Conclusion

Based on anthropological fieldwork and textual studies, this publication has examined the celebration of the deities' marriage at the annual festival at the Ekāmranātha temple in Kanchipuram. My objective has been to investigate various relations that are established and expressed through the re-enactment of the divine marriage—relations between deities, and also relations of participants and donors to the deities and the temple. Moreover, I examined the relation and interplay of different sources that inform the contemporary rituals. I have argued that the re-enactment of the deities' marriage is a means to create and transmit a specific form of cultural knowledge, which is in constant dialogue with other cultural productions, such as written mythological texts, oral narratives, iconographic images and discourses. Various interpretations and meanings are offered through the variety of available media. Additionally, each medium provides a range of possible interpretations, depending on the interpreter's points of view. Through this open-endedness, cultural knowledge is produced in a highly dynamic process that brings the tradition up to date while maintaining continuity with the past.

This study is located in the present, but throughout I have also aimed to include a historical perspective. I analyzed a wide range of source material, such as mythological texts, hymns, a poem, epigraphical records, reports, iconographic images, and observed rituals, collected oral narratives, and conducted interviews. The combination of these sources provides as detailed a picture as possible of the divine marriage as seen from different perspectives. In the following sections, I will link together the main findings of the different chapters.

The actual performance of the divine marriage

As outlined in the introduction, a main objective of this research project has been the analysis of the contemporary rituals and re-enactment of the divine marriage at the Ekāmranātha temple festival. This study has shown that the local context has a strong impact on the performance of the festival's rituals. The temple's priests refer to the ritual handbook *Mahotsavavidhi* for the conduct of the festival, but attach at the same time great importance to the temple's local traditions. The ritual handbook provides a structure that allows for the integration of place's and temple's specific features, which makes the festival special for the respective worshipping community. Moreover, local issues and potential conflicts can thereby be expressed and negotiated, as interactions with other deities during the festival indicate.

The rituals performed by the Ekāmranātha temple's priests are not the only ritual activities taking place on Paṅkuṇi Uttiram. This fact is often not taken into account by other studies, many of which provide normative ritual descriptions and thereby often represent the perspective of the festival's priests, a perspective that is also foregrounded in the ritual handbook. In particular, donors, and other participating groups, engage in ritual activities, some of which begin at their homes or in the local community temple, until they come

together with those rituals performed at the Ekāmranātha temple. They contribute to the complexity of the festival with ritual elements from their own, often caste-specific traditions. This specific form of participation of course shapes the perspectives of the diverse groups. There is not one, but many festivals celebrated on this occasion.

I argue that the divine marriage festival embraces various ritual activities that reach far beyond the 'mere' re-enactment of the deities' marriage and related key scenes of the 'marriage myth'. Interweaved are ritual elements of the folk tradition, oral narratives, and life-cycle rituals such as (human) marriages. Only the combination of these various ritual and narrative elements, and the interplay of various actors, such as priests, donors, musicians, participants, and so on, make the actual performance of the divine marriage on Paṅkuṉi Uttiram.

The deities' relations

Ekāmranātha and Kāmākṣī are *the* divine couple of Kanchipuram, at least they are known as such on a supra-regional level. On a local scale, however, their relation is more complex and differentiated. In the contemporary performance of the divine marriage, Ekāmranātha is getting married to Ēlavārkuḻali, his consort housed in a shrine at the Ekāmranātha temple, and not to Kāmākṣī. Kāmākṣī attends the wedding as bridesmaid, and, in fact, never meets or interacts with Ekāmranātha. The ritual performance represents Kāmākṣī as an independent, unmarried goddess. By contrast, most textual sources represent Kāmākṣī as Ekāmranātha's bride. Their union is announced on festival posters and promoted in several written sources. Local participants, however, clearly recognize Ēlavārkuḻali as the bride in the marriage rituals and seem to relate to her more than to Kāmākṣī. In my view, Kāmākṣī has moved beyond the stage of a local goddess, or as the main donor of the marriage phrased it: 'Kāmākṣī is a general thing. Throughout the world it is known, if there is Īśvara (Śiva) it is Kāmākṣī.'[1] Ēlavārkuḻali took her place as the local bride, and is either identified with Kāmākṣī or claimed to be Ekāmranātha's second wife to maintain continuity with the tradition. Historically, one reason for the introduction of the new bride was the relocation of Baṅgāru Kāmākṣī, the former festival statue doing the marriage rituals. However, this is hardly known to participants and at present is not promoted by priests. This policy is in the interest of the Kāmākṣī temple priests, who follow another ritual tradition than the Ekāmranātha temple and tend to keep quiet about connections between the two temples, since this also reinforces Kāmākṣī's status as powerful, unmarried goddess.

Nevertheless, Kāmākṣī is still involved in the marriage; she joins the bridal procession with Āti Kāmākṣī Kāḷikāmpāḷ as bridesmaid. Both goddesses share similarities, and are linked to each other through the 'marriage myth' and the 'taming' legend of Śaṅkara. However, whether one was the 'original' goddess of Kanchipuram will probably never be known. Moreover, there are many questions related to Kāmākṣī that need further investigation. One of these questions is her sudden popularity. Was this caused by royal Vijayanagara sponsorship, or perhaps by the identification with Śrīvidyā and promotion through the Śaṅkara Maṭha? At present, Ēlavārkuḻali and Āti Kāmākṣī Kāḷikāmpāḷ benefit from being linked to the supra-regional renowned goddess, Kāmākṣī. The three goddesses

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1   Interview with R. Narayanan, 18.03.2010.

are closely related, though their relationship is not clearly defined and remains open to change.

Social dimensions of the divine marriage

One characteristic I encountered throughout the study is the coexistence of different views, claims, myths and narratives. To continue with the example of the goddesses' relations: Priests of the Kāmākṣī temple object that Kāḷikāmpāḷ now uses the name prefix Āti Kāmākṣī, and of the announcement on the festival posters, one priest commented: 'Everybody gets the impression that he (Ekāmranātha) is getting married to Kāmākṣī, which is not so.'[2] Obviously, they advocate Kāmākṣī's status as supreme, unmarried goddess. Yet, they do not interfere in the policy of the other temples. Similarly, the donors' claims to be a representative of the bride's side overlap, yet, they are not disputed. Likewise, priests have their views on the events, which often represent the normative, 'high' tradition, and they insist that most of what people say is 'just belief or propaganda.' It seems that all participants uphold their divergent interpretations, without interfering in the domains of others. At least to my knowledge, no attempts have been made to unify or even coordinate these different views.

A pool of data and opinions about the divine marriage is available, out of which individuals and various interest groups make selections according to their specific purposes. The motifs of the 'marriage myth', oral narratives, notions about the goddesses' identities, and interpretations of the ritual activities can be adapted to serve one's needs and to represent one's group-specific interests. This is an ongoing process, as shown by the recent re-making of the 'marriage myth' by the trustee of the Āti Kāmākṣī Kāḷikāmpāḷ temple: it refers to the *Kāñcippurāṇam,* yet combines motifs from the version of the myth found in the *Kāñcippurāṇam* and the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa,* with the intention to associate Āti Kāmākṣī Kāḷikāmpāḷ with the dark colored Umā, and thereby creates a new version of the 'marriage myth'.

Most interpretations held by the diverse people I talked to revolve around the deity's motive for the activity. It seems that by sharing knowledge of the god's motives or thoughts another level of closeness and intimacy with him, or with her, is expressed. In addition, as long as the deity's motivation is the center of the interpretations, nobody can claim to know it 'better'. In this sense, nobody is directly interfering or suppressing the views of others, although one's own view is often considered as superior. This enables different communities and individuals to find their specific and unique roles and identities in the festival's activities. When the roles overlap, as is evidently the case with the representatives of the bride's side, other roles and opinions are ignored, since the focus is on one's own ritual contribution directed towards the center—the gods.

In a highly stratified society, it is especially important to allow space for diverging interpretations and to handle them, if not with acceptance, at least with 'ignorance' rather than suppressing them. In my view, without this attitude many more conflicts would arise during the close contact of differing and to some extent competing groups during the festival, particularly in a pluralistic setting such as Kanchipuram.

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2   Interview with Babu Sastrigal, Kāmākṣī temple, 18.03.2009.

Identity of humans and gods

The celebration and re-enactment of the deities' marriage is central to many temples in Tamil Nadu. Harman interprets the divine marriage as a 'metaphor' (1989: 5); priests of the Ekāmranātha temple refer to the 'role model' function of the deities. I my view, the deities mean much more to many devotees than mere role models; the gods are 'one of them'. This becomes most visible when donors speak about their relationship to the goddess. One explicitly states that the goddess was born in their family, while people of Okkapiranthan Kulam establish kinship relations with the goddess, considering their village as the goddess's mother's place. I suggest that the deities' marriage is not just an enactment of a 'role model', but that it is an expression of the identity of gods and humans. This is also ritually expressed by the priests performing in the stead of the gods, who "become" the gods by placing *mantras* (*nyāsa*) on their own bodies.[3] Thus, the identification of gods and humans is ritually enacted. The gods are part of one's own family and the participants of the divine marriage are wedding guests as they would be at a human wedding. As Raja, the twenty-five-year-old torchbearer, said: 'Ekāmranātha is my father, would you miss your parents wedding?' Unnithan-Kumar (2008: 207) describes the "absence of an absolute distinction between divine and human beings" and notes that gods descend to earth to "take part in human affairs." However, I would add that humans also take part in divine affairs. Devotees follow the deities' mood and feelings with great concern, and the way they speak about them shows how small the distance between humans and gods is considered to be.

Perspectives

The Ekāmranātha temple festival is a highly complex festival that has repeatedly been modified and customized. It provides space for various ritual activities and diverse interpretations of the events. The festival is in the making, adapts itself to changing circumstances, and renews itself. Today it seems to be more popular than ever. The processions become bigger and funding increases. Sponsoring religious rituals is a means to express status, not only for the Indian middle-class, but also for non-resident Indians. The new festival chariot of the Ekāmranātha temple has been sponsored with a crore (ten million) Rupees by the Sivarpanam trust, located in the US. This clearly affects the interests and status of local donors, competing with donors from abroad, who try to buy into the temple's redistributive system. It is vital to examine cultural transfer and the influence of globalization on festival practices, not only in the Hindu Tamil diaspora, but also in their homelands.

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3   Within the ritual setting the worshipper 'becomes' Śiva by purifying his body and placing *mantras* on it to constitute it as a 'divine' body, because "only a Śiva can worship Śiva" (Davis 2008: 83).