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).

Published in: Ina Marie Lunde Ilkama: The Play of the Feminine: Navarātri in Kanchipuram, Heidelberg: Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing, 2023. DOI: https://doi.org/10.11588/hasp.1167.

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.