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The Virgin against Eseki: Religious Consciousness among Christian Women of Kanyakumari District[1]

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Just as Mukkuvars[2] select and reinterpret the elements of the dominant culture, so the women are able to a certain extent to manipulate and even exploit to their advantage the qualities patriarchy ascribes to them. This manoeuvrability is made possible by the fact that the dominant culture is itself full of internal contradictions, ironies and ambiguities, which create a potential space for the contestation of cultural meaning. In the Christian fishing villages the rituals of binding, cooling and seclusion implicitly attribute to women a dangerous power not officially recognised by Church doctrine. Women physically take on the attributes of this illicit identity through the medium of illness and possession. The figure of the demonised Hindu goddess affects men and women alike; but in entering the bodies of women it enables them to challenge the daily discipline of living within the confines of respectable femininity.

My examination necessarily takes us outside the confines of the fishing community. Just as Mukkuvars incorporate and reassemble themes from Hinduism, so also their modes of worship and pilgrimage and their attempts to cure themselves of illness and demonic possession integrate them into a wider religious community of Christians, peasants of the

district and even all over Tamil Nadu. The modes of resistance employed by Mukkuvar women in possession and illness are not unique to them as members of a fishing community. Rather, they are specific to them as members of a Christian peasant community, which includes members of many different denominations (among them, Church of South India, Pentecostal Church and Protestant groups).

My pursuit of the theme of female illness, possession and religious consciousness took me repeatedly out of the fishing villages, accompanying Mukkuvar women on their journeys to the agrarian hinterland. The women visited healers, Christian women who began their cures in the name of the Virgin and the saints, and further directed them to a network of shrines dotted all over the Tamil Nadu countryside. The importance of the healers to these women cannot be underestimated. It was the healers who functioned as intermediaries between Mukkuvar Christians and the wider Christian world of rural Tamil Nadu. The settings for this interaction between Christians (and, indeed, some Hindus as well) were the shrines. Confirmed in their faith and directed by the healers, scores of women at a time pitted the demons possessing them against the powers of the Christian divinities.

The battle of the Virgin against Eseki,[3] the two female figures who symbolise the battle between good and evil in popular Christianity, is strikingly transposed to an earthly plane by the battle of the healer against the demonically possessed. Their contest produces and disperses among the peasant population images and meanings which confirm the bodily experience of religion. Where the healer and the demonically possessed are, in addition, women, we are in a position to explore the additional inflections of meaning that women bring to this popular religion.

I examine the details of this contest – between the discourse of the divine and the discourse of the demonic – in two parts.

The Discourse of the Divine: The Healers

Nowhere are the rival tendencies within popular Christianity – in its moments of complicity as well as of resistance to the dominant culture – made clearer than in the figure of the healer. Healers constitute themselves as key intermediaries in the dialogue between good and evil, between the Virgin and Eseki. Insofar as they are successful in this role, they unwittingly usurp one of the key bases of the official Church's legitimacy. The Church, already uneasy about the very existence of an unorthodox dialogue between the Virgin and Eseki, is even more nervous about the existence of mediators and intermediaries who are produced and legitimised in ways that are outside the Church's control.

Yet this is not to say that the healers ostensibly oppose their values to Christian ones – indeed, healers would like to claim the legitimacy of the Church's approval, and see themselves as co-partners in a common fight against Hindu demons and false gods. This discourse of the divine as elaborated by the healers is imbued with a latent and sometimes overt hostility towards indigenous Hindu religious figures. My consideration of the healers in Kanyakumari District bears some affinity with recent work on peasant healers. Folk healers have been analysed elsewhere as crystallising and activating peasant consciousness, as organic peasant intellectuals in the Gramscian sense (Connor 1982). Taussig (1980; 1987) has in turn analysed dispensers of magical medicine in South America as mediating and articulating "the differences that both divide and constitute the wholeness of society" (class, race, town/country, etc.). The description of healers as mediating and articulating oppositions seems to have particular relevance to their function with respect to the Mukkuvars – linking fishing and agricultural populations, mediating Christian and Hindu religions. The function of mediation is not to be understood as one of erasing the differences, or even of rendering the relations non-antagonistic. In the case of the Christian healers, the antagonism latent in a minority consciousness is kept alive. Hindu gods and goddesses are repeatedly berated, and held responsible for a great variety of misfortunes and sicknesses affecting the Christians. At the same time, in giving a bodily reality to the power of the Virgin and the saints, the healers unconsciously replicate the very Hindu popular consciousness they are ostensibly opposing. The iconography and visual detail of Christian images of the saints (male and female) and the Maataa[4] come alive as they possess the body of the healer, appearing to her in dreams and visions, and are each given a specific mode of curing.

Mary is a woman in her forties who cures in a trance state while variously possessed by St Michael, St Anthony and the Maataa. The Maataa speaks in a more singing, rhythmic chanting voice, the saints with more staccato bursts. The saints have a more dialogic interchange with their patients – Mary will then talk to her clients with eyes open, and the interaction takes on a question and answer form. When the Maataa speaks, Mary has her eyes closed and is more withdrawn from her surroundings. The style of Tamil adopted is more formal than Mary's ordinary conversation.

These details vary from healer to healer. Mariam conducts all her healing with her back to her clients, kneeling facing the shrine which contains images of the Christian deities. However, her voice varies like Mary's, depending on which divinity speaks, and it becomes particu-

larly fierce when she receives visitations on Wednesdays from Verghese (or St George), the one who binds the fleeing demon.

Not only the voice but the body of the healer must be altered to permit divinity to leave and enter. Mary has a kind of yawn at the beginning and end of her trance sessions, since the mouth is where the spirit enters and leaves. Her speech is punctuated by a kind of choking sound, between a cough and a clearing of the throat. Other healers, particularly when curing in a place where the divinity's presence is very strong, such as St Michael's shrine at Raja Uuru, become convulsed and shaken while possessed, hoarse of voice and drenched with sweat while healing.

The specific visual imagery of iconography becomes supremely important in the way healers bring divinity to life. St Michael is usually depicted with one sandalled foot on a speared slain demon, the other foot on the ground. When St Michael speaks through Mary, she places her foot, the *chaapaati kaalu* or the sandalled foot, on the back of a patient diagnosed of demonic possession. In Mary's visions, the Maataa appears in robes of blue, surrounded by rays of light as she descends from the sky.

In the curing sessions, the antagonism of Christian versus Hindu merges with the vigorously assertive mode in which faith healers seek to attract and keep clients. In Hinduism, curing sessions of a parallel nature are opportunities for the healer to demand greater human faith and following for the deity which has possessed him/her (Moffatt 1979; Moreno 1985). A similar atmosphere of aggressive interrogation and demands made of clients prevails among the Christian healers as well, but in their hands, such a form of social transaction becomes, in addition, a chance to demonstrate the inadequacy and evils of the dominant religion. Their opening remarks usually seek to establish the all-encompassing knowledge of the divinity possessing the healer:

Healer:	*MahaLe* (Daughter)/*Mahane* (Son)
[as Maataa or saint]	Do not be afraid.
	Rid yourself of all mistrust.
	I know your sorrows and misfortunes.
	I know the tears you have shed,
	the misfortunes you have borne.

Healers usually build up a degree of extended contact with clients, since the saint or Maataa commands a number of return visits. At each sitting, the divinity commands the client to state publicly whether or not she is feeling a distinct improvement. Any success is stressed:

Healer:	You came here with no faith in me.
[as St Michael]	Your husband was missing for three months,

and you had no money or word from him.
I told you not to be afraid.
He has now returned, has he not?

Client: Yes, he has.
[a Hindu Nadar]

Healer: Yet you had no faith.
You have visited my shrine at Raja Uuru.
Now you wish to know when you can safely bring your pregnant daughter home from her in-laws. Trust me in this also.

Curers usually demand a consistent and overt show of faith from the clients – by a specified number of visits to the most important local shrine of the saint or the Maataa, by donations of money. Although the subject of economic contributions – their extent and degree of compulsion – is a matter of debate between healers as well as in the peasant population generally, some healers will, in trance state, rebuke clients for not bringing enough donations as evidence of their inadequate faith. Much is made of occasions (such as the one described above), when the client is Hindu. In the interchange reported below, the client is a Hindu man worried about his failing eyesight, accompanied by his daughter:

Healer: [After opening remarks]
[as St Michael] Do not worship false gods any more.
Where has it got you?
[Throws holy water on his face]
Are you not feeling better already?

Client [slowly]: Yes.

Healer: [waits for this to sink into the audience]
You are in the early stages of *muulai kaachal* [brain fever]. See an English *marundu vaidiyar* [allopathic doctor]. You are being plagued by the ghost of a man who lived on street *x*. He was your companion on walks.
[Rubs the man's back with wax from candles burning in front of the domestic shrine.]
This will guard you against the *aavi* [ghost].
I wonder why none of my devotees brings me fresh candles (*molaguthiri*).
You must come back to me for six visits.
But do not wait to seek English *marundu* [medicine] for your complaint.

Healers who convert from Hinduism to Christianity as part of their divine ordination also report a similar Manichaean struggle between Christian and Hindu deities. Mariam, now a healer, was born into a Hindu family and was sent to a convent to work as a tailor. She continued to visit churches after her marriage, much to her mother-in-law's disapproval. She neglected the worship and upkeep of the household shrine, and became seriously ill. She refused hospitalisation and remained impervious to Hindu exorcism, asking only to be taken to St Michael's shrine at Raja Uuru. When finally taken there she lay rigid and without food for three days, at the end of which the saint came and told her: "I have brought you, destined to die, back to life. But I will not let you live in the place inhabited by Satan. Destroy the Hindu shrine in your household and I will come and live there instead."

The command could not be obeyed without conflict with the family, who were finally forced by Mariam's repeated serious illness and continuous visions to agree to her seeking baptism.

The efforts of the Christian healers to assert the supremacy of Christian deities over Hindu ones is contested from within the Christian population itself. In the discourse of the possessed, the visual characteristics of the Christian images and the linguistic and bodily signs of the healers in turn become material for mockery.

The Discourse of the Demonic

The demonic discourse is the "Other" of the Christian divine, inverting the latter, mocking it and threatening it. At the same time it is a dialectical Other in which the distance between the two discourses is not as vast as it may first seem, and seeming opposition can even become identity. Both discourses share the same characteristic way of expressing a form of consciousness through condensed bodily metaphors.

In shrines such as Raja Uuru, where I did most of my observation of public rituals of possession and healing, the possessed pour out their anger and mockery at Christian divinities. Here, any physical or visual characteristic of the Christian divinity becomes the target for mockery and abuse, often quite clever in its transformation of the established interpretation. Thus the sandalled foot of St Michael, his *chaapathi kaal*, becomes his *nonDi kaal*, his lame foot: with one foot raised off the ground, leaning on his spear, he is mocked as a disabled, feeble old man. He is called *kuruDu kaNa*, the blind one, a *moTTai* or bald one. Similarly, the Virgin Mother's serene composure is transformed by the demonic discourse into a kind of complacency. Women go running up to her pedestalled existence inside her shrine, and shake their fist at her, demand to know who she thinks she is, seated smugly and snugly behind

the steel bars that now cover her shrine. They ask what she is afraid of that she has to cower behind steel bars. Adolescent girls come repeatedly rushing over, and slap their hands on the wall immediately under the bars, and occasionally rattle the bars themselves. I was told that previously the shrine had been covered only with a glass casing, but this was repeatedly broken by the possessed.

I will concentrate here on the interpretation of female possession as paradigmatic of the discourse of the demonic. It is in women that the discourse of bodily possession – both demonic and divine – finds its fullest expression. This is true even at an empirical level: a very high proportion of both faith healers and the demonically possessed that I came across in Kanyakumari District were women. However, I am here referring primarily to the semiotics of bodily possession, not to its incidence. The female body is paradigmatic in the sense that it is able to convey the full range of the meanings codified through possession. This is particularly striking in the inversions which are the dominant trope of demonic possession. Hayden White (1978) elaborates on the meaning of trope in contemporary literary criticism:

> Tropes generate figures of speech or thought by their variation from what is "normally" expected, and by the associations they establish between concepts normally felt not to be related or to be related in ways different from that suggested in the trope used ... it is always not only a deviation *from* one possible, proper meaning, but also a deviation *towards* another meaning, conception, or ideal of what is right and proper *and true* "in reality". Thus considered, troping is both a movement *from* one notion of the ways things are related *to* another notion, and a connection between things so that they can be expressed in a language that takes account of the possibility of their being expressed otherwise (1978:2).

In the sense discussed above, the entire discourse of the demonic can be seen as one gigantic trope, expressed not through texts but through "the usually neglected phonic, graphic, corporeal supports" of texts and social practices (Gross 1986:128), a combination of bodily movement, words, gestures. The aim of this bodily discourse is also specific to the feminine: possessed women continually play with, invert and mock the cultural construction of femininity, directing their play at the locally produced metaphors of binding, cooling and seclusion with which the female body is disciplined. The cult of the village goddess, even when entering Christian women in an illicit manner, continues to keep alive the range of potentialities in much the same way as the image of the unruly woman on top kept open a way of symbolising social alternatives in early modern Europe (Davis 1978).

At Raaja Uuru, one can witness the visible transformation of women from respectable femininity to disorderly demon-goddess. The focal point of this transformation is the dance of the demon, *peey aaTam*. The women are brought by their families and by healers to dance. At first, resisting this expectation, the possessed women sit very still, head covered, sari demurely wrapped around. Only their eyes, fiercely brooding in an inward stare, betray that they are not the same as other ordinary worshippers gathered there. The dance or *peey aaTam* has many different levels of meaning. At one level it signifies the power of Christian divinity over the demonic – by dancing, the demon has had to make its presence overt instead of existing only through its effects, the symptoms. The powerful presence of the saints and the Virgin at the shrines torments the demon in the women – and the dance is therefore at one level an expression of torment. The *aaTam* acknowledges this dimension by bodily symbols of torment and chastisement. Women may dance with their arms pinned together at the wrist, held at the back of the body as if bound by the invisible ropes tied there by the saint. Women may roll over and over on the ground, with their ankles similarly pinned together. To all onlookers, this is the divine work of St Michael punishing the demon.

At the same time, *peey aaTam* is utilised by the women as a moment of physical liberation, a breaking loose from the daily restraints imposed on the female body. The utilisation of dance in ecstatic possession has a long history in Tamil religion. Descriptions of this phenomenon go as far back as the poetry of the Cankam period. In the *akam* poems from this period, dance is the mode by which the healer is able to enter into a trance:

> [M]an could for particular purposes call upon a special medium, the velan, "he who (holds) the spear"; he was a kind of soothsayer or shaman, who by getting possessed by Murukan could divine the cause of various diseases, when he had entered into a trance induced by a frenzied dance and had consulted the *kalanku* oracle. In akam poems, a particular genre developed in which the velan is called to cure the sickness of a girl which in reality only her lover can cure. For example: "My friend! When my mother, on account of my 'illness', arranges for the velan to come, will that velan be able to find out about my affair with the lord of the fragrant country, when he is in the frenzy of possession?" (Hardy 1983:138-139).

His dance is called *veriyaTu*, the dance of wild frenzy. But the dance had a religious significance far wider than the figure of the healer, particularly for women. Thus from this Cankam literature we hear of "the large market place where festivals never cease, which is crowded with girls (dancing) the *veriyaTu* of Cevvel" (Hardy 1983:139).

Under the Church's regime, dance is no longer a legitimate mode of religious experience. Indeed, there is no longer any form of dance available to men or women in the fishing community. Through the now familiar mechanism of displacement, *aaTam* re-emerges as the prime signifier of the forbidden, in the possession of Christian patients by the Hindu demonic. It still retains its old place as the crucial medium available to the healer in the cure of illness/possession, but it is no longer the healer who dances. Rather it is the worshipper of the Hindu deity, redefined as the sick patient. Sickness and possession are, however, highly ambiguous phenomena – they both reflect social expectations of the patient (that they will dance, that this dance is an expression of torment, acknowledging the power of social/religious norms), and constitute a transgression and rupture of those norms.

In the course of the *peey aaTam*, Christian women systematically invert every one of the symbolic yet corporeal modes of containment examined so far.

Hair, usually bound, is released from its knot to hang loosely. As the women roll in the sand in front of the shrine and leap in the air, the hair acquires a wild and unkempt appearance. As the women sway with head hanging forward, the hair is used to sweep the sand. Covering the face, the hair hangs limp, then is thrown back and forth as the head thrashes around. The mere sight of Kannagi's unbound hair was sufficient to cause the terrified king of Madurai to die.[5] These women are deliberately using hair as a symbolic weapon, drawing on the rich chain of associations of unbound female hair to produce a state of awe and terror among spectators.

The sari loses its normal modest draping quality. It is now hitched up and tucked into the *paavaaDai*, or underskirt, while the *talappu* which usually covers the breasts is tucked into the side of the sari. For women now turn into acrobats: running up towards the saint ensconced in his shrine, they break into wild somersaults, and swing with their arms wound around the pillars of the *mandapam* or covering of the shrine, occasionally shinning up the pillars. Men claim that a possessed woman, infused with the strength of a tiger, can fight a man.

The adolescent girls, who form a kind of sub-group among the possessed, give the vivid impression of enjoyment, as against older women who may look troubled and angry. These young girls perform not as individuals, but as a collective. They move with a bobbing, jaunty step, hand on hip, taking delight in their freedom of movement and speech. In the course of their wanderings they may descend on faith healers, taunting and defying them. The possession of the girls merges with a

kind of play, delighting in verbal games with healers, swinging around pillars, and somersaulting. Recent commentary on female hysteria and possession has attempted to make just such a suggestive connection between the theatre of the body in possession, and in other contexts such as those of circus acrobats and the play of children (Clement 1986). Clement brings them together in her commentary on the "rite of the swing" among women said to have been bitten by the tarantula spider:

> A rhythmic motion, which reproduces the rocking of infancy, pacifies. A motion reproducing the way Arachne was suspended by Athena in the threads of her web. Spider, hanged doll, the pleasure of a swing. The women swing, swing from it, don't give a hang for it, make fun of it: the Greek ritual of sacred swings is the same childish game as that of little girls' swinging (1986:21).

To the outsider at Raja Uuru, the inappropriate feeling of being present at a festival or carnival rather than among the sick and suffering is enhanced by the loud laughter and the clapping of hands from the possessed women. Young girls in Mukkuvar villages who are being schooled in the norms of femininity are told sternly by elder women when they laugh too loudly and openly: "*Pallai kaaTaade*", or "do not show your teeth". Open and unabashed laughter in a woman is as unpleasant as an animal baring its fangs, the snarling of a beast that shows its teeth. The possessed women blur the distinction between animal and human by inverting the signs of femininity.

Finally, there is the strong element of mockery and taunting which predominates in the speech of the possessed women. I have mentioned this feature earlier, but it deserves to be underlined since it is a striking component of the pleasure principle, the libidinous semiotic in Kristeva's sense, which surfaces here.[6] At the same time, since it emerges in the form of speech, and is not confined to bodily symptoms, the repressed is here allowed to make some impact on the conscious, to have some efficacy through the symbolic order of language. The licentious speech of the oppressed classes has always been a notable feature of their enjoyment in the *charivari* of the carnival (Davis 1978; Darnton 1984; Guha 1983). Mockery and strong language are certainly not alien to the daily speech of Mukkuvar women – but there is a difference between everyday abuse and the mockery of possessed women. I have already described the form taken by daily forms of mockery – often directed principally at other women, and reinforcing the patriarchal norms for female conduct. Among the possessed, it is directed outward, at divinity itself. The women taunt the capacity of the Christian divinities even to begin to understand and correctly identify the nature of the demonic,

let alone attempt to control it. An eighteen-year-old shouts out: *"Ei, kuruDu kaNa* (blind one) – not even the *mantravaadis* could drive me out. Why should you think of yourself any more highly?" The speech is punctuated by loud derisory snorting sounds which identify the demonic.

The young girls hive off, run as a collective pack, hunt their prey: divinity itself. Confrontation with the divine reaches its keenest delight when the divine can answer back in human form, through the faith healers. Where the healer is also a woman, we have the ultimate spectacle: woman against woman, one representing the patriarchal Virgin/Christian Maataa, the other representing the Hindu goddess turned demon. In the excerpt quoted below, the young girls are taking full advantage of the ambiguity in the popular interpretation of Catholicism: Virgin and goddess/demon are supposed to be antithetical. Yet both possess the human body and only a very practiced and knowing reading of the bodily text can distinguish one from the other. All healers who cure as Virgin or saint depend on the maverick element of social acceptance for credibility. Most healers in fact begin their careers under a cloud of suspicion that it is the demon disguised as saint which speaks through them. It is this fine line separating community acceptance from rejection which the girls continually try to erode when mocking the healers:

Girls: *Ei paaTi* (old woman) – can you tell everyone what kind of a demon I am?

Healer: I know how tormented you are already. I will send you even greater torment until you leave.

Girls: Do you expect us to believe that you are Mikheel (St Michael)? If everyone could turn into a Michael, what is the point of coming into a shrine? People may as well stay at home! In fact, it is not Michael at all – only Cholla (Sudalai) MaaDan pretending to be Michael, the old *nonDi kaal* (cripple). See – we have disrupted your *muzhi* (trance state), and you cannot fool these people any more.

In my account of the gender-specific production of bodily symbols I have tried to avoid the dual tendencies of psychoanalytic and sociological reductionism that vitiate the literature on possession. My own account of female possession gives central place to the women's experience of cultural/bodily discipline. Recent feminist criticism of psychoanalysis for the way it has obliterated the question of sexual difference is apposite here (Clement 1986; Irigaray 1985). Anthropology has utilised a version of psychoanalysis which is not only alarmingly crude (matted

locks equal "sublated penis emerging from the head" [Obeyesekere 1981:34]), but which fails to interrogate the phallocentrism of psychoanalysis with its "predesignated masculine categories, for example uncastrated woman = masculinity complex; normal femininity = castration" (Gross 1986:135). Under the masquerade of a "human" subjectivity, of a generalised human body in which "matted locks" have the same meaning for male and female ascetics ("sublated penis", of course), Obeyesekere is able to obliterate the entire question of sexual difference despite the fact that nearly all his material is based on the experience of female possession. A masculinist interpretation is meant to stand for the whole of human experience. Even where the orthodox psychoanalytic paradigm allows the question of sexual difference to be raised, as in Kakar's two books on Indian culture (1981) and healing (1982), far greater time and sympathy is spent on male fears, anxieties and repressions than on female ones. Once again, the reductionism of orthodox psychoanalysis presents an obstacle – in Kakar's hands, the possession of women in India may have its fascinating local colour, but ultimately they are all expressing a simple repressed sexual wish framed by the familiar predesignated masculine categories referred to above. The complex interplay of the different relations of power that feed into the possession of the Christian women in Kanyakumari are here emptied of their content.

I am arguing that as long as the strategies of power inscribed on the body are predicated on the sex of the human subject, bodily forms of representation and inversion must also be read in a gendered way. At the same time, this reading must give attention to the specific mode in which possessed women speak – not in conscious sociological commentary but with unconscious references back to the bodily basis of femininity and divinity in popular culture. The sociological analysis of possession ignores this unconscious dimension, even while it has enabled anthropologists (Lewis 1971; Brown *et al.* 1981; Freed and Freed 1964) to note, with varying degrees of sophistication, the links between femininity and possession. In this genre, social powerlessness, sometimes accentuated by social transformation (Constantinides 1978; Curley 1973) is responsible for the production of possession in women and other disadvantaged groups. But is there no difference between women and other disadvantaged groups? In this account it is difficult to see any. Freed and Freed write: "Opler mentions eight women who suspected ghosts and sought the aid of a shaman because of menstrual pain, death of children, barrenness, miscarriage and other ailments" (1964:170). Social tension may underlie possession, but why does it find its specific expression in the illnesses of female gynaecology? Once again, the spe-

cific content of the popular discourse on divinity and femininity in countries such as India disappears from sight.

Instead, the sociological idiom focuses attention on the function of possession – is it reproducing the social order by providing a safety valve for the tensions in the system, or is it changing that order? Ultimately, this is an important question, but I have not introduced it in the foregoing analysis due to its tendency to deflect attention from a careful examination of the discourse itself. I would, however, like to close this section by pointing out that the possession of women as illness is like the malady of the twentieth-century hysteric, rather than the ritual rebellion of the annual festival which has preoccupied anthropologists since Gluckmann: it cannot be planned for and put away at the end of a specified period to allow a return to normality. As such, it disrupts and ruptures the orderly reproduction of daily life and of the domestic domain, which depends crucially on the labour and cooperation of women. Illness and possession may mean the difference between a family being able to survive economically or not in communities such as the Mukkuvars, where labour power is almost the sole means of production. Illness and possession may end in cure, but they also have a disturbing tendency to recur when all seems settled: the threat of women turning into angry goddesses and demons is ever-present.

Further, possession by its very nature renders itself open to multiple interpretations within Tamil culture. It may be illness, evidence of a malign, harmful demonic presence or it may be the exaltation of the highest form of religious experience open to humanity. Illness itself may signify disease or erotic love. To make the matter even more complex, the difference between these various phenomena can only be established through possession, in the body of the healer. Women have historically taken advantage of these open-ended possibilities – passing off the illness of forbidden erotic love as ordinary illness (Hardy 1983:138-139), or else resisting parental control of their sexuality in the name of a higher, divine bridegroom. Christian women, denied a place in the formal positions of authority within the Church, disadvantaged by poverty, illiteracy and gender, continually play on these culturally given possibilities as well, to permit them direct access to divinity. Since it is never unequivocally clear that it is the demon and not a god speaking through them, peasant women suspected of demonic possession may still strive to convince all that they are the vessels of divine grace and power. In this way, they can constitute themselves as healers, and establish a position which transcends the confines of family, kin-group, village and even caste, to cater to the peasant community.

Their establishment as healers is always open to challenge and re-interpretation – as the taunts of the demonically possessed at Raja Uuru indicate. What is not held against them, as it would be in elite religion, is their low status as poor peasant women. Indeed, their poverty and low status are emphasised in the self-representation of these healers. In detailed case histories I collected of four faith healers, the suffering caused by poverty and gender is further underlined by a period of prolonged suffering as illness, death and loss of family fortune threaten the household of the woman who has embarked on the path to divine grace. In retrospect, this period is interpreted as the trial one must undergo in order to achieve this state (cf. Obeyesekere's exegesis of the "dark night of the soul" experienced by Sinhalese women healers). Egnor (1980) also describes the deliberate adoption of dirty, "low caste" habits among the Hindu Tamil healers she met. Far from being a handicap, low status and the experience of being the lowest of low – a woman from the despised castes – can be turned into a positive advantage in popular religion.

Ultimately, the non-reproductive status of popular religion, and women's use of popular religion, can be pursued as a thesis only by examining the fear and contempt it inspires in the discourse of the elite. I close my examination of popular Catholicism among the Mukkuvars with a brief look at the attitudes of the Church.

The Church and Popular Christianity

Priest A (two years the parish priest at KaDalkarai Uuru):

> Yes, I believe there can be possession by the devil. The *kaNaku* (faith) healers I totally oppose, since it is the devils speaking with the voice of angels. First, God would never lie – yet many of the healers' predictions are wrong. Second, judge a tree by its fruits. Yet there was a murder attempt in KaDalkarai Uuru following the "revelation" by a healer that his neighbour had stolen his watch. God would not cause this kind of conflict. Third, look at the gap between the lives of the healers and the divine powers they claim. They are dirty, ignorant and have no purity of heart.
>
> Genuine *peey aaTam* is recognisable by its insatiable frenzy, its fear of anything to do with the church. If cured, such cases exhibit extraordinary devotion to the church and become powerful lay preachers themselves. The majority of cases are simply psychological disorder caused by accumulated tension – disappointment in love, domestic strife, etc. A great deal of imitation is involved in such cases. I saw a young boy in KaDalkarai Uuru begin imitating the assistants to a *mantravaadi* who came to remove a *tahaDu* from his household. Such cases can respond to individual attention. I have conducted prayer groups for such people, aimed not at any devils, but at giving them peace of mind. I have also forbidden the performance of *peey aaTam* at the shrines of the saints in the parishes I work

in, and such a stern stance has often curbed the outbreak of a whole wave of hysteric dancing and healing.

The *kaNaku* healers who have told you they have the sanction of the church for their activities are mistaken. They ask us priests to come and pray at their house – and we cannot refuse such a request. This they then interpret as giving our blessing to their enterprise.

Priest B (parish priest transferred from Madurai to the coastal village of KooDimonai):

We believe in evil, but not in the personalised possession of individuals by evil. There may be a few genuine cases of devil possession. For such an eventuality one or two priests in a Diocese may have learnt special prayers. But it is not needed in anything like the numbers that it occurs in the villagers' diagnoses. If people come to us with what they say is possession, we say an ordinary prayer. It seems to help them. But most are social problems. Evil itself is a social problem.

School teacher at Colachel:

Most possession cases are due to mental tension, as you can see from the high incidence among women. The tensions come from the husband's drinking, children's behaviour, overcrowding, fighting, envy, competition, everyone watching one another.

Males pass on family responsibilities to women and do not suffer as much.

There are also the true cases of possession – to be detected by the extraordinary qualities of the possessed. They recognise the names of strangers, speak foreign languages, know of events occurring in distant parts of the world. Possession by "Hindu" spirits is simply because the more fearsome Hindu idols look demon-like to our fisherpeople. So they say it is Kali who is in them.

But there are also cases of pure fright:

ArunDavan kannuku
IrunDatillam Peey
(To the eyes of a fearful man
Everything around seems a demon.)

The shock of an uncanny encounter can affect the mind badly and encourage us to snatch at ready-made explanations.

In the responses of the priests to the phenomenon of Mukkuvar religiosity one can detect at least two lines of thought, both mutually in tension, but which unite in opposition to popular religion. The first is the official stance of the Church, which as an institution concerned with the spiritual welfare of humanity is bound to recognise the power and reality of evil, incarnated as the Devil. In the orthodox religious idiom, then,

the "reality" and distinct possibility of possession by evil is acknowledged – indeed it is the task of the Church to oppose and conquer the presence of evil and sin. Priests are therefore obliged to admit the possibility of Satanic possession, and must respond to villagers' requests for spiritual help in driving out such evil. Priests are thus unable to maintain a complete aloofness and distance from popular religion – they are implicated by reciting prayers at the request of individuals or in prayer groups, and by blessing objects of iconic status such as rosary beads over the bodies of sick or possessed villagers.

However, recognising the "reality" of divine possession, in villagers who speak and heal as the saints and the Maataa, is quite another matter. Such villagers threaten the twin bases of the Church's claim to power: its "monopoly over mediation between man and God", to use Stirrat's phrase (1981), and its capacity to heal and cleanse humanity of sin and affliction.

Weber's notion of "institutionalised charisma", where charisma lies not at the level of the person but at the level of the institution is elaborated by Turner (1984) with reference to traditions of sainthood in Islam and Christianity. He argues that the length of the process of canonisation ensured that "all saints are orthodox and dead" (68) and cites research that the "official" saints of the Church have been predominantly recruited from dominant, privileged classes.

The capacity of Mukkuvars and other Catholic sections of the Kanyakumari peasantry to make fluid transitions from demonic to divine possession, without any intervention or mediation from the Church, is a potent threat to this official control over the religious commodity of charisma. It must be noted immediately that the threat is not necessarily intended by the healers themselves. *KaNaku* healers would in fact be extremely gratified by the approval and ratification of the Church, and hanker for such legitimacy. Healers often tell stories of a visit from the local priest, and of their success in allaying doubts in the priest's mind about their own authenticity:

> Father James visited me when I first started getting the *muzhi*. He visited me three days in a row. He questioned me, asked why a regular church attender such as myself should behave in this fashion. I replied that if it was the devil speaking through me, I could not continue to attend church. He finally was satisfied, and gave me permission to continue, on the condition that I only use Christian prayers to heal people, and that I use my powers to convert people from non-Christian beliefs. (Mary, the healer)

While priests deny ever legitimising such activities (see priest A's statement), the popularity of a healer working from a base at her own domestic shrine may indeed spark off an attempt at cooption by the

Church. Such an attempt was made at a healer's shrine in the inland village of TheruvakaDai, where the priest offered to lead a weekly prayer at the shrine. The arrangement was resisted by the healer since he would have had to accede to the shrine being closed for the rest of the week by the priest, thus cutting off the healer's access to divine power. Further, as priest A's statement acknowledges, priests are not above prohibiting transactions between healers, the possessed and the divinity by forbidding *peey aaTam* around the Church's premises. The statements of the priests therefore show none of the sanguine attitude towards healers and villagers suggested by the notion of a complementary division of labour between a "transcendent" and a "pragmatic" religious complex. Rather, the entire framework of priestly intervention is one of discrediting the distinctive features of popular Catholicism.

Compare for a moment such attitudes with those of the Brahman priest at ManDaikkaDu towards low-caste Hindu cults. There is a striking convergence of elite religious attitudes to be noted. The complaint of some of the more educated Mukkuvars that "the coastal people are made to feel ashamed of their speech and ways by the priests who are trying to make Brahmans of our girls" acquires its full resonance only when placed in this context.

In this attempt to discredit popular Catholicism the traditional stance of the Church has been joined and aided by a somewhat unlikely argument of recent origin: that of sociological positivism and rationalism. Through the influence of liberation theology on the Church in south India, those such as priest B are now inclined to look upon villagers as "the oppressed". In this view, while a small minority of possessed are still in the clutches of the devil "speaking in the voice of angels", the rest are simply sick, psychologically disturbed, and suffering from social problems. We are back in the realm of Western logocentrism that is evident in the sociological accounts of possession found in anthropology – once again, the denial and supercession of the place of the body in popular religion by a conscious, rational discourse.

Such a misplaced rationalism merges rather easily with an elitest attitude towards popular culture and religion. Liberation theology may be the particular conduit through which Western rationalism has influenced priestly attitudes, but it is conveyed equally effectively through schooling and the kind of education it inculcates. It represents a stance which unites priests even with educated Mukkuvars who would be inclined to be fiercely critical of priestly power and corruption on all other fronts. The language of the school teacher, a Mukkuvar staunchly opposed to the Church's power, is virtually indistinguishable from the priests'. In both cases, the Mukkuvar villagers emerge as impression-

able, fearful – always inferior. In the new version of priestly religion, one may attack social problems, but religion is still individualistic. Each individual villager is supposed to be ruled by his or her *sammanasu* or conscience and utilise nothing but prayers to conquer and combat the evil in themselves. The fact that villagers allow evil and good to battle it out externally, as the Virgin and the Demon; that they experience this battle in a collective mode, as part of a group at the healers' shrines or at the shrines of the saints; that they experience this collectivity through the medium of their bodies and in an altered state of consciousness – all these features are still anathema to the new radicalism in the Church and among educated villagers. One may almost speak of a "Protestant Catholicism" in the making, one perhaps even further from popular Catholicism than the traditional stance of the Roman Catholic Church.

Popular Religion as Cultural Struggle

Mukkuvar popular religion has acquired some of its specific features from its involvement in a terrain which may be defined as a cultural battlefield. The ability to mark out an autonomous stance in a cultural terrain is directly related to the strength (economic, political) of the partners engaged in battle. As part of a broad grouping of castes, the artisan-merchant bloc, fisherpeople have enjoyed a cultural autonomy which must be related to (but cannot be wholly explained by) their freedom from economic subservience. One can easily imagine how much more heavily compromised would be the religious practices of economically dependent castes such as landless agricultural labourers. Moffatt's ethnography of just such a group (1979) testifies to their replication of Sanskritic hierarchies within their own religious cults – but his dismay at having to report this also testifies to an underlying misconceived quest for an autonomous subjectivity among the subjugated.

At the same time Moffat – and indeed most functionalist interpreters of religion – underestimate the tensions which underlie hegemony, and which require that hegemony to be constantly re-affirmed and reconstructed. Growing evidence indicates that castes penalised by Sanskritic beliefs will modify them to allow themselves a measure of dignity and some capacity to shape their own lives. Moffatt's own ethnography shows how different are the explanations offered by Brahmans and untouchables on the origins of caste and untouchability. The former stress karma, the notion of untouchables having earned their low status by an accumulation of impurities. The latter typically stress upper caste trickery and their own naiveté in allowing themselves to lose status. Kolenda (1964) presents similar evidence on the sweepers' view of karma theory.

Even such minor modifications and inflections are important for groups whose situation is defined by their extreme dependency.

Cultural processes, whether of myth or ritual, may reflect the standpoint of the hegemonic elite by synthesising and defusing latent antagonisms, which is why functionalist interpretations (such as Beck's otherwise excellent account, published in 1981, of the goddess festival in village Tamil Nadu) retain a surface plausibility and force. However, what such interpretations fail to do is to interrogate these as process, or bear witness to the interplay of power. Guha (1985) attempts such a deconstruction in his account of the myths surrounding the lunar eclipse and the use that untouchable ex-tribal groupings have made of these myths.

A possible pitfall here is simply to equate non-Sanskritic elements with an inherent class bias in favour of the dominated. Neither Sanskritic nor non-Sanskritic ideology is inherently "elite" or "subaltern". Rather, the two constitute distinctive moments of religious history which now coexist and constitute cultural resources or raw material for different classes or caste blocs to define and utilise. It would, however, be fair to say that given the overwhelming utilisation of Sanskritic ideology to uphold caste and patriarchal supremacy, groups seeking to subvert this supremacy have found richer materials to hand in the non-Sanskritic tradition which has proved particularly forceful in the context of colonialism and post-colonial transformations. The contrast drawn within the non-Brahman movement of the south, between Brahmanism and a Dravidian culture uncorrupted by Brahman importations, parallels the contrast drawn by the urban untouchable ideologies of the Lucknow Charmars studied by Khare (1984), between an Indic tradition (Buddhist, Jain and ascetic religious traditions) and the Hindu tradition. Parallel political appropriations of the goddess tradition have occurred in the nationalist movement (Ratte 1985) and more recently, in the urban feminist movement in the 1970s. Such utilisations represent comparatively articulate, conscious challenges to cultural and political hegemony. In the case of the popular Catholicism found in Kanyakumari and among castes such as the Mukkuvars, the antagonisms between elite and subaltern interpretations are no more than implicit.

In viewing popular religion as a site of cultural struggle I am signalling a break from the characterisation of world religions as composed of two complementary complexes (Mandelbaum 1966). In such formulations, the place of the body in peasant religiosity is recognised and at the same time mis-recognised. In Mandelbaum's characterisation, popular religion serves as an example of a pragmatic complex which complements a transcendental complex. The first problem here lies with the efface-

ment of the relation between social class, power and religious culture. Each complex may have different concerns and be serviced by different personnel (shamans and priests), but both are adhered to by all sections of Indian society and in the same manner. Here the problem of power and struggle disappears entirely in a cosy relationship of mutual affirmation and homogeneity in the different sections of the social structure.

The second problem is one which would remain even if we reintroduced questions of class and power into this schema. This has to do with the characterisation of popular religion as pragmatic. It comes up again in Bryan Turner's 1984 article. In discussing the relation between scholarly and mass Islam, he places the matter squarely in class terms: "Rather than treating Islam as a 'decline' from or 'corruption' of pure Islam, popular religion may be regarded as a form of 'practiced Islam' and the relationship between scholarly religion and its popular manifestations as an interaction between social groups interpreting their practices by reference to common formulae" (1984:55-56).

However, when it comes to characterising the "mundane interests and needs" of the rural peasantry, we find in Turner a strikingly behaviourist interpretation: these are about the "acquisition of remedies and cures". First pragmatic, and now mundane! Certainly, popular religion sets up its own practices, exemplified in the pilgrimages to shrines and healers. The healers give the religious paradigm its efficacy, the point at which it is demonstrated to have a real transformative power over the material world. But to reduce the discourse to the pragmatic cure-seeking behaviour of the peasantry is to rob it of its own specific assemblage of meanings.

Yet another way of minimising popular religion is not only to interpret it as concerned with cure-seeking behaviour, but to see illness as a "liminal" period during which all religious and social taboos are suspended. The readiness of popular believers to cross religious boundaries is here again reduced to a kind of pragmatism. The desperation of people during illness is enough to drive them to try anything: a Christian faith healer, a Hindu *mantravaadi*, Western allopathic medicine. Such eclectic strategies are, of course, striking features of villagers' approach to illness. However, the reason they are able to move with such ease from one to the other relates back to the problematic, one which not only relates peasants divided by official religious barriers, but one which integrates the peasant view of illness with the peasant view of the place of the body in religion, as a part of everyday life.

In order to dispute this behaviourism I have examined the distinctive and systematic interrelation of concepts in popular Catholicism. This is

a consciousness necessarily eclectic, deriving strands from diverse sources. However, the principle of selectivity in the way they are incorporated emphasises some elements, gives different inflections to others while yet other, fundamentally incompatible, elements are suppressed altogether.[7] With regard to Hinduism, the Sanskritic construction of divinity and femininity along the grid of purity and pollution is virtually suppressed. Popular Hindu images of a multivalent conceptualisation of femininity have more resonance – but cannot be incorporated untransformed due to tensions between Christian fishing castes and Hindu agricultural ones. The tensions allow the Church to reaffirm and establish its hegemony over the coastal people. We thus have the splitting of the multivalent goddess and the projection of her anger onto the Hindu population.

In my analysis, therefore, the actual content of the popular religious consciousness is vital to analysing the kinds of relationships (of antagonism, transformation, suppression) that this consciousness forges with the rest of the peasantry and with elite culture. In his "Deconstruction of the popular", Stuart Hall argues that it is the tension between the culture of the elite and the culture of the periphery which determines what is popular from one historical period to the next (1981). For him, the content of each category (elite/popular cultural activity) is irrelevant to the definition of the popular in any given period: it is forces and relations which sustain the difference. Hall's approach, a useful corrective to a trivially descriptive social history, seems unduly structuralist in the end. Anthropological traditions, thanks to the care given by the ethnographer to content and detail, have always had some inbuilt corrective to the construction of content-less structuralist boxes – but have been notably deficient in paying attention to the central way in which power is implicated in the production of knowledge. Representations of Indian culture as a unified and shared set of meanings, which forego the investigation of hegemony as an ongoing process, which is always under some form of contestation, are striking illustrations of this critical failure. Practices which have contributed to this failure are now under challenge within anthropology as a result of a more generalised critique of conventional modes of representation in Western social theory. An introduction by Clifford to a set of essays on the practice of ethnographic writing (Clifford and Marcus 1986), states: "If culture is not an object to be described, neither is it a unified corpus of symbols and meanings that can be definitively interpreted. Culture is contested, temporal and emergent" (1986:19).

Notes

1 *Editors' note:* This paper is a lightly edited version of the latter part of Chapter 4 of Kalpana Ram's monograph *Mukkuvar Women: Gender, Hegemony and Capitalist Transformation in a South Indian Fishing Community* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, Women in Asia Publication Series, 1991). We thank Allen & Unwin and The Editorial Committee (Asian Studies Association of Australia) for permission to reprint this work. This section examines the themes of Chapter 4 ("Popular religion and femininity: the signification of the female body as a culturally contested zone") from a different vantage point – that of the women themselves, who had thus far been discussed as the passive objects, rather than the agents, of cultural rules and practices.

2 A semi-autonomous community of Catholic fishing people living in a predominantly Hindu agrarian society in the Kanyakumari District of Tamil Nadu, South India.

3 Local pronunciation of the name of the Hindu goddess Issakai, as worshipped by local Hindu castes in Kanyakumari District. She is a village goddess with a complex range of meanings. For the Mukkuvars, Eseki has demon companions and is the source of evil and affliction. In opposing the Catholic Virgin (on the side of good) to Eseki, the Mukkuvars split the unity of the opposing qualities of femininity embodied in the Hindu goddess.

4 Mother (Mary).

5 The Tamil epic *Silappadikaram* stresses the potential for destruction in the wrath of the chaste wife, by describing her loosened hair.

6 Cf. Gross on Kristeva: "The semiotic is thus both the precondition and the excessive overflow of the symbolic. It is necessary for symbolic functioning, but because it cannot be spoken as such, it also continues to exert a possible resistance to and subversion of symbolic norms.... Like the dream or symptom, a repressed eruption in the discourse of consciousness, the semiotic threatens at certain privileged moments, to transgress its subordinated, unacknowledged position, breaching the limits of textual intelligibility and destabilising symbolic efficacy" (1986:129-130).

7 In setting my argument out in this form, my views have been sharpened and clarified by Partha Chatterjee's recent work on nationalism in India (1986). Chatterjee is concerned with a very similar question: what are the tensions, contradictions and suppressions which mark nationalist thought as the discourse of a subordinate class, in his case, the indigenous bourgeoise of colonial India.

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