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Research Article

Material Religion and the Edges of Assemblage at a South Indian Beach Festival

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In this article, I approach the study of South Asian religions, and the Masi Magam festival in particular, in a way that attributes agency and vitality not only to humans but also to material objects and environments. I apply the concept "assemblages," as deployed by political theorist and philosopher Jane Bennett and scholars of contemporary South Asian religions and cultures Jasbir Puar (2007), Joyce Flueckiger (2020), and Kajri Jain (2021) to shift away from human-centred theories of action, and to elevate the responsive, spontaneous flow of assemblages that occur in a religious festival. According to Bennett, such assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts that can confound from within…assemblages are open-ended collectives with uneven topographies of power and certainly without a central governing head (2010: 20-25). The literal and conceptual assemblage considered in this article is the series of decorated procession deities at the Masi Magam Festival in Pondicherry, South India, and includes ornamental garments and flowers, which constitute in themselves assemblages of organic, plastic, and fabric materials, domestic animals, water- and fire-based rituals, a street market, and more. I propose and demonstrate that these material assemblages are not only the context for but also contributing agents in the formation of religious aesthetics and experiences.

material religion, assemblage, Tamil, festival, Hinduism, flowers

Introduction

In this article, I approach the study of South Asian religions and the devotional practices that occur during the Masi Magam Festival in particular, in a way that attributes agency and vitality not only to humans but also to material objects and environments. I apply the concept 'assemblage' to shift away from human-centred theories of action, and to elevate the responsive, spontaneous flow of assemblages in the context of a religious festival. American political theorist and philosopher Jane Bennett developed the assemblage concept from Deleuze and Guattari to capture these dynamic collectives along with Spinoza's associative bodies concept, that a body is continuously affecting and being affected by other bodies (Bennett 2010: 21, See Deleuze and Guattari 1987[2013]).[1] According to Bennett, such assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts that can confound from within…assemblages are open-ended collectives with uneven topographies of power and certainly without a central governing head (2010: 20-25). The assemblage considered in this article begins with the procession deities decorated for the Masi Magam Festival in Pondicherry, South India. In this case study, I open with the processional deities wearing ornamental garments and flowers, which constitute in themselves assemblages of organic, plastic, and fabric materials. I then shift my focus to the structure of

[1] Bennett also agrees with Spinoza that everything is made of the same substance (2010: x), however, Bennett takes the position that all is not unified by a common spirit.

the procession and annual events that are planned to occur over the course of the day that include and react to searing summer temperatures, domestic animals, water- and fire-based rituals, sandy beach cliffs, street vendors, and the roaring engines of tractors and generators. I propose and demonstrate that these material assemblages are not only the context for but also the contributing agents to the formation of religious experiences. My approach to material religion draws from a framework offered by *The Jugaad Project*, a digital journal edited by Urmila Mohan, which asks, "how and why people use material interfaces/mediums, such as objects, bodies, spaces, and senses to connect the reality of their lives with ***beliefs*** of various kinds" and pays special attention to the historic and contingent nature of the contexts in which said connections and our scholarly analyses take place.[2]

Most broadly, I am interested in the role of materiality, material objects, and perception through the senses in expressions and experiences of the religious. In seeking new ways to study and to appreciate material religion, as well as to interrogate my own thoughts and positionality as a writer and as an object with limited agency myself, I find Bennett's concept of vibrant matter and use of assemblages to be a productive way to highlight the liveliness of material objects. In her book *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett proposes a philosophical project: to think slowly through the false presupposition that matter is inert, passive stuff, and that, in a contrastive binary, humans or "we" are agentive, living beings (2010: vii). Bennett uses "vitality" to mean the capacity of things to both impede or block humans' wills but also things' capacities to "act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (2010: viii). With this crediting of vibrant agency and action to nonhuman things, Bennett empowers us to dissolve limiting onto-theological binaries of life-matter, human-animal, organic-inorganic, among others (2010: x). In my article, I apply Bennett's methodology to theorise the event of Masi Magam, especially the procession of the deity, with an emphasis verging on overemphasis of the "agentic contributions of nonhuman forces (operating in nature, in the human body, and in human artifacts) in an attempt to counter the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought" (2010: xvi). At the end of this study, my elevated attention to the nonhuman material and decentring of humans at the festival that is certainly teeming with human agents, may leave readers dissatisfied; however, my aim is to tip the scales of our imaginations and perceptive lenses toward a deeper understanding of agentive materialities in religious contexts. Ultimately, with more practice framing and by critiquing the foundational environment in which religion takes place, these complex assemblages might speak back to their human counterparts with new theories of religion. This article and special issue are preliminary models and proposals for what understanding assemblages might draw out or gather together for scholars of South Asian religions.

Before diving into the case study of Masi Magam which takes place in South Asia, I would like to draw the reader's attention to Bennett's reflections on American materialism to clearly distinguish American materialism from *materiality* as it will be used as an analytical term in this article. Bennett explains that "American materialism, which requires buying ever-increasing numbers of products purchased in ever-shorter cycles, is *anti*materiality. The sheer volume of commodities and the hyperconsumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, conceals the vitality of matter" (Bennett 2010: 5). I raise this point because there are many products for sale and in fact, a street market is a central activity of the Masi Magam festival. Consumption is certainly an aspect of how people interact with the beach-side festival. However, my focus is on the activities, interactions, and agency of the materials in their own right, not only as they are passive stuff gobbled up at great speed and volume by human

[2] See, "The Jugaad Project": https://www.thejugaadproject.pub/about-us (accessed, 28.08.2023).

attendees. As Bennett points out, hyper-consumption is in fact anti-materiality because it is a practice that does not consider the potential agency or force of material objects.

Assemblage in South Asia

Bennett's assemblages concept has already appeared in recent scholarship on materiality and culture in contemporary South Asia, especially in the work of Puar (2007), Flueckiger (2020), and Jain (2021). In her book *Material Acts in Everyday Hindu Worlds* anthropologist Joyce Flueckiger presents a wide array of "materials that have an effect that cause something to happen that may be beyond what a human creator of that material intended," and in her example of a cement devotee prostrating at the base of a temple footpath in the opening of her book, Flueckiger describes a material figure that "has been left to create its own effect without intervention of any ritual specialist" (Flueckiger 2020: 4). Utilising Bennett's concept of assemblage in the context of South Asian religious practice, Flueckiger shows that the prostrated figure is part of an active assemblage composed of the footpath location, *kunkumam* applied to cement, marigold garlands encircling it, passing pilgrims, and other people responding to the figure (ibid). In a similar vein, in her chapter on ornaments, Flueckiger shows that ornaments continue to act after the event of putting them on, again without the intervention of a ritual specialist. For example, a marriage necklace which is important in rituals that occur at a wedding is subsequently worn with only the chain, whether in gold or cord, visible around the back of a married woman's neck (Flueckiger 2020: 22-33). While the chain marks its wearer with her more general status of being married, the pendant on the front of the chain that indicates social and religious information about the couple's families is worn unseen under the blouse in day-to-day life. Bangles are another form of ornament that do social work for their adorned. As Flueckiger and other scholars of bodily aesthetics have established, "To be ornamented is to be complete, fully human" (Flueckiger 2020: 22, see also Mohan 2015, Packert 2010, and Dehejia 2009). Ornaments are not extra objects added to a woman's comportment but rather they are fortifying, constitutive, and protective of her complete self. As we will see, ornaments play an important role in the adornment of the gods and goddesses on display at the Masi Magam festival.

In her recent book *Gods in the Time of Democracy* about the massive statues that tower over Indian landscapes and give voice to an emerging aesthetico-political iconography (Jain 2021: 4 and 7), art historian Kajri Jain presents an assemblage with "its multiple scales and rhythms, complex spatiotemporal circuits, networks… as a set of processes, a parietal view that forces a certain coherence and sense on its own, but with the knowledge that it is selective and needs to be seen in conjunction with many other possible layers" (Jain 2021: 24-25). This new iconic form, super-sized statues of gods and national heroes, feeds on religious and secular powers, requires enormous resources in their creation and maintenance, and thus occupies both the collective and disconnected characteristics of an assemblage. Jain argues that assemblages make sense of that which can be seen, heard, and touched, and that which is intelligible (Jain 2021: 7). However, and significantly, Jain uses the same joined but uneven characteristics of assemblage to precisely break through the "sensible" to be heard (Jain 2021: 7). I find this to be an especially profound potential outcome of assemblage-centred analysis; one that is open not only to decentralised fissures but also to voices, forces, or experiences that seep through such cracks in what might be perceived to be hegemonic materialities. In her pathbreaking book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007), queer theorist Jasbir Puar also deploys the concept assemblage as both a sense of a collective and of breaking off from it to engage with varied notions of record-keeping, archive, and documentation that when considered together work to undo what have become taken-for-granted anti-queer knowledge formations (Puar 2007: xxiii). Both Jain and Puar engage with the convergence yet impermanence of assemblage to propose multiple theoretical positions and to avoid the

overdetermination of one or more models of power, knowledge, or identity in contemporary South Asian religious and social landscapes. Puar thereby avoids the shortcomings of intersectionality, for example, which relies on multiple identities but each in terms with an exaggerated stability that "attempts to still and quell the perpetual motion of assemblages" (Puar 2007: 213).[3] Following Jain and Puar's methods, I also utilise the notion of gathering together and powerful eclecticism to approach but not necessarily contain an experience of the beach festival.

Preparing for Procession

Image 4.1: Beach activity at the Masi Magam festival. March 2020. Photo by author

The Masi Magam Festival is an annual festival that takes place in the Tamil month Masi (mid-February to mid-March). For this festival, devotees gather at a body of water, a temple tank for example, to bathe and thereby wash away sins and past suffering, a religious practice with a historical record that dates back to the 11th century on Chennai's Marina Beach.[4] In Pondicherry, a coastal town in Tamil South India, temple deities famously travel to the beach on grand procession vehicles, gather on the sandy ridge overlooking the crashing waves of the Bay of Bengal, and, carried by their priests, eventually make their way down to the ritual bath at the water's edge. Devotees and tourists also crowd onto the beach to take their purifying dip in the ocean and receive blessings from the gods and goddesses.

[3] Puar writes, "Intersectionality demands the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and time, relying on the logic of equivalence and analogy between various axes of identity and generating narratives of progress that deny the fictive and performative aspects of identification" (Puar 2007: 212).

[4] See Dehejia (2021: 14-17) for a short description of the Masi festival as it is celebrated in Chennai with a procession to Marina Beach and sea-bathing practices that have taken place since the days of the late 11th century emperor Kulottunga I.

I have attended this festival several times, but the following observations are based on photos and notes taken in March 2020. In the morning, I observed priests and temple staff at the goddess temple on its namesake Ellaiyamman Koil Street, a quiet residential street about half a mile from the Pondicherry (Puducherry) railway station, as they built and decorated the procession vehicles and conducted rituals to begin their travel to the beach. They were scheduled to assemble and leave between 6am and 8am.[5] They departed around 7:30 am and I met them at the beach in the late afternoon at around 3:30pm. When I arrived at the goddess temple the bulls who would pull the procession vehicle were already there, tied up at the post on the side of the temple. Eating, relaxed, they were waiting-to-be-called-to-work animals. A priest in the temple informed me that the flowers had already been delivered and assembled around the processional deity by a young flower designer in his twenties who came in the early morning from neighbouring Muthialpet. Once Ellaiyamman was dressed, the goddess, fully decorated with clothing, jewellery, and flowers, was kept inside the temple in a side room waiting to be loaded onto the cart closer to departure time. I was shown into this otherwise empty room and permitted to observe her ornamentation in detail. Her face, hands, feet, and sceptres were a shining bronze material. Her eyes and lips were subtly marked on her metal face, and a big deep-red mark of *kunkumam* was applied to her forehead. Moving upwards from Ellaiyamman's face, she wore a side knot hairstyle in her black hair which was ornamented with diamond pendants and a gold crown. The goddess had on a bright orange sari skirt tied around her body, waist, and legs. She had red velvet short sleeves with forest green forearms, colours that expressed her power and life-giving vitality. In total she wielded four metal sceptres. In her left hand she held a lotus on a long stem-like rod, in her right hand she held a twisted sceptre with a parrot on top. Two more sceptres that were topped with a trident and a drum emerged from behind her shoulders. The goddess's upper body was draped in concentric gold and white diamond costume jewellery. The outermost loop was a chain of gold coins. The shorter interior necklace featured a pendant in red and white stones with the centre resembling a target. Alternating red and white wavy rays encircled the jewellery like a sun. These two colours, red and white, are commonly painted in alternating stripes on temple walls in Tamil Nadu and indicate the complimentary heating and cooling powers of the goddess and god.

She wore round flower design pendants on each sleeve also in red and white stones. Initially, the ornaments were pinned into place, but they were also held flush to her body by a thin black thread crisscrossing her form. She wore anklets of white silver balls that looked like jasmine buds or pearls. By her right knee, a small bronze *murti* (idol) stood wrapped in a complimentary triad of colours, green, orange, and violet with a gold border. This figure, the portable one who would be bathed at the beach, was small enough that she was fully encircled with a string of fluttering pink oleander blossoms. The main goddess's silhouette was traced with a mixture of thin and thick, solid and striped flower garlands. Around her head and crown, she was wearing a small string of yellow chrysanthemums followed by a colour-blocked stripe of white tuberose trumpets and velvety dark red cockscomb. The goddess's shoulder line was expanded with white tuberose, fragrant green herbs, yellow chrysanthemum, pink oleander, and a thick colour-blocked semicircle of yellow chrysanthemums alternating with pinks, reds, and violets. The final most exterior organic arch was made of dried *vettiver* roots (a plant known for its medicinal properties) wrapped with a few whip-arounds of pink, green, and yellow synthetic threads to tie the otherwise earth tone roots into the overall design of the seeming wall of flowers. This was how I first encountered the goddess on a stationary low stage inside an otherwise vacant temple. The sheen of the goddess's dress kept catching my eye as I stepped

[5] I arranged permission to observe and photograph aspects of the temple's morning activities in advance of the festival day, so they were expecting my presence, and they were very generous to answer questions that I had as they prepared for departure.

Image 4.2: View of the processional vehicle on the street before its departure from the temple. March 2020. Photo by author.

back into the street to check on the procession cart. The animals, cart, and priests had a long day ahead of them, as they planned to transport the goddess to the beach by bullock cart rather than by tractor which were louder, faster, and less likely to succumb to hunger and heat. First, the cart was loaded with hay to feed the bullocks. Parked further down the street there was another procession cart in the form of a tall elephant mount. A bystander explained that after the beach tour, the goddess would return to the temple and then ride through the neighbourhood streets at night starting at 8pm. For this procession, she rides on the elephant, he said, "like a king" and wears even more garlands and ornaments than her morning decorations. The goddess was secured to the beach-destined cart with ropes while seating for the humans was arranged in front. Only then were the bullocks decorated with flowers on their foreheads and hooked to the cart. Once in their harnesses, the animals came to life, whisking their tails and shifting their weight in anticipation of their assignment, thereby bringing new energy and small movements to the previously still assemblage. Led by a drummer and horn player on foot, the cart pulled away toward Gandhi Road on their route to Vaithikuppam Beach. It was an easy departure with a calm and pleasant gait. The cart would return by Bharathi Road at the end of the day.

Returning to the characteristics of an assemblage as an ad hoc grouping of diverse, vibrant materials with uneven topologies, I place the permeability and dynamic scale of assemblage into conversation with the goddess as member-actant dressed for the Masi Magam festival. My first proposal is to identify the goddess on her transportable platform as an assemblage. Her form was a grouping of various materials of metal, cloth, makeup, hair, flowers, and wood, and the way that they were held together whether through pins, woven thread, wrapped thread, or rope, was a record of the layering method used in their initial application. Although stable when stationary, the tall and heavy procession assemblages sway and jostle when in motion. Accessories like the fringe around parasols are designed to accentuate the lively

movement of the palanquin. Another aspect of the assemblage that I was particularly attuned to was the use of flowers and floral motifs. Flowers are a ubiquitous material used in Hindu rituals inside and outside of temple contexts (Comeau 2020). Flowers are also widely available and visible in everyday aspects of South Indian culture such as women's beauty practices like flower hair pieces, architectural features like decorative gate handles, and printed media like calendars and poster art. When flowers are used to ornament a procession deity, they are not used in isolation but rather in the delightful clamour of, as we have seen, hairstyles, metal and stone jewellery, a painted wooden pedestal, folds of silk clothing, *kunkumam* powder, and related pins and cords. Despite measures to stabilise the flowers, for example, under the stress of the hot sun and jostling, the blossoms shrink as they wilt, edges of the flower garlands pull loose, and they swing wildly like the parasol's fringe. Assemblage as a concept enables this flower-inclusive ornamentation practice to evolve over the course of the festival with and without the action of adjacent human agents.

My second related proposal is that the goddess, cart, priests, and bulls constitute an assemblage. Bennett's "throbbing confederation" (Bennett 2020: 23). The movement of the cart in response to a startled animal, a hole in the pavement, or a sideways slide on gravel-mixed sand, the ways in which energy dissipated from it as the humans and animals tired over the course of the day, and, significantly, the ways in which people brought energy to the cart in the form of devotees seeking blessings from the goddess all illustrate the uneven, energetic pulse that characterise vibrant matter.

Image 4.3: Devotees reaching for *prasad* from the procession vehicle at the Beach Festival. March 2020. Photo by author.

Finally, I offer a third proposal that engages with another aspect of Bennett's assemblage definition. Based on the highly temporal and highly uneven nature of assemblages, I propose the entire festival environment at the beach as an assemblage of which the goddess and her cart are one "member-actant" that joined into and then later broke away from the annual but temporary beach festival assemblage. Bennett explains, "Each member and proto-member of the assemblage has a certain vital force, but there is also an effectivity proper to the grouping

as such: an agency of the assemblage. And precisely because each member-actant maintains an energetic pulse slightly 'off' from that of the assemblage, an assemblage is never a stolid block but an open-ended collective, a 'non-totalizable sum'" (Bennett 2020: 24). Bennett concludes that an assemblage has a finite life span, a point that resonates especially well with the ephemeral qualities of organic flowers in the procession which have a considerably shorter life span than the goddess's metal jewellery or the bull who will expire long before the wooden vehicle. Holding these three proposals in paused consideration, I turn now to the material activity at the beach.

At the Beach

Image 4.4: Police overlooking the crowd at the Masi Magam festival. March 2020. Photo by author.

The road leading into the neighbourhood and down to the beach was in full festival mode and lined with tables and mats on the ground. Every surface, every square inch was topped off, bright, and colourful. There was costume jewellery, cut fruit, whole watermelons, fried snacks on floppy silver foil plates, fluorescent polyester flower arrangements, monochromatic western-style bouquets, balloons, beach balls that exclaimed 'I love you' while others lamented 'Missing you', plastic babies, plastic guns, clay banks and figurines, an All-for-10-rupees table, winnowing baskets, hot plates, and gas lighters. Some of the items were dropped into plastic bags while others were packed in squares of scrapped newspaper or sheets of banana leaf and then wrapped around and around with cheap white string that snapped apart when pulled. The folds were enough to hold the packet's shape. No knots were tied. And, the lines of thread crisscrossing the newsprint echoed the thin black stripes of strings that held the goddess's ornaments to her chest.

One block back from the beach the road was covered with consecutive multicoloured canvas canopies commonly used for family and community functions. Neighbours sat on cool concrete stoops sharing snacks. Between the market

Image 4.5: View of a goddess dressed in rainbow skirts at the Masi Magam festival. March 2020. Photo by author.

and sandy plaza where the procession vehicles park, there was a bouncy castle, ice cream carts, and carnival rides all powered by a thunderous army of generators guffing black smoke into the air. Finally approaching the beach and the enormous temporary structure stretching ahead of me, I saw the row of stalls delineated by basic cane frames and varied corrugated sheeting and each was filled with a celebratory procession vehicle distinctively assembled by a local temple. The environment was hot from the combination of crowded bodies, blazing camphor fire atop metal pedestals, sun overhead, and white light reflected from the sand, wet rocks, and ocean. A short line of old women was selling camphor from baskets. Their faces intimated that they were suffering in the heat like they were physically baking in the sun. In the next smaller display of flowers for sale, just three or four yellow chrysanthemums balanced on a cracked coconut showed visible wilt. People leaned on the edges of shade painted in thin stripes across low building walls. Some were watching festive bodies already bathing in the waves below.

It was about 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Scanning the crowd, I noticed a lot of vertical activity. People paused and turned for *darshan* then moved freely to their next destinations, successfully weaving between people, fencing, tall shifting flames, mounds of *kunkumam*, tall poles attached with bags of pink and blue cotton candy, and young vendors ringing bells to announce their sugary wares. Above me, the police watched us from standing cane towers. The first parked procession cart that I saw carried the *nalvar*, the four poet-saints of medieval Tamil Shaiva fame, standing in a row in front of the main deity. I have a photo of the same statues on the same cart and in the same first stall from a decade ago when I had my attention tuned in to the poet Manikkavacakar. This year the bronze poet was wearing a necklace made from rupee notes. It was good to see a familiar face and I wondered how many more I would

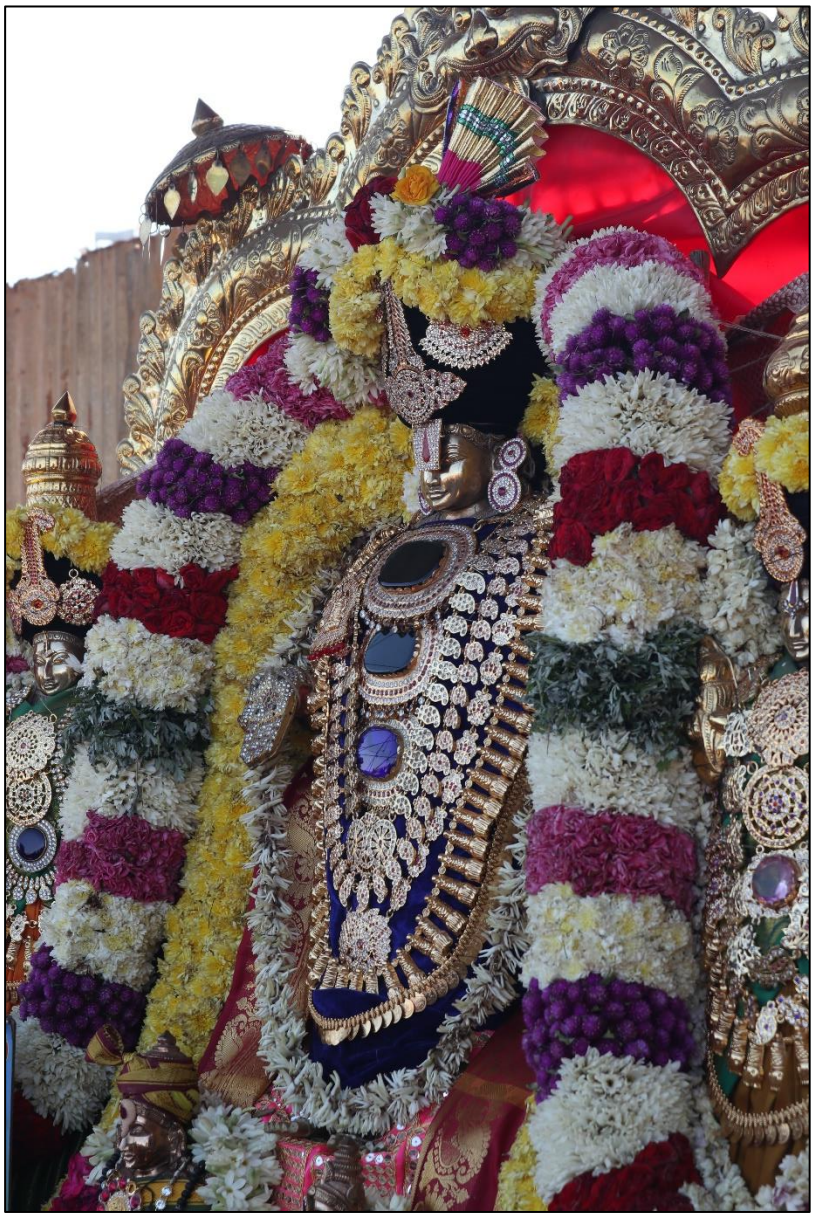

Image 4.6: Vishnu wearing gold and yellow ornaments at the Masi Magam festival. March 2020. Photo by author.

recognise. In the subsequent stalls, there were deities with bold, glittering colour stories. In one stall a goddess sat with knees bent atop a mound of cascading, tiered folds of sari skirts and thick bands of gold borders in a rainbow of colours. Her chest was wide and completely paved with gold jewellery. She was framed by two flower garlands that traced the outline of her form, expanding her presence with a floral radiance. The first garland was alternating white trumpet-shaped tuberose and colour blocks of red, pink, violet, or green. The outer garland was solid red in colour and made more voluminous in appearance by the fluttering texture of the oleander's petals. While stationed in the open-air stall, her human attendants had erected a backdrop composed of pink and red curtains and sprays of artificial red, white, and yellow lilies. Further down the line, Vishnu was seated with two consorts and wore the same style of multicoloured garland which traced the entire shoulders, crowns, and body lengths of the procession assemblage. However, all the reds that were worn in the previous goddess display were replaced with yellow chrysanthemums which played differently against the white tuberose and gold fabric borders of Vishnu's dress, including the fan-like folds accentuating the top of his crown. Vishnu's backdrop was a yellow-gold arch, and two small reflective metal parasols encircled with flat dangling plates. All three of their chests were paved in gold jewels except for three flat stones that laid flat down the centre of Vishnu's chest. Overhead, finally, the majestic golden impression was shaded by a red and green fabric parasol with wind-tossed fringe.

Yet another procession vehicle included a motorised parasol that splayed its sporadic fringe made from mixed organic and artificial flowers. It spun on the power of an audible but visually hidden generator that competed in volume with police announcements that were amplified over a loudspeaker, and that included a search for a missing girl wearing a pink dress. Here we can recognise human actants as vital materiality. The speaking police officer and the missing girl, as well as the bell-ringing candy vendors, are organic materials operating within

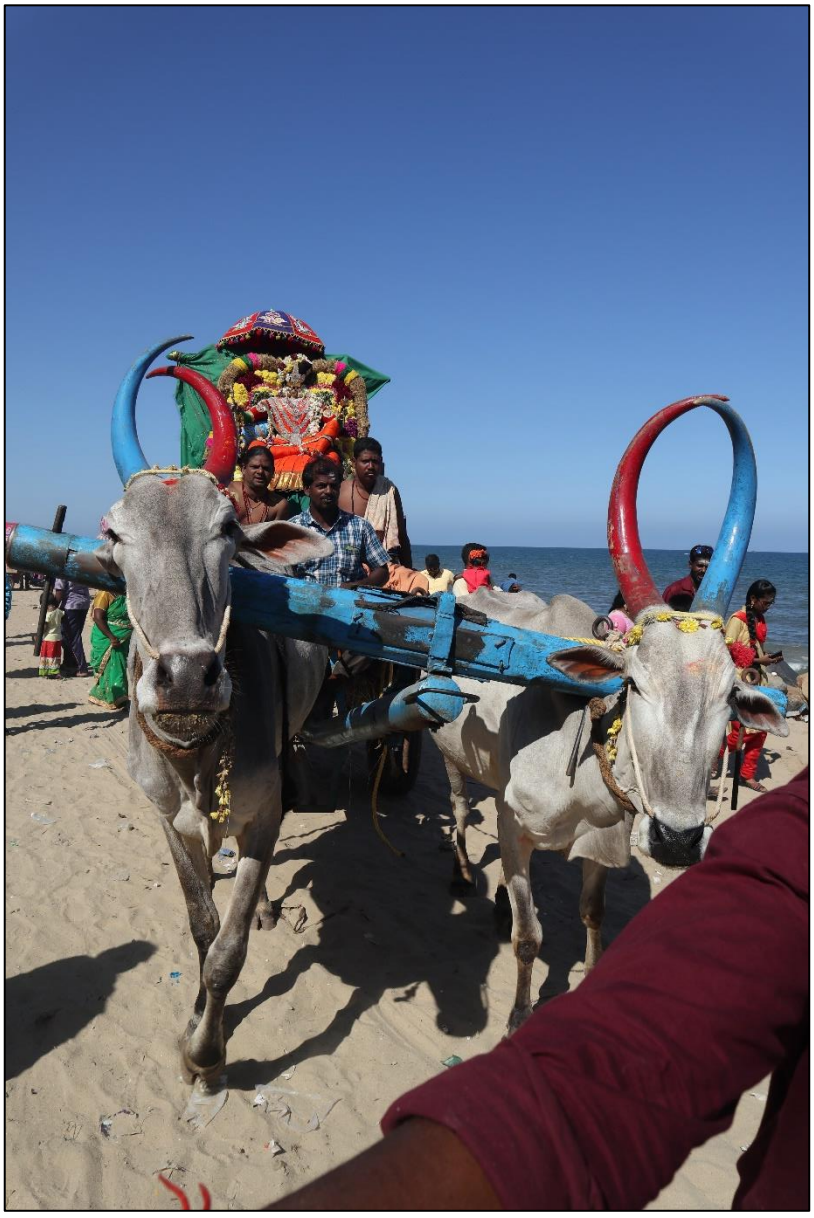

Image 4.7: View of the processional vehicle at the beach in the late afternoon. March 2020. Photo by author.

and contributing uneven impacts to the religious event. The sound of the police announcement, comparable to the roar of nearby engines, was one temporary component of the sensorium of the beach festival which was composed of a range of organic and inorganic materials *and*, in this case, the sounds that they made. This point about human power as thing power is worth drawing out a bit further using the example of heat. Heat at the festival came from the sun, from ritual fires lit and tended to by priests, and the crowd of human bodies. The human-inclusive sources of heat illustrate how the materialities of humans and nonhumans (i.e.: sun and fire) can be perceived and valued more horizontally (Bennett 2010: 10). I too was melting, and I had started compromising with myself to see just a few displays before turning back to the main road. Just one more. Just one more. Curious about that one. I took a few paces more through the crowd. That moment and that mindset was abruptly cut off when I saw and recognised the goddess riding toward me on her bullock cart, the same goddess that I had observed at her temple on Ellaiyammankoil Street. People crowded the slow-moving vehicle and reached out their hands to receive small pinches of flowers and blessings from the priest. The priest and his assistant recognised me, smiled, and waved. As they passed, the priest yelled over his shoulder that they would see me back at the temple at 8 o'clock. The bulls' yellow chrysanthemums had dried out and lay flattened into their fuzzy grey foreheads. In stark and transformative contrast to the tractors and amplified voices, the animal-powered cart was virtually silent. The animals were quiet but arguably some of the most hardworking actants expending energy in the procession. In a few short moments, the cart passed me with another big trailer in front of it. Both sets of wheels kicked up a lot of dust and sand. This hot burst of debris in the air took my breath away. I was able to regain my footing and draw in a clean breath of air in part because I was a full head taller than the rest of the crowd and though there were a lot of people there, the daytime crowd was not packed as it would be later. I felt seen and connected to the temple's contribution to the Masi Magam festival and I felt lucky, fortunate to have seen the goddess at the beach, like a top celebrity in

public. Even though I clearly went to the beach knowing that she was there and planned to actively seek her out, it felt nonetheless genuinely miraculous, surprising, and special that I did see her there. Ignoring my own copious handwritten notes, names and phone numbers, start times, addresses, and other evidence of premeditation and intensive planning that I had invested in this meeting, I recorded the sighting on the next clean page in my notebook with a dash "—amazing luck!!" Although the priest encouraged me to meet at the temple for the evening portion of the neighbourhood procession, I didn't make it. On the literal eve of what became a global lockdown, airports had begun to close, and my flight was cancelled earlier that day. I was worried and feeling the pressure to find another route home within the next 24 hours.

The unevenness of the assemblage concept enables us to gather and critically engage with a variety of dynamic and seemingly discordant materialities and agents as a whole religious experience. With this in mind, I now step aside from the events of my day at the beach festival to develop a few divergent, eclectic nodes of the assemblage that offer nudges and resemblances to the vitality of the procession deities, beginning with the motorised parasol that so enlivened one of the procession vehicles.

Electric Umbrella

The emergence of the mechanised parasol does not set off an immediate list of binaries that all procession vehicles must take up on one or the other side, such as tractor versus bull, modernity versus tradition, or electric technology versus stasis or manually propelled movements. Rather, from the perspective of assemblage theory, the electric umbrella contributes a welcome unevenness to the festival environment.

The parasol has long been a part of royal and divine iconography and is a common accessory for deities on procession who view their loyal devotees, tour sacred cities, or visit temple grounds. Many parasols were present at the beach. The whirling parasol was a new iteration rather than a departure from its peers. As I previously described, the bodies of deities are firmly secured to their pedestals or various chariots, however, there are other parts of the decor that bring intentional and vital movement to the sacred procession. Parasols, tassels, and fringe are some of those quintessential materials that bring swing, sway, bustle, and thus liveliness and jubilance to the divine presence and the devotees' experience of it. Thus, the electricity-powered parasol added a new directionality in its spin rather than swing but, from the perspective of the movement that it brought as a sacred accessory, it remained familiar. The innovation however was not entirely without its departures. The rim of the parasol was decorated with artificial flowers and with intermittent dangling artificial flower strings, forgoing continuous fringe. As I observed the use of flowers in particular among the procession vehicles, their textures, volumes, colour stories, and integration with other decorative materials, I found that some were decorated with strictly natural flowers, increasingly noticeable as the hot day went on, while others intermixed a variety of natural and therefore withering organic flowers with the more durable and 'ever-fresh' in appearance, inorganic flowers. The high speed of the whirling parasol that drew people toward it would have instantly pulled the petals from dangling organic flowers. The force of the electric parasol was not compatible with tassels made from organic materials. So while this new age parasol did not present a departure in its general use, it did bring new tendencies in force and material to the festival environment.

To this notion of incremental or uneven change in plastics and electricity, I add a few more nodes of change and related unevenness that have evolved through the years since my first visit to Pondicherry in 2007 that can provide us a wider context for the whirling parasol. In my

neighbourhood in 2020, there were still carts where men smoothed laundry with coal-filled irons. There was a man with a grinding stone built into his bicycle who rode from house to house calling out his knife-sharpening services. But there were also more dry cleaners and maternity and baby specialty boutiques popping up in the vicinity since my stay in 2010. Internet cafes with signs advertising 'browsing' were no more because our cell phones used data plans, and the coffee shops had WIFI. The existence of Xerox shops and power outages had decreased in equal measure. In my friend's neighbourhood in 2020, I heard small lorries and motorcycles drive up and down the residential streets playing amplified, automated, and pre-recorded advertisements. The lorry announced they were selling onions and garlic from the back of the truck. The motorcycle's service? Hair fall or hair loss treatments. On the same street women still called out to housewives while walking with big silver bowls of produce or fish covered with a light hand towel on their hips or heads. The ad hoc mechanisation of Pondicherry's domestic services was part of the same larger dynamic context in which the parasol whirled and in which it drew the attention of festival attendants with an organic, eclectic, and electric flair for the material presentations of gods. Alongside this automation thrived yet another expression of collectivity made through piecemeal handiwork and craft. In addition to string wrapped around paper and leaf parcels and pins securing jewellery onto the goddess's dress, more practices of binding tied the festival assemblage together. Thick ropes secured pedestals to carts. Banana fibres ran through the spines of the gods' flower garlands. Safety pins in women's saris and extra pins riding on their marriage necklaces were joined by the nearly invisible but ubiquitous presence of black bobby pins. White thread was tied into flower buds and worn in long strands or short tufts at the napes of women's necks. Subtle, common, invisible, behind the scenes, however you conceive of these binding technologies, they are nonetheless the quiet glue of the Masi Magam festival.

Finally, I return to the goddess on Ellaiyammankoil street where we both started our day ahead of the procession activities to engage with vital materials that evolved over the course of a day and as the materials moved through changing contexts. I begin with the visual reception of the ornamented procession goddess inside and outside. Inside the temple under the fluorescent tube lighting, the painted columns and walls, other deities, and their own decorated shrines shared many visual resemblances. The contents and container of the goddess temple reflected a mutually colourful, shining, shared aesthetic. In this context the temple surroundings were in such harmony with the main deity it was difficult to visually isolate the individualised features or ornaments of the specially dressed goddess. When she moved outside, the goddess appeared much differently in the muted context of the paved and tree-lined street. Although her surroundings did not contribute the same symbiotic energy of the temple interior, natural sunlight caught her gold jewellery and sari border, and most of all the sunlight picked up the iridescent quality of her orange-coloured dress. Both contexts, inside and outside, offered changing opportunities for engagement with the goddess. In procession through the streets and beach path, devotees could get closer to the goddess than if she was set into the depths of a formally structured temple shrine. But she was also in motion and passing by when outside, and so, she could not be viewed in detail or contemplated from a stationary position. In addition, she was up high, putting the devotees at eye level with her reclining feet and the folds fanning from the bottom of her sari. Even as I tried to position myself to photograph the procession event for my notes and this article, I encountered changing conditions. Many of the important accessories such as the coverage of the umbrella and the roof of the temporary parking structure, cast irregular shadows across the vehicle and goddess.

The overall display also changed over the course of the day. At the beach, the garlands were visibly wilted and wilting even in the indirect light while parked in the shade under corrugated structures. Bennett explains that the force-power of assemblage is a "mood or style of an open

Image 4.8: Detail of one procession vehicle with organic and inorganic flowers, fabric, metal, wood posts, electric lights, parasol with fringe, and a priest wearing a sacred thread at the Masi Magam festival. March 2020. Photo by author.

whole in which both the membership changes over time and the members themselves undergo internal alteration" (Bennett 2010: 35). By the late afternoon the organic leaves tied to the ends of the goddess's garland, leaves especially known for their fresh fragrance and silvery green tones that give texture to a garland design, showed damage and browning edges, and shrivelled to expose the strings that bound them to each other. Finally, as the cart pulled away from the stalls on its departing route, the goddess appeared in yet another outdoor context. Riding along the ledge of the cliff, the bright clear blue sky evoked a wide-open impression in contrast to the soft enclosure of the tree-lined street just outside her temple.

Here in the literal light of day, we see the agency of a human-nonhuman working group (See Bennett 2010: xvii). The changes that I saw in the goddess as she moved through the street and the beach reflect the agency of changing nonhuman contexts. As recipients considering the goddess, we must constantly hold two points in tension. In one sense, the materials of an assemblage have 'thing power', are actants, and find momentary independence from subjectivity (See Bennett 2010: 3). The decorated vehicle inclusive of priests and bulls is an independent agent. At the same time, and possibly the most important concept of assemblage, "an actant never acts alone" (Bennett 2010: 21). The vehicle both attends the festival and *makes* the festival for other human and nonhuman things to attend. The goddess assemblage really shines as a contingent tableau, a constellation, and a vivid entity and at the same time, in Bennett's words, remains, "irreducible to the contexts in which human subjects set [her]" (Bennett 2010: 5). Let's also consider Puar's powerful writing on assembled time (Puar 2007: xxx):

> ... something is happening to time, not in time, revamping an encounter with time. And so this book is an assemblage of temporalities and movements–speed, pace, duration–which is not strictly bound to developmentalist or historical telos or their

> disruption, and an assemblage of theoretical interests, meaning that there is not one or several main strands that thread through this book, but rather ideas that converge, diverge, and merge.

These temporalities expressed by Puar as duration, speed, and diversion describe the friction between time, heat, natural flowers, and notions of freshness that are disrupted by the intermingling of artificial flowers *as well as* the early and late arrivals of deities over the course of the day, their positions in the shade, the initial conditions of the ornaments before they left their temples, and so on. Taking a step beyond the contingencies of the floral decorations, it is noteworthy that while faded, falling loose from the jostling garlands, and being distributed from the vehicle by the priest to crowding devotees in the form of *prasad* (a sacred status reserved for organic flowers and not applied to inorganic lookalikes) these variously damaged or dispersed flowers and greens participate no less in the evolving assemblage of the festival after they break away from the goddess's ornaments. In fact, these take-away materialised blessings have the potential to stir up new assemblages of devotion as they are variously tucked into women's hair, presented to deities in shrines at home, or in some cases ingested.

Conclusion

Over the course of this article, I have presented a Hindu festival day using and thus testing the concept assemblage in partnership with the priorities of material religion, both of which are theoretical positions that elevate the potential agency of sacred stuff that is essential to and constitutive of religious experiences. Returning to Flueckiger's examples of marriage necklaces and stone figurines, she presents objects that create effects for Hindu devotees without the continuous presence of ritual specialists. In my study of the beach festival, I began with the ornamented goddess and attending priest riding in a cart together. Both Flueckiger and I take overtly religious materials as our starting points. As my analysis developed, however, I found the eclecticism of assemblage to be especially beneficial to how I wanted to build up the festival environment for readers because it allowed me to include electricity, string, the contingency of organic materials, sensorial effects, and other things that are not overtly or exclusively sacred materials, yet fit easily and well under the wide umbrella of an ad hoc grouping of diverse elements. Assemblage is a big tent and consequently raises questions about scope, a theme already present in the eclecticism argued for in Bennett's analysis and working environment. To vital materialist Bennett, a complex community resource such as the electrical grid for a major American city should not be cast as a single cohesive system. Rather it is better understood as "a volatile mix of coal, sweat, electromagnetic fields, computer programs, electron streams, profit motives, heat, lifestyles, nuclear fuel, plastic, fantasies of mastery, static, legislation, water, economic theory, wire, and wood–to name just some of the actants" (Bennett 2010: 25). Bennett gestures toward her own eclectic grouping of uneven actants when she incorporates the contributions of her eyeglasses, plastic keyboard, gut health, and to some extent a littered gutter in Baltimore into her vision of the electrical grid and into her publication product*ion* (Bennett 2010: 4, 23).

To the vital materialist ethnographer of religious festivals, the discursive boundaries of cleansing rituals and blessings from one local goddess are variously expressed by a throbbing confederation of jostling member-actants, reflected sunlight, smoke, loudspeakers, cut fruits, lines and lines of thread, outstretched hands, flowers, synthetic rhinestones, bronze *murti*s, plastic toys, rupees, paper litter, vehicles, the Bay of Bengal, arms of the state, and the verge of a global pandemic. From this perspective, I have redistributed agentive power to material actants and to the people who inhabit the festival, thus dissolving the 'us versus stuff' or the binary of spiritual devotees versus the material world. At times the characteristic eclecticism and unevenness of assemblages, however, run the risk of including anything or everything—

a conceptual death by diffusion. The porous boundaries of an assemblage are precisely the working context in which I as the author may call attention to the safety pins and automated onion vendors that inform my interpretation of the festival yet are not the central matter of my research. Handed the long leash of assemblage and the ensuing uncontainable pool of resources, the author's writing—my writing this, the notes I jotted down on the day, and even the plans that I made in advance of my temple observations—is a form of assembling itself. And, in order for the assemblage to be something rather than anything I find myself responsible for holding up the edges, like the corners of an apron, for the thing I want to write about. The author does control how the assemblage is framed in her writing, and this is perhaps why I initially proposed three 'ranges' for the assemblage: the ornamented goddess, the collective in the rolling cart, or the two or three city blocks along the beach that host the festivities. Each time I reset the possible boundaries of the assemblage by drawing in an impression of the market or noting silent actants such as the string, the animals, and myself, I signal to the reader that there are many possible edges to the assemblages that are up for grabs and up for consideration—and reconsideration. However, on the day of the festival, I was also subject to the unpredictable ebbs and flows of the material environment which narrowed my perception of the festival from anything goes to a still significantly varied understanding of the festival that was grounded by the limits and happenings of the day.

Assemblages are destabilising. These open wholes disrupt the exaggerated stability and the neat contain-ability of religious life. They are thick descriptions with loose edges and uneven topographies of power that include the hand and limits of the author. This article, written through the lens of assemblage about my meeting with the goddess at a beach festival is not a presentation of one person and one procession deity, but rather it is offered as one pulse among many that were created and emitted by the vibrant materials of the 2020 Masi Magam festival day.

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