entirely auspicious *kolu*. While their theory at first sight also seems to fit the instances of Navarātri in Kanchipuram, a closer look at contemporary practices does not allow us to draw such clear-cut boundaries. First, because the fertility, auspicious and creative powers of goddesses and women are hinted at also in temple rituals: the priests of the Kāmākṣī temple worship potentially fertile prepubescent girls, along with child-bearing auspicious married women, and lamp *pūjās* to Lakṣmī are held in many temples during Navarātri time. Fertility is also an issue in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple, where the women, in order cool down the goddess offer her milk, the signifier of motherhood.[299] It should also be mentioned that the installation of goddess in pots, or "wombs", which is so important during this festival (while this is by no means exclusive to Navarātri) carry strong associations with fertility and fecundity in earth, soil, and women (Rodrigues 2005,

298 The characteristics of *ugra* and *śānta* are also imposed onto the goddesses by the priests. However, even though Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ is peaceful, devotees take care not to offend her and act cautiously in her presence to avert her harm. This suggests that the dichotomy of *ugra-śānta* is too simplistic and fails to recognize the much wider repertoire of actions a single goddess is capable of.

299 This argument is following Hüsken (2018), who argues similarly regarding the *viśvarūpadarśaṇa* in the Varadarāja temple. There a cow, a calf and the goddess are venerated together during the Navarātri celebrations.

98). Secondly, most temples in Kanchipuram do not enact the goddess's fight with the demon and hence have no particular emphasis on battle. Instead, the immensely popular *alaṃkāras* are the main attraction in nearly *all* temples that celebrate Navarātri. Furthermore, many households which are connected to temples where the fight *is* enacted do not keep *kolu* (this is for instance the case in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple). The contrast drawn by Fuller and Logan between harmony and order in homes and battle and subjugation of demons in temples is therefore too sharp when it comes to contemporary Kanchipuram.

The Religious Agency of Women and Feminine Power

Many respondents in Kanchipuram stressed the connections between women and Navarātri. Values and concerns commonly attributed to women are emphasized and expressed throughout the festival. Girls and women are identified with and treated as the goddess, and in the context of the *kolu*, women act as ritual specialists and as guests and hosts. These culturally dubbed female concerns include the well-being of the family and the prosperity of the household, women's roles as wives and mothers, the wish to gain and maintain the status of the auspicious and fertile *sumaṅgalī*, and feminine beauty. This all confirms a stereotype of female religiosity, emphasizing women's important relationships and the domestic realm, around which their everyday life revolves. While particularly the *kolu* and its auspicious rituals are performed on the household-level promoting these female values, they are also expressed in the context of vows manifested in the milk pot and piercing rituals of the Paḍavēṭṭammaṉ temple, and in the *pūjās* performed to women in the Kāmākṣī temple.

Accordingly, women exercise religious agency in many ways during Navarātri: they are recipients of *pūjās*, they are performers, they are consumers and audience, and they are authors of tradition. I have called attention to a ritual agency in the varied ritual roles of women, an economic agency in adhering to the requirements for keeping or starting *kolu*, and an aesthetic agency in creatively fashioning doll displays and other forms of the goddess. Women's agency is here considered as reaching beyond free will and resistance. Women maneuver for power within existing social structures and life circumstances, and their agency may even be present in conformity and the ability to maintain things, with active, transformative, and creative aspects. My view here thus contrasts with Tanaka's that the festival "demonstrates the limitation of women" (1999, 134) in that it does not openly challenge patriarchy. *Kolu* may

be said to reaffirm stereotypical patterns[300] but women gain and enact power as *sumaṅgalīs* as they appropriate the goddess's powers.

Kolu also reveals the dynamics at play between higher and lower castes and classes. Once restricted to Brahmins and higher castes, *kolu* has for the past few decades been taken up by families of various social standings on the initiative of women and seems only to be increasing in popularity. Its appeal lies, I have argued, in its social dimensions as an arena where women meet, chat, dress up nicely, enjoy the displays and sing together, in the sentimental love many women cultivate for the dolls, and in the desire to appropriate the auspicious powers of the goddess with a prosperous display. This, too, is agency. Several women also appropriate this ritual to accumulate cultural capital in their performance of a middle-class identiy. In that *kolu* is associated with higher castes, it may be said to form part of a Brahminization process. However, *kolu* is often re-invented by these women to include caste-specific practices includeing possession and non-vegetarian offerings. I have therefore suggested that we have here a multi-dimensional change beyond, but including, the one-way process of upward caste mobility.

While it is not surprising that women are ritual specialists at homes, Navarātri also exemplifies agency of women in the male dominated context of a Hindu temple. While in the Kāmākṣī temple ritual agency almost exclusively belongs to male Brahmanic priests, their worship of *sumaṅgalīs* and prepubescent girls shows more emphasis on women than during the rest of the ritual year. In the temple of Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ, devotees are actively involved in ritual activities, and women have own rituals reserved to them. Through the ethnographic data we thus catch a glimpse of a sliding scale of female agency from Brahmin temples to non-Brahmin temples and homes: in the Kāmākṣī temple, daily *pūjās* are performed to women, whereas in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple, several rituals, including an elaborate milk *abhiṣeka*, are performed entirely *by* women. In the female sphere of the home, we have the rituals of the *kolu*, performed entirely *by* and *for* women.

In that this festival has long and continuous associations with power and venerates a goddess who is strongly associated with empowerment,[301] I extend

300 *Kolu* can, of course, be interpreted or used differently, see for instance the Occupy Navarātri campaign mentioned previously: https://www.occupynavratri.com/ (accessed 30.08.2022).

301 For example, see the conclusion of Rodrigues (2018) and several of the articles in the volume "Nine Nights of the Goddess. The Navarātri festival in South Asia" (2018). From medieval kingdoms to contemporary polititians, buisnesses, neighborhood communities, and the very recent Mahiṣa Pūjā, where Dalit groups seek empowerment through

this connotation to female power: with the temple-like *kolu*, homes, too, become centers of power, and through these rituals, women establish order in their homes as goddesses or as queens of the home (Ta. *illattaraci*). I have termed Navarātri a "power event" (Reynolds 1980, 50), in which women do not only worship the goddess, but ritually *become* the goddess, and appropriate her powers. Although such identification and appropriation also happen in temple contexts, it is most visible in *kolu*, which is one ritual with which women re-affirm their nature as auspicious female beings. For many married women, *kolu* and thus Navarātri is among the most significant of annual rituals (socially and ritually); it is celebrated for a prolonged period with emphasis on friendships, dolls and connecting women with the goddess, distinguishing it from other festivals.

The myriad activities of women out and about during Navarātri can moreover be seen as paralleling the goddess's emergence to fight evil demons. While women who are not at work are not commonly seen in the streets when it is dark, during this festival there is an emergence of the goddess as women in a host of locations and forms: an "external display" of the feminine. Women dress up in their finest and claim the streets in the evening as they visit illuminated *kolus*[302] and temples. This, too, can be seen as cyclically and symbolically defeating evil and darkness during the inauspicious autumn months.[303] Knowing that the myth of the goddess and the demon often is internalized as an allegory of defeating ego and how women would identify with the theme of subjugation of darkness and inauspicious forces, as shown in chapter 2, such a parallel is not far-fetched.

reversing the narrative of the goddess and Mahiṣa, the festival and its associated myths have been utilized for power.

302 *Kolus* are often illuminated with light chains. Usually, oil lamps are also lit.

303 Although Navarātri is considered an auspicious time for worshipping the goddess, the festival falls on an inauspicious time of the year. The solar year is divided in two and corresponds to a day of a deity where the bright half is considered the daytime and the dark half the nighttime. Navarātri occurs close to autumn equinox, corresponding to the gods' midnight, a highly inauspicious time of potential danger when demons may thrive in the dark and the gods are vulnerable (Fuller 1992, 110, see also Balkaran 2018, 23–24). The festival is moreover celebrated immediately after the *pitṛpakṣa* (fortnight of the ancestors), considered highly inauspicious due to the rituals performed to dead ancestors (see Narayanan 2018).

The Festive Play

In Navarātri display and play are brought together (Rodrigues 2018, 324). With the concept of *līlā* the world becomes the goddess's stage, and creation, manifestation, and dissolution her play. Likewise, play is an important expression of rituals, and therefore of religious agency. The playful or creative potential inherent in ritual is particularly visible in religious festivals, maybe because they contain many various rituals – or because of their liminal frame as a time set apart. Play and ritual are viewed here as open and inclusive categories, overlapping with for example festival, performance, celebration, spectacle.

Playfulness is however more evident in some rituals than others. While I in the following focus on *kolu* and *alaṃkāra*, ritual fields of imagination which particularly express an aesthetic playfulness, Navarātri also encompasses dramatic displays and dramatic playfulness. This includes fights as public spectacles and vows on exhibition through ritual piercings. It should also be emphasized how Navarātri is filled with music, chanting, singing and dance. This goes on in homes in front of the *kolu* where even field researchers are expected to sing, and in temples and other public venues. Performing arts are a significant part in domestic and public Navarātri celebrations, and the festival glorifies the goddess of music and arts with an own commemoration on the ninth day.

In *kolu* mythological narratives unfold visually, family narratives are imagined, and worldviews, hopes and dreams are expressed. *Kolus* are not just displays of a *līlā* but may be statements and provide opportunities to reflect on contemporary matters. Despite the many unwritten rules of this ritual, includeing the hierarchy of the display and its purity connotations, the ritual is flexible with room for improvisation and subversion in its performance. *Kolu* includes implicit and explicit competition, and women creatively fashion themes and add on to their dolls in their search for a good display. This playfulness engages people and draws people to action. Therefore, we can see play as an expression of agency. While play is usually characterized as joyful and even seemingly purposeless, it is not trivial, and can even be empowering. However, while there beyond any doubt is much joy and anticipation surrounding the ritual of *kolu*, my respondents simultaneously considered it demanding to keep one. *Kolu* thus neatly exemplify the blend of efficacy, *bhakti*, and entertainment within a ritual – as work done playfully.

With Navarātri *alaṃkāras*, the goddess's statue is adorned excessively in new clothes, fresh flowers, and jewelry, offering for devotees a new and creative look at their beloved deity. These ritual decorations may be stereotypic, as

those of Kāmākṣī, or avant-garde, as those of Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ, which are themed and sometimes decorate the sanctum along with the goddess. In any case, *alaṃkāras* attract devotees to the temples during festival times. These *alaṃkāras* do not only seek to entertain, but project layers of presence onto the image of the goddess and enhance her presence in the devotees' experience of *darśana*.

In the case of Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ, fierceness is temporarily projected onto the goddess as she transforms to different *śaktis*, leading up to her fight with the demon as the ferocious Kāḷi. Kāmākṣī's decorations on the other hand give prominence to forms of herself which pertain to local mythology and history, but also include Durgā and Sarasvatī. I have argued that the difference in *alaṃkāra* styles and practices apparent between Brahmin and non-Brahmin temples lies in how independent goddesses kills the demon themselves whereas Brahmanical married goddesses do not. Kāmākṣī is in this regard in a middle position, because of her independence and her origin as a fierce deity.

Kolu and *alaṃkāra* both conform to the emphasis on ritual display and conspicuous devotion emerging in contemporary Tamil Nadu. *Kolu* plays part in constructing and communicating middle class identities, and temples incorporate for example huge posters, temple decorations, printed programs, staged entertainment, and, for entertaining children, bouncing castles and merry-go-rounds in their Navarātri celebrations. These are signs of temples receiving extensive donations and families' desires for a display to reflect one's financial possibilities, but simultaneously point to the significance of display and the playful dimensions of this festival.

Līlā is commonly understood as the play of the divine, akin to the purposeless play of children. However, as alluded to by Rodrigues (2018, 324–325), we can also understand *līlā* as actual child's play. Human beings are the Goddess's children in the context of goddess worship, and our activities could be construed as child's play in the presence of the Goddess. Thus Navarātri, with its accentuation on creative *alaṃkāra* designs and *kolu* displays, dramatic enactments, and performing arts can be seen as honoring and celebrating, even paralleling, the goddess's cosmic *līlā*. And metaphysically speaking, if the goddess is the ultimate creator of the universe, we can all be considered her puppets, and all our activities are essentially her *līlā*.

Glossary of Recurring Terms

abhiṣeka (Skt.), *apiṣēkam* (Ta.)	ritual bathing of a deity
alaṃkāra (Skt.), *alaṅkāram* (Ta.)	ornamentation, ritual decoration of a deity
amāvācai (Ta.)	new moon day
ammaṉ (Ta.)	goddess, more common term than *ampāḷ*
ampāḷ (Ta.)	goddess, more Brahmanical term than *ammaṉ*
aruḷ vākku (Ta.)	oracular speech
asura (Skt.), *curaṉ* (Ta.)	demon
āratī (Skt.), *āratti* (Ta.)	ritual of circulating a burning lamp in front of a deity
bhakti (Skt.)	devotion
cuṇṭal (Ta.)	dish of pulses and legumes
curasaṃhāra (Ta.)	ritual fight between deity and a demon
darśaṇa (Skt.)	auspicious viewing
homa (Skt.)	fire sacrifice
kalaśa (Skt.), *kalacam* (Ta.)	pot
kanyā (Skt.), *kaṉṉi* (Ta.)	girl below the age of puberty
kāppu (Ta.) *rakṣabandha* (Skt.)	protective cord tied around the wrist
kolu (Ta.)	tiered display of dolls
kuṅkumam (Ta.)	vermillion powder
līlā (Skt.)	divine play
mūlamūrti (Skt.), *mūlavar*, *mūlapēram* (Ta.)	lit. “root image”, immovable image of the deity installed in a temple
nōṉpu (Ta.)	ritual fast of women
paṇḍal	temporary structures set up for venerating a deity
pommai (Ta.)	doll
prasāda (Skt.), *piracātam* (Ta.)	food offered to a deity distributed to devotees for consumption
pūjā (Skt.), *pūcai* (Ta.)	ritual of devotional worship
pūjāri (Ta.)	officiating non-Brahmin priest in goddess temples
Puraṭṭāci (Ta.)	Tamil month September-October

śakti (Skt.), *catti, cakti* (Ta.)	feminine power, the supreme female energy
śānta, saumya (Skt.), *cāntam* (Ta.)	benevolent, peaceful, characteristic of the goddess
śrīcakra (Skt.)	three dimensional mystical diagram of the *Śrīvidyā* school
Śrīvidyā (Skt.)	auspicious wisdom, a tantric tradition of goddess worship
sthalapurāṇa, māhātmya (Skt.), *talapurāṇam* (Ta.)	texts that tell the origin of Tamil shrines, sub-genre of *purāṇas*
sumaṅgalī, *suvāsinī* (Skt.), *cumaṅkali* (Ta.)	auspicious married woman
tāmpūlam (Ta.)	offering of betel and auspicious gifts
ugra (Skt.), *ukkiram* (Ta.)	fierce, malevolent, characteristic of the goddess
utsava (Skt.), *uṟcavam* (Ta.)	religious festival
utsavamūrti (Skt.), *urcavapēram* (Ta.)	procession image of the temple deity
vāhana (Skt.), *vākaṉam* (Ta.)	vehicle (of the god)
vrata (Skt.), *viratam* (Ta.)	vow
Vijayadaśamī (Skt.), Vicayatacami (Ta.)	final commemoration day of the goddses's victory
yāgaśālā (Skt.)	sacrificial hall

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In Tamil Nadu, the nine-night autumnal Navarātri festival can be viewed as a celebration of feminine powers in association with the goddess. This book explores Navarātri as it is celebrated in the South Indian temple town of Kanchipuram. It investigates the local mythologies of the goddess, two temple celebrations, and the domestic ritual practice known as *kolu* (doll displays). The author highlights three intersecting themes: namely the play of the goddess in myth and ritual, the religious agency and images of women and the divine feminine, and notions of playfulness in Navarātri rituals; as articulated in creativity, aesthetics, competition, and dramatic expressions.

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