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This paper examines issues of embodied performativity and transmission of dance practices amongst Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus in the suburbs of London, focusing on how the experience of migration has shaped the making of cultural and ethnic identities. Using data gathered from recent ethnographic work in British Tamil temples and in the Tamil community, it addresses the complex discourse between the religious and political sense of selfhood articulated in these Sri Lankan Tamil groups, particularly in relation to dance and ritual performance, and seeks to answer questions regarding the place of dance and movement in defining such identity. In addition, I note the expansion in transmission and performance of the classical dance form of Bharatanatyam in British temple locations and the presence of trance dancing at Hindu festivals, and question how investigating migration as embodied practice might lead to greater understanding of such highly politicised contexts.

Keywords: Indian Dance; Bharatanatyam; Migration; Tamil Community; Performativity; Possession and Trance; Ritual Performance

Introduction

This paper examines issues of embodied performativity and transmission of dance practices amongst Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus in the suburbs of London, focusing on

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how the experience of migration has shaped the making of cultural and ethnic identities. Using data gathered from ethnographic work in British Tamil temples and in the Tamil community,[1] it addresses the complex discourse between the religious and political sense of selfhood articulated in these Sri Lankan Tamil groups, particularly in relation to dance and ritual performance, and seeks to answer questions regarding the place of dance and movement in defining such identity. These are groups who are not simply relocating to new homes, but who are redefining their identity having experienced, for the most part, forced migration and powerful dislocatory elements in their lives. In addition, I note the expansion in transmission and performance of the classical dance form of Bharatanatyam in British temple locations and the presence of trance dancing at Hindu festivals, and question how investigating migration as embodied practice might lead to greater understanding of such highly politicised contexts.

As a dance scholar who is neither Indian nor Hindu, I place myself as an outside observer of Hindu ritual practices and events, yet do draw on my experience as a one time student and practitioner of classical Bharatanatyam (and Kathak) dance. Additionally, my many decades of research and interest in Hindu community life, including immersion through sustained periods of detailed fieldwork in the British Hindu community and an engaged study of Hindu scripture and the language of Sanskrit has provided rich data from which to draw these findings. During earlier doctoral research in the UK cities of Leicester and London, I examined Hindu cultural practices, especially dance and movement, as a performative means of expressing faith (David 2005), and current research with which I am engaged forms part of a larger, international project in London, Kuala Lumpur and Johannesburg and focuses on the religious lives of migrant groups described in part in this paper.[2] Using an anthropological approach that engages with people foremost, and which views their cultural practices such as forms of movement and dance, as agents in the production of knowledge, I have endeavoured to go beyond appearances and enquire, observe and participate in a variety of ways that allows deeper engagement in such migratory and cultural lives. The Sri Lankan groups discussed here have warmly welcomed me into their communities and their lives.

Migration and Mobility: The British Sri Lankan Community

The British Tamil population comprises migrants from south India, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Malaysia and Singapore and is therefore not a homogenous community.[3] Sri Lankan Tamils are the largest group, numbering around 150,000 with their first settlers arriving in Britain in 1956 when Sinhalese was made the official language of Sri Lanka in opposition to Tamil. These were high-caste professionals (mainly Vellalars) with proficient linguistic skills who found easy employment in the National Health Service as doctors, or in private practices of accountants and lawyers. This group included younger well-educated men who came to take up university places. Migration to Britain in the late 1960s and early 1970s increased as discrimination[4] against Tamils in Sri Lanka proliferated, and a strong and active community began to

develop in Greater London. The 1977 riots in Sri Lanka added to the numbers of young men fleeing the violence and migrating to Britain, but their facility with English and their educational achievements were not as extensive as their predecessors, impacting on their employability. This particular phase of migration was tempered both by policies in Sri Lanka that restricted the movements of professionally qualified Tamils, and by Britain's tighter immigration laws that had just come into force.[5]

The intense fighting in Sri Lanka during 1983–84, during which it is claimed by Tamils that over 1,500 of their number were killed by the Sinhalese in just one month, led to a huge exodus of Tamils from the island. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, it is estimated that over 1.5 million Sri Lankan Tamils left their homes, mostly never to return to live. Because of the forced nature of the exodus, many of these Tamils became refugees or asylum seekers, ending up in adverse conditions in refugee camps and asylum centres. Many of these Sri Lankans fled to Britain as escalating sectarian attacks threatened their lives in Sri Lanka. Political anthropologist Chris McDowell's analysis in 1996 reveals that during the forced migration period of 1983–91, approximately 100,000 Tamils from Sri Lanka went to North America (including Canada); 160,000 went to India; 7,000–10,000 to Australia, 2,000–3,000 to Singapore and Malaysia, and 200,000 to Western Europe, including 17,000 to Britain. Issues of resettlement, relocation and dislocation feature powerfully in the lives of this immigrant community, and impact directly on the transmission of culture and religion, revealing how Sri Lankan political circumstances are never separate from religious or cultural affairs.

It is the strength of the transnational connections of these more settled Tamil migrants in London boroughs such as Newham, in the east of the city, or Brent[6] in north-west London, which draws even greater numbers of Tamils, seeking asylum, searching for employment and for places of refuge. In Newham, this has created the second largest refugee community in the borough. Out of nearly 5,000 asylum seekers arriving in 2002 in Britain, the majority of them came from Sri Lanka and it is estimated that nearly one-quarter of the British Tamil population were asylum seekers. As far as religious practice is concerned, Tamils show by far the highest numbers of participation at Hindu temples and Tamil Christian churches, and the support provided by their community in socio-cultural, religious and economic ways impacts directly on the settlement experience. In Alice Bloch's sociological study of different refugee groups in London, virtually all Tamil respondents gave their reason for coming to Newham as kinship or friendship ties, or because of other refugees there and the presence of places of worship. Clearly, it is the large numbers of Tamils already living in Newham[7] that allows the more recent refugees to show "tentative signs of acculturation" (Bloch 2002: 144). Understood in this way, the sense of being at home, or of diasporic place-making, is revealed to be multi-layered.

Asylum seekers from Sri Lanka have continued to arrive in Britain, despite the government's decision in June 2003 to add Sri Lanka to its 'White List' of countries now presumed to be safe, and despite protests from the Refugee Council[8] and Amnesty International. However, recent changes in Sri Lankan Tamil migration

patterns reveal a new decline in asylum migration, but an increase in the regrouping and relocating of family groups, particularly of Tamils from Europe to Britain. This secondary migration appears to have been pushed forward by desires for the younger generations to gain an English education, and by the obvious support of a well-established, significant British-based Tamil community. Current research being carried out by the author at a newly established Tamil Hindu 'worshipping centre' (the Melmaruvathur Shakthi Peetham) in East Ham reveal that many of the attendees are relatively recent Tamil migrants from other parts of Europe – Germany,[9] Holland, France and Switzerland – and are frequent travellers between Britain and Europe, and Britain, Sri Lanka and India. In these newly settled, and the more established communities, one pertinent question to be addressed is how the experience of migration is part of a problematical[10] diasporic and global network and how it might influence the performance of culture and of ethnic identity. How are the community's cultural expressions framed? How do dance practices function as cultural identity markers in Tamil, urban, diasporic life? How is ethnic identity transmitted and maintained? Media and culture specialist, Rehan Hyder, in his discussion of Asian music, argues that the "importance of expressive cultural forms and practices are central to any articulation of ethnic identity" (2004: 12). Thus, this paper continues by interrogating the complex issues, which include cultural practices such as dance that form part of the dynamics of the migratory process.

The Future of Tradition? The Dance Form of Bharatanatyam as Temple Practice

> A young dance student, dressed in coloured silk, stitched and pleated into a Bharatanatyam costume, heavily adorned in gold jewellery, long hair plaited with flowers down her back, and wearing *gungurus* (ankle bells), stands by the main shrine of the temple, in front of the highly decorated images of the gods.
>
> She is about to perform *Alarippu*, the first item of a dance recital, to the crowded audience of temple devotees eagerly awaiting her performance. Past and future, local and global, tradition and modernity are present in this poised moment of time that offers stability and a sense of cohesive belonging to the gathered onlookers. (Author's field notes, 26 October 2007)

Many studies on Bharatanatyam claim that performing this classical dance by young Tamil girls and women in diasporic locations is a way of demonstrating a return to one's roots and of ensuring the continuation and absorption of Tamil culture (Cunningham 1998, Ram 2000, Grau 2002). As noted in the SADiB (South Asian Dance in Britain) report by dance scholar Andrée Grau, "In the UK and elsewhere . . . most families who send their daughters to Bharata Natyam classes do it with the conviction of continuing an ancestral duty" (2002: 57). It is a way of ensuring "that one continues a glorious tradition in the modern world" (59). Performances such as the one noted above are increasingly part of diasporic religious practice, as I go on to discuss.

The South Asian classical dance form of Bharatanatyam has its heritage in Tamil Nadu, south India. The lyrics accompanying the dance are mainly in Tamil, Telugu

and Sanskrit and a Tamilised Sanskrit is used for descriptions of the movement forms. Although the heavily weighted narrative of the glorious 3,000-year-old history of Bharatanatyam has now been disputed and exposed by scholars both in the east and west (Allen 1997, Ramphal 2003), this view is still sustained and taught to today's younger generation of dance students, and for many of the South Asian diasporic community, Bharatanatyam is seen as synonymous with tradition and as a highly valued commodity. Dancer and choreographer Shobana Jeyasingh comments:

> For my parents, who were typical of their generation, it was important that their daughter learned Bharata Natyam, the classical dance of India. The idea was that by doing that we kept faith with something ancient and precious about Indian culture. (1998: 49)

Ethnic identity, to the immigrant mind, "is often predicated on the 'traditional' cultural values they believe are embodied by India's classical arts", writes dancer and academic Shanti Pillai (2002: 17) in discussing the contemporary dance scene in Chennai and in particular, the style of Bharatanatyam. In her work on Bharatanatyam in a global context, scholar and Bharatanatyam practitioner Janet O'Shea shows how this dance form appears "internationally as both an emblem of national and diasporic identity and as a 'high art' that transcends national and linguistic boundaries" (2003: 177) and comments that Bharatanatyam "provides a means of maintaining nationalist sentiment in exile for Sri Lankan Tamils in Canada, Germany, and the UK" (178).[11] Further evidence and the significance of political affiliations in the Tamil diasporic community is discussed later in the paper.[12]

There is too a new growth in the teaching of Bharatanatyam dance and of dance performances in the Tamil temples indicating a greater concern for the transmission of traditional culture to the young people. This is also indicative of the more settled nature and growing confidence of the community that enables extra time and energy to be given to cultural practices. Tamil professional dancers/teachers told me that the evidence of dance classes in the temples was a British phenomenon, as in India there are more independent dance schools that cater to the need for dance classes (interviews 12 March 2003). It too reveals the different role that British or diasporic Hindu temples have assumed – one of providing community care (spiritual, moral, cultural and even medical) – as well as traditional ritual worship (David 2008).

Of the several London Hindu temples visited for this research, three offer regular dance classes – the Shree Ghanapathy Temple in Wimbledon, the London Sri Murugan Temple in East Ham and the new Shree Thiruthanigai Vale Murugan Temple in New Malden, south London.[13] Additionally, dance classes were taught at the London Sri Mahalakshmi Temple in East Ham, but have now moved to a local church hall. The dancers from this school, Mudralaya,[14] still perform at the temple on festival occasions. The Sri Muthumari Amman Temple in Tooting, south London ran Bharatanatyam dance classes but these stopped some time ago because of organisational difficulties. On 1 January 2004, however, a Bharatanatyam dance performance was given in this temple by students of the Harrow Tamil Sunday

School, for celebrations for New Year's Day (1 January). The dance teacher described how she had expected the presentation to take place in the downstairs hall, as she was not aware of the performance stage, in the temple, facing the deities. This was usually covered by a curtain and not used for dance performances. In fact, at that event, as the main evening *puja* finished, the devotees simply turned around in their sitting positions to watch the dance performance on the stage. It was beautifully decorated and lit, and although small, provided an entirely appropriate performing space for a devotional programme of Bharatanatyam dance (author's field notes, 1 January 2004). This underlines the importance of the dance form as religious and cultural expression, particularly in a diasporic setting. Most of the abovementioned temples have held performances of Bharatanatyam dance at festival times, although at the Highgatehill Murugan Temple, the festival of *Mahasivaratri*[15] in March 2002 was the first time a dance performance had been held *in* the temple area. Nearly all performances I witnessed were put on by young teenage Tamil dance students, evidencing the enculturation that is prominent in the temples, yet the students, as might be expected, presented quite varied discourses about the place of dance when interviewed, as is shown below.

Changing Narratives of the Younger Generation

Eleven young female Bharatanatyam students, aged between 10 and 17 and studying dance at the London Sri Murugan Temple in East Ham, who I had observed in class over a period of several weeks, completed my questionnaires on the subject of their dance lessons and their views on dance.[16] They had all been trained solely by the teacher at the temple, and had been learning between four and seven years. No boys were present in any of these classes. The only boy I saw joining a class was aged 5, and attending his first lesson. All the girls had successfully taken Grades 1–4 or 1–5 of the Academy of Fine Arts Exams[17] and had danced several times in the temple's hall for *Navratri* festival programmes. The girls indicated that they loved performing. When questioned on their favourite dance style, most stated Bharatanatyam and explained that they enjoyed the music and that it helped them to understand their religion. In conversation later, I put questions to them on the subject of Bharatanatyam vs. Bollywood dance, and they wholeheartedly agreed to enjoying the latter as a dance form and to practising it regularly in school dance clubs. They spoke this in rather hushed voices out of earshot of their dance teacher. Then checking with me that it was acceptable, some of the girls felt confident to write in their questionnaires that Bollywood was in fact their favourite dance form. However, it was obvious that they felt shy of speaking about it in the context and place of their Bharatanatyam lessons. All the Tamil Bharatanatyam teachers I interviewed had no interest in film dance and had no wish to discuss it. Perhaps it is the equivalent of asking Western classical ballet teachers whether they are interested in disco dance? The fact too that the movements in film dance encourage the gaze directly on the female body, and predominately to the breasts and pelvic area would not be acceptable to a strict Tamil Hindu (David

2007a). Bharatanatyam dance is certainly viewed by most of the community as a vehicle for the enculturation of young female Tamils as it is thought to epitomise femininity, to encourage the learning of mythology and religious stories, and to be a valuable carrier of tradition. Boys are encouraged to learn classical Indian instruments rather than dance.

Most of the girls agreed that Bharatanatyam did express their Hindu religion in telling the stories of the mythological gods and the fact that the dancer performs prayers to the gods. Sophie, aged 16, indicated that "Lord Nataraj is the God of dance and I feel I receive his blessing", and Arani, also 16, simply stated, "It is the dance of Lord Siva." Sophie articulated how dance played a part in teaching both the student dancer "and the audience about the gods of the Hindu religion and prevents the religion and culture being forgotten, especially in the west". Sahaana (13) thought that dance "is part of my faith as it has prayers to God, and it tells the story of our God, Lord Nataraja". The girls interviewed enjoyed attending the *Navratri* festival at the temple in order to dance, but importance was given to the meeting of friends and family there as well as watching the other cultural programmes. Meera, aged 12, noted that fasting was her favourite aspect of *Navratri*, whilst Sahanna mentioned taking part in the *puja* held a special significance. For Priya (15), the blessing in the temple after performing the dance was particularly powerful. Although a useful tool, it is worth noting that questionnaires for this age group do not always yield the best results, as often more detailed verbal discussion is necessary to draw out more considered responses, something that time did not always allow. In the girls' answers there are two levels of understanding of the mythology presented. One alludes to the monolithic, unquestioned history of Bharatanatyam that places the god Siva as the creator of the world, dancing the cosmos into existence, and creating the form of Bharatanatyam, a discourse that continues to be presented to today's generation of dance students (Ramphal 2003). Secondly, these Tamil girls are rehearsing their own taught Tamil history that views Siva as the main and significant deity of the Tamils and is alluded to in the ancient Tamil poems, as religious studies scholar Karen Prentiss notes:

> The hymnists imagined Siva as one with the Tamil lands and culture. They see Him everywhere: Siva is in the hearts and minds of the Tamil people, Siva is in the stories of cosmic deeds and local bhaktas, Siva is in Tamil towns and lands, and Siva is in temples. (1999: 52)

As the girls perform their introductory prayer to Siva – a staple item of all Bharatanatyam classes – their bodies carefully inscribe the details of the deity whilst, at the same time, the deity is imprinted and inscribed on them. The gestures of the prayer are loaded with cultural specificity, conveying not only the complex mythology but also the emotional states of characters being represented. Such codified movements that have migrated to diasporic locations all over the globe, "find new homes and lead to creative cultural translations that are meaningful in different environments" observes Ketu Katrak (2008: 217). Facing front and in a fairly

stationary position, the prayer begins: *Angikam bhuvanam yasya* (we bow to Siva whose body is the whole world) – the girls run their outstretched hands in *alapadma*[18] down the length of their bodies, whilst stepping back on one foot, leaving the other heel just touching the ground, as if showing the body of the deity. Then with feet together, they draw a large circle in the air around their heads with *suci* hands, indicating the whole universe. Next Siva's speech is described as being all language, all sound, *vachikam sara vangmayam*. The hand gestures here show words emerging out from the mouth, using *mukula* to *alapadma*, and then stepping to the side with one foot crossed over the other, the gesture for writing (language) is made – one hand flat in *pataka*, whilst the other writes on it using *chatura hasta*. The next line of the prayer, *ahararyam chandra taradi* (Siva's ornaments are the moon and the stars) is depicted by the dance students with the hand making a crescent moon – *chandrakala* – and with three steps forward both hands mimic the twinkling stars. Finally, the prayer states, *Tam namah satvikam sivam* (we bow to Him, O bestower of bliss) and the girls show three different poses to Siva and finish with a full bow, torsos bent over and hands in prayer position in front of the chest (*anjali*). In addition, as one of the girls (aged 15) described after:

> In Bharatanatyam, every dance means so much and every dance has a story. You become the characters in the dance. It's like when you're being Parvati (or Siva), you feel, ok, I have to be Parvati (or Siva) now. You become so involved in the dance. When you're being sad, you have to feel really sad inside, so the emotion looks right on the stage. In England it's difficult to keep as in touch with the culture as you'd want to. Through the dancing I'm also learning a lot of the stories about the gods and goddesses that I wouldn't have known otherwise. I'm learning a lot about my religion as well. (Interview, 28 November 2008)

The prayer and the comments reveal how the migrating dance form of Bharatanatyam is imprinted on the bodies of these British South Asian dance students, thereby embodying the cultural and religious heritage of the Tamil migrants. Gestures carrying the knowledge of the deities, the ritual practices, the great mythological stories are learnt, repeated and reproduced in these young bodies of the second and third generations as they perform at religious and cultural occasions. As sociologists Helen Thomas and Jamilah Ahmed note in their discussion of cultural bodies, "the body is both marked by culture and 'speaks' of and to cultural practice, the self and history" (2004: 7–8).

Another young British Hindu dancer, performing a *padam* dedicated to Siva at a different venue during the festival of *Mahasivratri*, said afterwards, "I really felt Siva around me and inside me . . . In both cases, I did not treat it as a performance, at all. It was not a performance for an audience. The dance was for Siva; it is Siva" (personal communication, 28 March 2002). Here the dancer is speaking of the depth of *bhakti*, the inner feeling of devotion to the deity that is at the heart of a Bharatanatyam performance. Katrak notes how it is often this element that is lost as the dance form migrates (2008: 218), yet in this case, and the examples cited below, I would suggest

we can see evidence of *bhakti* being embodied in new cultural translations as movements and gestures are adapted to fresh environments, in both cultural and religious settings.

Embodied Devotions and Ritual Worship

For a further example of migration as embodied practice that is immersed in *bhakti*, we can shift the gaze to the Tamil Hindu women at the Saivite London Melmaruvathur Temple in East Ham, who incorporate into their devotional or *bhakti* worship various bodily practices. Here, there are embodied expressions of religious devotion that include circumambulating the shrine on knees carrying a tray of lamps (made out of limes), performing full-length bodily prostrations on the floor, chanting and singing devotional *bhajans*, making *kolam* (floor patterns), preparing food, and the physical and meta-physical offering of flower petals, or red *kum-kum* powder to the photos of the deity. These movements appear to constitute "a human grammar of devotion" (Eck 1998: 48). Their prayers petition not only for the culturally accepted Hindu blessings of marriage and children, but also for employment and to receive successful visas. These mainly Sri Lankan women are 'twice-migrants'; first from Sri Lanka to mainland Europe – Germany, Switzerland, France – then from Europe to Britain. Most do not speak much English and are struggling to make a reasonable existence in urban London.

The discourse at this predominately Sri Lankan centre seeks to reconcile tradition and modernity, offering new understandings for the contemporary, and often displaced, diasporic devotee. Worship is of a male guru in India, Bangaru Adigalar, who becomes inhabited by the divine feminine form of *shakti* and speaks in oracles whilst possessed. With mottos, both in Tamil and English displayed on the walls and frequently quoted in interviews, that speak of one family, one humanity and one Mother, this reformulated Hindu doctrine presents a world that is free from caste, gender restrictions, colour and creed. Dominant themes are of miracles that involve resolution and healing of health crises, pregnancies in the case of women unable to conceive and job offers where none had been forthcoming, *and* the successful receiving of visas (as mentioned above) – all essential areas of importance for contemporary, diasporic Hindu life and survival. This modernised Hinduism offers a certain freedom for such marginalised devotees, many of them low caste. Proposing "a universalist and modernist form of Hindu devotionalism", as Asian scholar Alexander Kent (2004: 47) describes it, it creates accessibility for those without Sanskrit and Agamic knowledge and places them at the very heart of the participation in Hindu ritual, supported by the singing of *bhajans* and a newly developed system of prayer, worship and meditation.

Embodied devotional movement such as found in these diasporic settings is an aspect of the 'doing' of religion or of faith, in the sense that "doing is believing" (Myerhoff 1977: 223). During the last several decades amongst the disciplines of religious studies, anthropology, history and psychology there has been an increased

attention to the performance or embodied "doing of religion" (Bell 1998: 205) in both a kinaesthetic and synaesthetic sense. In dance ethnology, Deirdre Sklar has theorised an approach to understanding the spiritual knowledge of a community by investigating the gestures, postures and movements of devotional or religious action (2001), an approach I have made use of in this particular research. Not only the specific dance forms of Bharatanatyam and its performative genre at festival times, but also the movements and actions of the devotees and priests during temple worship offer a rich display of embodied knowledges. This knowledge is the key to their experience of faith, of migration and of their beliefs in the presence of the deities. It establishes the orthopraxy of Hinduism for each individual.

Trance Dance in a British Context[19]

Other forms of embodied devotion are apparent in British Tamil Saivite worship. At annual Hindu festival times such as *Tai Pusam* and Chariot Festivals, male devotees (and occasionally some females) may become possessed by the deity, expressing their faith and beliefs in a type of trance dance, a *kavadi* dance.[20] In the west London suburb of Ealing, one hot August day, men devotees danced in front of the path of the deity as it was carried out of the Shri Kanagathurkkai Amman Temple and placed on the chariot to process around the local streets. Hundreds of people lined the pavements. On their shoulders, the men carried large, heavy wooden frames adorned with peacock feathers and flowers, and with metal bowls of milk attached at each end, called a *kavadi* (lit. a burden). On top, there are often pictures or statues to the deity Murugan (son of Siva). This coloured structure symbolises the legendary mountain of sins that the god Murugan carries on his shoulders on behalf of humankind, and milk is carried as an offering, purified by the men's devotion through their dance. These men moved to the sound of the temple musicians playing the traditional instruments of *nagaswaram*, a double-reeded flute (like an oboe), the *tavil*, a large, outdoor drum beaten with a curved stick one side and the drummer's hand with metal covers on the fingers on the other, and the Indian cymbals (*talam*).[21] It was an extraordinary and powerful sight to witness, perhaps due the overwhelming sensory nature of the event (as described below) and also to appreciate the intensity of devotion from all present at the festival.

Already at 8:30 a.m. that morning, the temple was packed full of people. The warm air was somewhat stifling, and the playing of the two drummers, cymbals and two reed instruments incessantly loud. Scents of incense, flowers, fire burning and of cut fruit, and the intense colours of the decorated deities, the flowers and the silk garments appeared to almost intoxicate the senses. Sounds of the rhythmic music competed with the ringing of the bell and the chants of the priests as they continued their oblations to the deities, and the devotees, after two to three hours of such ritual *puja*, were in a contented, devotional and emotionally unified state. With great concentration focused inwardly, the men began their dance firstly in the temple, oblivious to their immediate surroundings. As they moved and turned around

following the beat of the drum, jumping, hopping and stepping to the rhythm, they knocked against some of the devotees or occasionally lost their footing as the floor became slippery with spilt milk. Their movements grew more rapid and intense as the sound and the beat of the music increased. This was my introduction to the colourful, expressive Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu temple customs that have been exported and reinvigorated in the diasporic situation. The intensity of such actions is framed by a complex belief system that views all actions through the binaries of purity and impurity, auspiciousness and inauspiciousness. The power of such possessions is indicative of the state of purity of the temple, their rituals and the individual devotees. A detailed explanation is outside the scope of this paper; yet suffice to say that issues of purity and pollution are compelling motivators in such community matters.[22]

Not only did the men dance, but they also had undertaken body piercing. Such practices are part of many Tamils' devotional ritual to the deity, amongst both men and women, but it is primarily carried out by male devotees. At the London Sri Murugan Temple (East Ham), and at this Ealing temple, (but not at the Shree Ghanapathy Temple in Wimbledon[23]), ritual piercing takes place at the annual Chariot festivals and at *Tai Pusam*. Through their cheeks and through the tongue devotees have a small metal spear, a *vel*, symbolising the spear that Lord Murugan carries, and that represents his *shakti* power. Placed through the top skin on their upper arms are long, thin needles and in their backs, hooks that are attached to ropes and held by another man who guides the dancer from behind, carefully pulling and lifting the ropes as he moves. Others might have small hooks over their chest and back, on which small limes are hung. Body piercing of this type is called "wearing *alaku*" as anthropologist Karin Kapadia writes:

> The term *alaku* denotes the various metal hooks, spikes, spears, skewers and needles used to pierce and wound the human body – always solely the male body – in order to express submission, obedience, repentance and devotion to a deity. A man 'puts *alaku*' either in order to fulfil a vow made in the past or to win divine favour for a boon which the devotee hopes will be granted in the future. (2000: 184)

Hindus believe that a state of ritual purity is a precondition for possession, or entering a trance-like state, and these male devotees will have fasted, bathed and carried out various *puja* before undertaking the *kavadi*. In their focused state, devotees state (after the event) that they feel no pain, and there is never any sign of bleeding.

Trance or possession dances within Hindu religious practice can indicate a state of benevolence or divinity, or conversely, of demonic power. The benign ecstatic trance dancing of the Tamil devotees at the *Tai Pusam* festival, is regarded as a potent signifier of Tamil devotion, a performance of faith in the deity Murugan, expressed in the movements and gestures of their dance (as described above). In their jumping, hopping and stepping to the loud and insistent rhythms of the *tavil* drum and *nagaswaram*, the men's bodies exhibit an abandon, almost as if they are 'being danced'.[24] At times the

movement appears quite wild and frenzied. It is thought that the powers of the male deity Murugan, known for his strong, warrior-like attributes, become embodied in the purified body of the devotee during the dance. This same potency is believed to bring auspicious results for vows made by the dancing devotee, who will petition the deity for good health for him/herself and for family members, for success in exams and in employment. It becomes, as does the dancing form of Bharatanatyam, both a local and national identity marker, appearing in a globalised and localised diasporic location – local in its adherence to Tamil Hinduism and even more so, to Sri Lankan Tamil Hinduism, and nationalistic in its adherence to Hinduism in general. Cultural performance is thus a point of "reference for locating religious and gender identities, forms of class politics and national narratives" (Peterson and Soneji 2008: 2). Narratives surrounding the invented tradition of Bharatanatyam as a classical dance form that are intertwined with discourses of nationalism and political ideologies have been well-aired by other Indian dance scholars (Allen 1997, Srinivasan 1998, Meduri 2004, O'Shea 2007) but are significant here in relation to the way this classical dance form is being appropriated by Tamil community groups as a bearer of tradition and of moral values in the diasporic situation.

Yet rituals such as trance dancing/possession behaviour, body piercing and fire-walking have in the past been linked to low-caste Tamil status and their appearance amongst middle-class, educated Tamils in Britain and in other migratory locations has created some tensions – the body itself becoming a site of contested identity in this way. Writing about *kavadi* ritual in the diaspora, religious studies scholar Ron Geaves has stated that:

> This ritual act of self-mortification in diaspora locations reinforces Tamil identity at a number of symbolic levels, helping to create an imagined diaspora united in its suffering against a tyranny that created exile in the first place. Yet there are other tensions inherent in the diaspora situation and in the *kavadi* ritual.
>
> The body itself becomes a site of contested narratives where the sociological, the psychological and the religious meet. The *kavadi* ritual consists of carrying a burden in procession with other devotees. This burden in diaspora is felt as absence from the god's homeland and the ongoing effort to maintain treasured traditions of religion and culture. (2007: 94)

Perhaps the steady increase in and the encouragement of these ritual practices in Britain is indicative of the need for reinforcement not only of socio-cultural and religious identity but is also a strategy to bring harmony and equilibrium to a disrupted, dislocated, migratory arena. Most devotees attending the festivals speak of the importance of the power that they experience through the rituals, and a feeling of potency that will help deal with problems that they face in their day-to-day lives (fieldwork interviews with author).

Possession[25] involves present experience but one that is mediated by a historical mythology, and provides a form where the personal and the collective are yoked together, as the individual internalises the form of the deity. Public witnessing is of

great significance to the event, allowing a corroboration of the extent of the possession. Although embodiment and trance dances contain multi-layered significance that varies from group to group, for Hindus the prime attribute is one of purity and auspiciousness. The possession is a statement, an exhibition of the "moral status" (Kapadia 2000: 181) and level of purity of the caste group or community and hence its significance, particularly in a newly settled environment. As purity implies not only cleanliness, but also spiritual merit, holiness and therefore hierarchy, there may be perceptions of impurity due to the difficulties in carrying out strict religious observances in such places. Ritual conduct necessarily controls impurity. Possession signifies the ritual depth of an event and therefore upwardly mobile caste groups may encourage the practice. Hinduism scholar Gavin Flood explains how "the scale of purity and pollution is an organizing principle and constraint which controls the regulation of bodies in social space in Hinduism" (2002: 220).

Possession of humans by deities is common in India, forming part of the normal range of human experience and affecting anyone from any walk of life (Huyler 1999, Erndl 2007). Kapadia, in her discussion of Tamil possession in that continent describes it as being "essentially an exhibition, a display . . . a manifestation of a deity's power and grace" (2000: 186). The unpredictable nature of possession, in that it can happen during *puja*, or whilst singing *bhajans* or in having *darshan* with a deity, or at any time or place allows it to be accepted and honoured in Hindu society, demonstrating that it is possible for a devotee to become united, albeit briefly, with his favoured deity. This is the sought-after "enhanced level of intimacy between worshipper and deity" (Waghorne and Cutler 1985: 38), an aspect of *bhakti*, which is the common goal of Hindu worship. In a diasporic situation such as the UK, which for many has resulted from forced migration, evidence suggests this level of intimacy with the deities in a religious setting is even more sought after and is experienced during religious worship. The power and sense of 'closeness' occurring was prominent in the discourse of many of the Sri Lankan interviewees by the author (see David 2010).

Political Boundaries of Bodies and Space

Political trajectories weave through the religious, cultural and social lives of these Sri Lankan community members and remain at the heart of their migratory journeys. Several examples illuminate the complexity of the contested arena of migratory space and settlement. The devotees of the recently established Melmaruvathur Worshipping Centre are battling with the local council in an effort to remain in their converted house/temple in an urban street. Complaints from neighbours regarding the usual factors of increased noise, issues of space for vehicles and cooking smells have caused the local Planning Enforcement officer to check the planning permissions on their site. The concerns are focused on the use of space and an encroachment into what is considered secular, public and suburban city space. The temple is not seen as an asset to this mixed race, urban area. Facing closure and with little available funds, the organisers

are searching for a new, affordable space where they can continue their embodied devotions and continue to assert their Tamilness in a conflicting, and increasingly secularised public space. As anthropologist John Eade (1996: 225) points out, disputes and criticisms in contested spaces are often "motivated by cultural exclusion" and draw on "issues of what is culturally acceptable". Asianist Vernon Schubel's argument[26] that the creation of sacred space by religious groups is problematic carries an echo here; he writes, "the very act of creating a sacred environment carries the risk of thoroughly secularizing the world outside of that space" (1996: 202).

Elsewhere in the same London borough, in East Ham High Street and the surrounding area there have been spates of gang violence and intimidation (2005–2008), causing a climate of fear and uncertainty amongst many of the shopkeepers and businesses there. Groups of young Tamil men from neighbouring areas have smashed shop windows, poured paint over business premises and threatened to harm families if extortion money is not paid (personal communication, Paul Sathianesan). Community leaders believe the violence stems from inter-gang rivalries and their territorial control, but the police inspector in charge of a specially set up task force believes the money demanded from the businessmen is to fund the Tamil Tigers (LTTE). A total of £70 million from credit card fraud by Tamil gangs has been recovered between 2005 and 2007 in the police operation, but only two gang leaders have been arrested and others given ASBOs (anti-social behaviour orders). The level of intimidation is so high that no one from the local Tamil community will come forward to give evidence.[27] I have been told in my interviews with devotees from the London Sri Murugan Temple (discussed earlier) that the presence of LTTE members also affects events at the temple, particularly the large, outdoor festivals, and many are very aware of the controlling 'gaze' of the LTTE.

Other London Tamil temples have been cited as being involved with the LTTE. In his earlier work on Tamils in the UK, Donald Taylor notes that the organisers of the Highgatehill Murugan Temple in north London expressed their political allegiances from its inception, as the founder had stated to him "that the Archway Temple was sympathetic to the moral cause of a separate state in Sri Lanka" (1994: 203). The political organisation of LTTE based in Britain held its annual *puja* at the Highgate Temple for many years.[28] As noted above, this temple holds many cultural performances of music and dance as part of its service to the Tamil community. Further controversies circulate around the Sri Muthumari Amman Temple in Tooting, south London, established by a Jaffna-born Tamil. This man, a trained accountant, was formally financial controller of the LTTE in Western Europe, responsible for coordinating the collection of funds from Tamils in the European diaspora and for procuring weaponry. Joanne Waghorne, writing about Hindu temples in the diaspora as a religious studies scholar, notes that "the constitution of this temple stipulates that any income above expenses be sent back to Sri Lanka for aid to projects" (2004: 218). The LTTE donated £25,000 to a further temple in Wembley, north-west London to support its formation. Since the temples provide both ready access to the Tamil community and a potential source of income, the

LTTE has in this way sought control over temple events, management and revenue.[29] The temples discussed here hold regular performances of music and dance at festival times, as discussed above, by young Tamil girls and occasionally boys. Historian Nira Wickramasinghe in her account of the contested identities of Sri Lankans in the diaspora emphasises the political links, stating that "in fashioning a Tamilness in the diaspora, history and collective memory plays a crucial role. The dominant separatist group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), has succeeded in its objectives of radicalising the Sri Lankan Tamils overseas" (2006: 266).

The complex political and cultural tensions overlap, creating spaces such as these temples that are simultaneously religious, culturally expressive and politically aligned. Migrant Tamil community members see themselves caught in a double-bind – that of their desire to support the establishment of a separate Tamil state (Tamil Eelam), yet at the same time being fearful of any repercussions to themselves and their families from LTTE hardliners as well the possibility of being criminalised by the British government through the 2001 Terrorism Act that banned the LLTE as a terrorist organisation.

For many Tamils, the establishment of their own separate Tamil state in Sri Lanka absorbs much of their emotional, political and financial capital. It is the epitome of 'place-making' in all senses of the term, but of course, is not without considerable tension of divided loyalties. As with many diasporic groups, the focus of attention is turned in multiple ways – to the past and to the future and to the present, not only in Britain and Sri Lanka, two vastly different worlds, geographically, culturally and linguistically, but also to family members in Europe, North America and other parts of the globe. On a similar note, Waghorne, discussing the Tooting Muthumari Amman Temple (in south-west London), says that it "lives in an ethereal public space somewhere between Sri Lanka and London, created within the eye of the beholder and the memory of the founder" (2004: 218–219).

Concluding Remarks

This paper has attempted to examine the embodied expressions of dance, ritual and devotional movement as aspects of a choreography of migration amongst British Sri Lankan Tamils. The complexities of different trajectories of migration and settlement, and of caste differences and ritual practices contribute to the making of a multi-layered and multi-valent diasporic space and one that is in the process of constant change. The mixture of orthodox Agamic Sanskritic religious customs with the more vernacular, village rituals manifests itself in bodily performance and procedures that have become a distinctive part of the migratory experience, such as the dance form of Bharatanatyam appearing at temple events, and the growth of trance dance and elaborate embodied ritual.

Framed by political tensions and the uncertainties of urban migrant life, these Tamil cultural expressions are essential ingredients for the maintenance of identity – identities that are fervently Hindu, and at the same time strongly Tamil Sri Lankan.

Young women performing dance, devotees entering trance and embodied devotions during ritual worship create a discourse of solidarity, of kinship, of tradition and of survival, across local and global trajectories. These are the markers of identity for Tamils worldwide. As Waghorne has termed it, it is a "globalized localism" (2004: 171) of embodied migration.

Notes

[1] Detailed ethnographic research work has been carried out by the author since 1999 in several London boroughs that support large Tamil communities such as the London Borough of Newham (east London), the London Borough of Brent (north-west London) and the London Borough of Merton (south London). Research work has taken place at certain Tamil temples (all Saivite) including the London Sri Murugan Temple, East Ham, the Shree Ghanapathy Temple, Wimbledon, the Highgatehill Murugan Temple, Highgate, and the Shri Kanagathurkkai Amman Temple in Ealing and one or two others. Methods used involved participant observation, film, audio recording, interviews and questionnaires. The early part of the research was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK, and the more recent research by the Ford Foundation, USA.

[2] See http://www.ssrc.org/programs/religious-lives-of-migrant-minorities/ and http://www.surrey.ac.uk/cronem/projects/past/the_religious_lives_of_ethnic_and_immigrant_minorities_a_transnational_perspective.htm [both accessed 20 July 2011].

[3] Despite the problematic and contested nature of the term 'community', I am using it to indicate the symbolic construct, as Anthony Cohen has called it (1985), created by the perception of boundaries by the members of a group, in this case, Tamils originating from Sri Lanka. The actual notion of community often sustains a fluid and pragmatic meaning to individuals, revealing it to be a multi-layered, multi-valent notion that does not signify adherence or membership to one, closely defined group. Each member may be a member of various, loosely defined and changing communities, as Gerd Baumann's work has revealed (1996).

[4] One of the discriminating measures put in place was a restriction on university admissions for Tamils. The Sinhalese government introduced the 'university admissions policy' that standardised marks, effectively placing "the Tamil students at a disadvantage in that they had to obtain a higher aggregate of marks to enter the universities – in the medical, science and engineering faculties – than the Sinhalese" (Silva 1996: 22). Up to then the Tamils were in dominant positions in the science-based faculties of the then University of Ceylon.

[5] The right to reside in the UK was restricted by the 1971 Immigration Act. From 1971, 'right of abode' was limited to those with a prior link to the UK, such as a parent or grandparent who was born here, which had the effect of virtually ending 'primary' immigration. The British Nationality Act of 1981 abolished the 1948 definition of British citizenship and replaced it with three categories: British citizenship, citizenship of British dependent territories and British overseas citizenship. Of these, only British citizenship provided the right to live in the UK.

[6] The London Borough of Brent (north-west London) is home to the largest number of Sri Lankan Tamils, calculated to be in the region of 12,000. Brent is one of London's most culturally diverse boroughs where the non-white ethnic groups in the borough now form the majority of the population at 57 per cent; of this total, there is a Hindu population of 17 per cent (see Brent Council's website: http://www.brent.gov.uk [accessed 2 May 2011] for further information). Tamils began to settle in the borough of Brent in Willesden, Harlesden and Neasden in the 1970s, as many were students at Willesden College, and then began to move

out to the areas of Kingsbury, Queensbury and Wembley. As the community grew more established, Brent became an attractive place for many more refugees, and now houses a vibrant Tamil community.

[7] The Tamil population in Newham is predominately Sri Lankan, although Singapore Tamils were the first to come to the area (personal communication with Newham councillor, Paul Sathianesan).

[8] See the Refugee Council's press release of 18 September 2003, published on their website: http://www.refugeecouncil.org/news/archive/press/2003/september/20030918refug [accessed 8 March 2006].

[9] Martin Baumann (2001) writes that three-quarters of the Hindu population in Germany are Sri Lankan Tamils (numbering around 60,000), the majority having arrived since the 1980s, although some were settled in the 1970s. He notes that there has been a consolidation and stabilisation of the Tamil presence in Germany as temples are built and new sacred spaces are established.

[10] Problematic for several reasons – firstly, with reference to tensions between the more settled Tamil groups and the recent migrants (see details in David 2007b, Brun and Van Hear 2011) and secondly, with regard to governmental changes in migrancy laws across Europe and in particular, the UK.

[11] It is important in this discussion to note the debate regarding the restructured and renamed modern form of Bharatanatyam that we see today, that relates to its two key historical revivalists – Rukmini Devi and Balasaraswati. O'Shea writes of how their two perspectives appear to form "sets of binary oppositions. Devi privileged a Sanskrit tradition, Balasaraswati a Tamil one. Thus, Devi identified bharata natyam as a national form; for Balasaraswati, its roots were regional" (2006: 136). See also Avanthi Meduri's work on this subject (2004).

[12] See David 2008 for further discussion of issues of Bharatanatyam dance related to politics, nationalism and war in Sri Lanka and in the Tamil diaspora.

[13] I have been informed of dance classes taking place at the London Sivan Kovil Temple in Lewisham, south-east London. This Tamil temple has an adjoining community hall with a stage where weddings, arangetrams and performances can take place.

[14] Mudralaya dance school is run by two well-known professional Indian dancers, Pushkala Gopal (Bharatanatyam) and Unnikrishnan (Bharatanatyam and Kathakali). They have about 125 students enrolled in their lessons, including several male students (summer 2004). Both dancers also taught at the Tooting Muthumari Amman Temple, London, for several years.

[15] *Mahasivaratri* (Siva's night; also called simply *Sivaratri* and *Sivaratri-vrata*) falls on the fourteenth night of the dark half of every lunar month. His great (*maha*) night is in the lunar month of Magha (January/February) and is celebrated by all castes with elaborate rituals and offerings to *linga* (shape of the male organ) images. "The most auspicious religious observance among the devotees of Siva – and one which marks the high point of the Saiva religious year is *Sivaratri* . . . In its simplest form this observance consists of keeping a vigil (*iagara*) throughout the night and performing continuous worship of Siva during the day . . ." (Long 1982: 189). Music and dance often feature in the celebrations.

[16] Some parents of the girls interviewed are professionals – doctors, accountants, teachers – others own their own businesses, such as retail outlets, and some of their parents are employed in shops or garages.

[17] The Academy of Fine Arts examination system, developed in 1990 in India and Sri Lanka, is used extensively by the Tamil community in the UK and in New Zealand, Denmark and Norway. It incorporates Grades 1–7 in both dance and music and the children take one grade each year in April, and is taught and examined in Tamil. The director of the Academy is Dr Niththyananthan, also the director of the London Tamil Centre, and headmaster of Wembley Tamil School. Pathmini Gunaseelan is the Dance Director and examiner for the

dance exams, and Saraswathy Pakiarajah is the Musical Director. Tamil students living in Europe at present come to the UK to take their exams.

[18] These hand gestures are as follows: *alapadma* – open hand with fingers separated and stretched out, showing a lotus flower; *suci* – first finger points whilst others are held in fist; *mukula* – hand forms bud of flower with all fingers together touching thumb; *pataka* – the flag hand, which is held with all fingers straight and together; *chatura* – hand is bent at right angle with fingers together and little finger extended; *chandrakala* – thumb and first finger make shape of crescent moon whilst other fingers are bent into palm; *anjali* – both hands in prayer position.

[19] Aspects of this research material were presented at the CORD (Congress for Research on Dance) annual conference in New York in 2007, and have been reproduced in their conference proceedings for that year. These original ideas have been further developed for this paper.

[20] The *kavadi* dance is also performed by the men devotees at the London Sri Murugan Temple in East Ham at their annual *Tai Pusam* festival in January/February. Two of the men participating when I visited in February 2004 had their tongues and cheeks pierced; only one performed a rather wild dance, as if possessed. The other men carried the *kavadi* whilst walking in a slow, single-file processional line several times around the inside of the temple (author's field notes, 4 February 2004).

[21] These instruments were "traditionally the hereditary specializations of the Isai Vellala [music landlords], a politically powerful community of Tamil Nadu" (Srinivasan 1998: 3). They play as an accompaniment to the deities, at times of ritual worship in the temple and at festival times, to initiate processions and as a prelude to the deities' arrival on the streets during processions. As their sound is so powerful, they are considered to be outdoor instruments.

[22] Flood states: "The scale or purity and pollution is an organizing principle and constraint which controls the regulation of bodies in social space in Hinduism" (2002: 220). The concept of purity (not to be confused with Western notion of hygiene) is essential to the Hindu worldview of humans and their hierarchical position within that perspective.

[23] I was told by one of the temple organisers that they had decided not to have body piercing during this festival as the children found it too upsetting (personal communication, August 2002). There were in fact men and boys dancing with the *kavadi* on their shoulders, but without any piercing.

[24] The Tamil word often used in these circumstances is *avecam*, meaning to be mounted or possessed by the deity.

[25] It is important to acknowledge here that possession in both historical and current Hindu practice does not comprise one single, simple category, but rather is a phenomenon that manifests through a complexity of embodied states, emotions, linguistic expressions and geographical locations.

[26] Schubel writes about Shi'a Mulims at the Ja'ffari Islamic Center in Thornhill, Ontario (1996).

[27] Interview with Chief Inspector Derrick Griffiths, Newham, London, 19 March 2007.

[28] This again reveals that Sri Lankan political circumstances are never separate from religious or cultural affairs. O'Shea writes of a Tamil Sri Lankan dancer, choreographer and teacher, based in Toronto, who teaches Bharatanatyam there "under the auspices of the Tamil Eelam Society, a Toronto-based organisation which exists primarily to provide social services for Tamil refugees, but that also, as its name implies, embraces a 'counter-state nationalist' . . . - view of the Sri Lankan political situation" (2007: 100).

[29] This is confirmed in the Human Rights Watch report at: http://www.hrw.org/reports/2006/03/14/funding-final-war-2 [accessed 22 August 2011], and unpublished current research presented by Cathrine Brun and Nick Van Hear at the workshop, "Research on Tamils in the UK", held in January 2006 at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society in Oxford (COMPAS), UK.

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