

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 Pommaikaran 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, *gombe 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 Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ 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 forties 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 *lilā* 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 permission²⁷¹ 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. Vasturāhalakṣmī 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. *vēṇṭatal*):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, *vēṇṭatal* (to want, desire, request), such as *nāṅkaḷ vēṇṭitu vāyccōm* (we prayed and kept [the doll]) or *vēṇṭi kuḍukkṛatu* (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 Pommaikāraṅ 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 Murukaṅ set (Ta. *caravaṇa poykaī*). 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. *grhapraveśa*, 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, *cunṭal* 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 vikaṭaṇ*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 Muddaliars 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 *cunṭal* 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 vikaṭaṇ* are spiritual magazines published by the *Ananda Vikaṭaṇ* 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 Sanskrit 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 Sanskrit 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 Brahminical 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

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: Vastugrahālakṣmī, 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-classness²⁸² 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 *ammaṅ* 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 expanded 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 *ammaṅ* temples in Kanchipuram during fieldwork for my MA thesis on Reṇukā-Māriyammaṅ.

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 Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ 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, Māriyamman and Lakṣmīnarasimha. 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 Aiyappaṇ, 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 *saptakaṇṇikaḷ* (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, jasmynes, 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 *Mahiṣāsūramardinī 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 vermilion powders, and presented her a plate filled with fruits, a sari, and a spear (Ta. *vēḷ*) 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 Māriyamman 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 Mahṣāsūramardini (the killing of the buffalo demon), so ampāl (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 vermilion 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, Ampāl is lively coming, telling *aruḷ vākkū* 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 Ampāl on my body (i.e. after getting possessed), Ampāl 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 Paramēcuvāri, Karumāriyamman and Lakṣmīnaraśimha, 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 *Bharatanāṭyam* 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 Āṅkāḷa 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 Karumāriyamman also entered her body. Finally, after Madhumita's mother was told in a dream to bring her daughter to the Lakṣmīnaraṣiṃha temple in Palayasevaram, Lakṣmīnaraṣiṃha possessed Madhumita and finally balanced the female deities with a male deity. However, Madhumita told that Lakṣmīnaraṣiṃha “will also be manifested [in me] as Ampā], because this house is the goddess's. After all, [goddess] Lakṣmī is also there in Lakṣmīnaraṣiṃha”.

287 Madhumita's mother also gets possessed occasionally and gives *aruḷ vāḱku* as Murukaṅ and *Ugra* Lakṣmīnaraṣiṃha.

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 Ammaṅ 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 Karumāriyammaṅ, 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 their 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*, Kārttikai²⁹⁰ 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 Tamils²⁹¹ 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*.

290 Kārttikai (Skt. Kṛttikā) is a monthly observance when Kṛttikā is the prevailing *nakṣatra* (Skt. “lunar mansion”). Most significant is Kārttikai tīpam in the month 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 *kolū* 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.