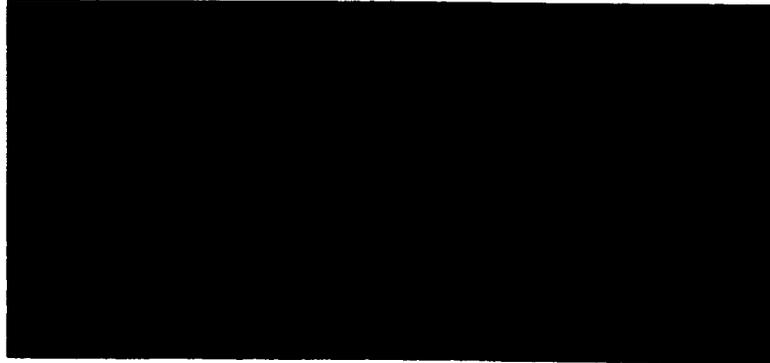




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RITUAL AND RESISTANCE:
SUBVERSION AS A SOCIAL FACT

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"There is subversion, no end of subversion, only not for us."¹

The social history of modern India has developed side by side with anthropology. Often, social history has simply received its fundamental understandings of what constitutes "society" in India from an anthropology which itself betrays all too clearly the traces of colonial forms of knowledge about India. While social historians of areas outside of South Asia (or other third world areas in anthropologyland) have worked in greater autonomy from anthropology, they have recently turned to anthropology to enable them to understand many aspects of social life which had not been addressed by political or intellectual history, and yet later proved equally intractable to the quantitative methods of early social history. In both cases, social historians have consumed anthropological theories and rubrics too uncritically, little realizing the possibility that interdisciplinary collaboration should leave neither of the constituent disciplines untouched. In this paper I will use the critical perspective of this volume, focussing on everyday forms

1. Greenblatt's (1988) transformation of Kafka. I am grateful to my colleagues in history and anthropology at the University of Michigan for their comments in seminars when I delivered this paper. I am also particularly indebted to Val Daniel, Geoff Eley, Steven Mullaney, Gyan Prakash, and Sherry Ortner.

of resistance, to critique both anthropological assumptions about ritual and historical reifications of these assumptions. In taking "ritual" as my subject, I will also argue that too often the combination of the key terms "everyday" and "resistance" leads us to look for new arenas where resistance takes place rather than also realizing that there are many old arenas also brimming with resistance. Finally, I seek to suggest that our old theories of either "resistance" or "the political" are not all that are at risk in this enterprise, but also the underlying presuppositions of order that undergird and normalize even such potentially radical undertakings as this volume (or this paper).

* * * * *

Ritual is a term that sanctifies and marks off a space and a time of special significance. Ritual may be part of everyday life, but it is fundamentally opposed to "the everyday." Anthropologists have typically identified ritual as a moment and an arena in which meaning is cathected and crystallized, in which social experience is distilled and displayed. As summarized by Geertz, Durkheim and Robertson-Smith set the terms of anthropological discourse on ritual by emphasizing the manner in which ritual "reinforce(s) the traditional social ties between individuals (...) the social structure of a group is strengthened and perpetuated through the ritualistic or mythic symbolization of the underlying social values upon which it rests (1973, 142)." Rituals are thus seen as embodying the essence of culture, "as

dramatizing the basic myths and visions of reality, the basic values and moral truths, upon which ... (the)... world rests." (Ortner, characterizing Singer's view, 1978,1). This is not to say that anthropologists have always treated ritual as static. In her first book Ortner (showing Geertz' influence) clarifies that while she says that rituals "dramatize basic assumptions of fact and value in the culture" she in fact is coding a more complex assertion, namely that "such 'fundamental assumptions' are actually constructed, or reconstructed, and their fundamentality reestablished, in the course of the rituals themselves (p. 2)." Nonetheless, as her more current work indicates (Ortner forthcoming), this earlier clarification reflected a particular moment in anthropology when Durkheimian assumptions about meaning and ritual were being reevaluated but left basically unchallenged. Ritual might have been viewed as a process that was profoundly integrated into the complex and shifting social worlds of anthropological subjects, but ritual was still the principal site of cultural construction, and culture was fundamentally about shared meanings and social values.

Interestingly, some years later, when summarizing theoretical developments in anthropology since the sixties, Ortner (1984) noted that ritual had been shifted from center stage by new concerns in anthropology with practice and everyday life. This new call to practice has been part of a general move away from traditional subjects such as kinship and ritual, or at least away from traditional approaches to these subjects. And

history, viewed more as process than as chronology, is fundamental to this new concern with practice. The movement towards history and practice is not motivated, as the movement towards anthropology was for a time among historians, with a concern about a paucity of meaning and culture, but rather just the opposite; there has been a sense that studies of meaning had become too aestheticized, too abstracted from the everyday contexts in which meanings are produced, reproduced, and manipulated. Nonetheless, even calls for practice oriented anthropologies from such theorists as Bourdieu confirm the residual centrality of the cultural: in Bourdieu's (1982) theoretical proposals capital is now modified by the adjective symbolic.

In recent years as social history has become increasingly anthropologized, historians have appropriated ritual as a subject and employed anthropological perspectives on ritual. William Sewell (1980) invoked a Geertzian conception of ritual to demonstrate that ritual performances -- in his particular story rituals that employed old regime forms in post-revolution contexts -- were used to symbolically mark and socially solidify the emerging communities of labor in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century France. More commonly, the names of Turner, Van Gennep, and Gluckman rather than Geertz have been cited when historians have attempted to grasp ritual (Geertz has been used by historians principally for his semiotic theory of culture (e.g. Clark 1983, Medick 1987), not for his gentle critique of functionalist analyses of ritual). Following from these

anthropological authors, historians have typically been interested in rituals such as the carnival or the charivari, in rites of inversion or status reversal. Some historians have accepted the functionalist undergirding of anthropological writing about these rituals, concurring at least to some extent that rituals, in Gluckman's terms, "obviously include a protest against the established order" (but) "are intended to preserve and strengthen the established order (1965:109)." As Natalie Davis puts it, rituals "are ultimately sources of order and stability in a hierarchical society. They can clarify the structure by the process of reversing it. They can provide an expression of, and a safety valve for, conflicts within the system. They can correct and relieve the system when it has become authoritarian. But, so it is argued, they do not question the basic order of the society itself. They can renew the system, but they cannot change it (Davis, 1965:130)." From a textual perspective, Stephen Greenblatt has recognized that the anxiety about royal authority induced by Shakespeare in such plays as *Richard II* and *Henry V* serves only in the end to enhance the power of authority; as he says "actions that should have the effect of radically undermining authority turn out to be the props of that authority," (Dollimore and Sinfield 1985; 40).

Returning again to the Carnival, many historians have recognized in it something more than this, seizing on the pre-political elements of class struggle and contestation, concentrating on the unsettling and disorderly aspects of the periodic inversion. However, in so doing they for the most have

had to suspend the teleological framing they might perhaps have rather recorded as critics of the social order; rituals rarely became highly politicized, and often did lapse back into the social orders that produced them, whether or not that social order was reinforced or slightly shaken as a result. Subversion was either contained, or transformed into order.

Indeed, in literary studies, which since the translation of Bakhtin's extraordinary book on Rabelais in 1968 has become even more carnivalesque than social history, the relation between periodic disorder and subversion on the one hand and order and containment on the other has been widely debated. Terry Eagleton is one of many critics of Bakhtin who thinks that Bakhtin's celebration of the political potential and meaning of the carnival is misguided (Eagleton 1981:148):

Indeed carnival is so vivaciously celebrated that the necessary political criticism is almost too obvious to make. Carnival, after all, is a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art. As Shakespeare's Olivia remarks, there is no slander in an allowed fool.

Be this as it may, it is in fact striking how frequently violent social clashes apparently coincided with carnival. And while carnival was always licensed, not all that happened in carnival was similarly licensed. Carnival was socially dangerous, semiotically demystifying, and culturally disrespectful, even though it often confirmed authority, renewed social relations, and was rarely either politicized or progressive (see Stallybross and White 1986).

In all these debates the question whether ritual can occasion, or serve as the occasion, for resistance is read in terms of one specific form of ritual and one particular kind of resistance. We hear only about the carnival or the charivari, about rituals that involve reversal and inversion, not about rituals that are about power/authority of both secular and sacred kinds. And we evaluate the politics of ritual only in terms of a discourse on resistance that seeks out contestatory and confrontational upsurges by the lower classes. It is perhaps no accident that Natalie Davis was less affected by these discursive blinkers than many of her contemporaries since her most critical discussion of the carnival concerns the status of women, who could not participate in public and politicized moments of confrontation, consigned as they were to the private, the domestic, and the particular. A concern with gender issues has led some writers to a critique of the virile assumptions underlying most writings on resistance (see O'Hanlon 1987).

Meanwhile, the move among anthropologists from symbolic analysis to practice theory has led to increasing focus on both the everyday and the non-ritual. Jean Comaroff, an anthropologist who has worked among the Tshidi of southern Africa and who was clearly deeply influenced by the practice theory of Bourdieu, turned to the everyday for a sense of the repressed and oppressed tensions characteristic of a system of violently established and maintained hegemony such as exists in south Africa. She found that,

while awareness of oppression obviously runs deep, reaction may appear erratic, diffuse, and difficult to

characterize. It is here that we must look beyond the conventionally explicit domains of 'political action' and 'consciousness'; for, when expressions of dissent are prevented from attaining the level of open discourse, a subtle but systematic breach of authoritative cultural codes might make a statement of protest which, by virtue of being rooted in a shared structural predicament and experience of dispossession, conveys an unambiguous message" (1985: 196).

But the message is ambiguous, and anthropologists are still struggling to open up theoretical and empirical spaces for culturally constituted counter-hegemonies.

Among historians, a concern with the social has also led to a concern with the everyday, and social historians interested in a social history of confrontation have redefined their categories of the political and the confrontational. Alf Ludtke exemplifies this trend in his writing on workers movements and protests in imperial Germany. As he writes in a recent essay: "My focus will be on the total spectrum of expressions and daily assertions by individuals as well as by different groups and classes. I will emphasize not simply the ways in which people tried to raise demands or resist the demands of others, but also those modes of self-reliance whereby (in theoretical terms) people reappropriated these constraints and pressures -- the specific, even peculiar, practices whereby individuals handled their anxieties and desires. I wish to transgress and then blur the usual boundaries between political and private." (1985, 304). Elsewhere Ludtke writes that protests should be "regarded as occasional manifestations of a wide complex of structured processes and situations" and that "research into traces of suppressed needs should not be confined to manifest expressions

of dissatisfaction, opposition, and resistance" (n.d., 4). In this turn to the "everyday," ritual has too often been left out of the picture. However, ritual is not just a dramatic event, but a vital component of everyday experience.²

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As we increasingly, and from differing perspectives, examine ordinary life, the fixtures of ordinariness thus give way to fractures, and we see that struggle is everywhere, even where it is least dramatic, and least visible (see de Certeau 1984.) Struggle becomes visible where previously we could not see it, a trope for a critical vision of the world. Consensus is no longer assumed unless proven otherwise, but even more unsettling for our social science, rebellion and resistance can no longer be identified through traditional indices of the extraordinary. The ordinary and the extraordinary trade places.

We should reflect briefly on the potential epistemological implications of finding resistance, rebellion, or disorder, everywhere. For in most of our social scientific thinking, order is presented as a universal human need, an expression of reason and the basis of the social. Order thus becomes naturalized, while all that produces and is produced by disorder becomes marginalized as extraordinary and unnatural. When naturalized,

² An important exception here is the work of scholars associated with cultural studies in Britain, in particular Hebdige, Clarke, Hall, Jefferson and Roberts (see Hall & Jefferson 1976, Hebdige 1979).

order is an ideological tool which works to suppress or contain disorder and subversion.

Ironically, many current understandings of discursive domination (following from Foucault) or hegemony (following from Gramsci) are at least in part informed by notions of order that seem antipathetic to the posture of critique, for our notions of power appear both totalizing and a priori. "Power" is virtually synonymous with order. But in denaturalizing order, we must also denaturalize power, attending to its own fissures and dispersals. Prakash has argued in this volume that we should not see resistance as a pure counterpart to power, and his warning serves to underscore the dangers of reifying our concepts of struggle. It follows that order can be seen as an effect of power rather than its condition, thus liberating resistance from the (teleological) requirement that it establish a new order in order to be recognized as significant. But power is neither a cause nor a first principle; it is, rather, a relation, or rather an endless series of relations. In the concerns of this volume, we should remember that although struggle may always, as Foucault suggests, be interior to power, it (as our current preoccupation) can seriously subvert our normal assumptions, about both power and order (Foucault 1980: 94-97).

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In the study of rural India, anthropology has provided most of our social scientific terms of reference. And in anthropology

"order" has always been the chief ordering principle of discourse. When anthropology puts particular emphasis on order, it sanctifies it with the adjective "ritual". Ritual is not only principally about order, it is often the domain in which our sociological conception of society is properly realized. We have already noted that Anthropologists have often viewed rituals in terms of religious or cultural meanings. They have interpreted the social significance rituals have either directly in terms of these meanings, or -- in what is just a slight transformation of this view -- as productive of social solidarity. In this view, social relations are displayed and renewed and the hierarchical forms underlying social relations confirmed and strengthened by ritual.

Perhaps therefore it comes as no surprise that writers like James Scott (1985), who has made an important and eloquent plea for the study of everyday forms of peasant resistance, ignores the possibility that ritual could constitute an important site of resistance. Partly this reveals his basic economic assumptions, but in part this is because he is suspicious of ritual. In a long and rich book he makes only two brief references to rituals of status reversal, and several other references to ritual as something which is constitutive of community. Scott is therefore typical of how writers concerned with resistance themselves accept with little modification the Durkheimian foundations of our social scientific conceptions of ritual.

However, Jean Comaroff among others has argued that ritual need not be about order and domination alone. She has found, at least in her work on southern Africa that

ritual provides an appropriate medium through which the values and structures of a contradictory world may be addressed and manipulated....The widespread syncretistic movements that have accompanied capitalist penetration into the Third World are frequently also subversive bricolages; that is, they are motivated by an opposition to the dominant system. While they have generally lacked the degree of self-consciousness of some religious or aesthetic movements, or of the marginal youth cultures of the modern West, they are nevertheless a purposive attempt to defy the authority of the hegemonic order...Such exercises do more than just express revolt; they are also more than mere acts of self-representation. Rather, they are at once both expressive and pragmatic, for they aim to change the real world by inducing transformations in the world of symbol and rite.

It is this mode of situating ritual practice and ideology in a world of hegemony and struggle in which representation itself is one of the most contested resources which I follow in this paper.

But I also seek to go further, as also to start with a more basic premise. I will not evaluate ritual practice on the basis of whether or not it aims to change the real world, however much it may lack self-consciousness. Rather, I will look at traditional village rituals in India that at face value have the effect of restoring social relations and upholding relations of authority both within the village and between it and the larger political unit of the kingdom or later state. And I will seek to determine if the way in which order and disorder have been narrativized as basic components of ritual practice is in fact adequate to the multiple foci and forms of disorder as I

encountered them. For anthropologists have not only viewed ritual as merely a sociological mechanism for the production of order, but also as a cosmological and symbolic site for the containment of chaos and the regeneration of the world (as we, or they, know it).

Elsewhere (1987) I have argued that current anthropological writing on ritual underplays, both at the level of kingdoms or large political units and at the level of village rituals and festivals, the social fact that ritual constitutes a tremendously important arena for the cultural construction of authority and the dramatic display of the social lineaments of power. However, although I presented examples of conflict, I saw them largely as products of the breakdown of authority under colonialism. Here I shall argue that precisely because of the centrality of authority to the ritual process ritual has always been a crucial site of struggle, involving both claims about authority and struggles against (and within) it. By historicizing the study of ritual, we can see that while rituals provide critical moments for the definition of collectivities and the articulation of rank and power, they often occasion more conflict than consensus, and that each consensus is provisional, as much a social moment of liminality in which all relations of power (and powerlessness) are up for grabs as it is a time for the reconstitution and celebration of a highly political (and thus disorderly) ritual order. Resistance to authority can be seen to occur precisely when and where it is least expected.

The ritual I will focus on is crucial here because although it is only one of several village rituals it is the one that inaugurates all other village rituals, often setting the calendrical and cosmological agenda for the yearly ritual cycle. The Aiyandar festival, called the kutirai etuppu, was critical also in that it vividly reflected and displayed the hierarchical relations within the village, with the village headman, or ampalam, as the ostensive center of these relations. The priests for this ritual, who also acted as the potters who made the clay horses that were consecrated in the central ritual action, had to obtain permission from the village headman in order to begin making the horses for the festival. The ampalam was the host for the festival which began and ended at his house and his emblems were as importantly involved in the procession as were the clay horses themselves; the ampalam received the first honors, which he then distributed to the other members of the village at the conclusion of the ritual. In short, the ampalam represented the totality of the village in a rite which was seen and said by some to celebrate and regenerate the village itself.

When I was in the field -- for me the little kingdom of Pudukkottai, one of the largest of the little kingdoms in the early modern period of the Tamil speaking region of southern India and later under the British Raj the only Princely State in the Tamil country -- it took little time to realize that Aiyandar was a critical deity, and the yearly festival in his honor a crucial festival, in the ritual life of the social formations constituting the focus of my general ethnohistorical research.

Village elders and headmen would regularly take me to their own Aiyandar shrine as the most important stop on the village tour. They would tell me all about their village festival, how it was famous for miles around, how I would be able to observe and recognize the political centrality of the headman, that I should definitely plan to return to their village on the occasion of the festival. Clearly ritual was important, and clearly this was the social ritual par excellence, at least in the post independence days of a post-royal kingdom. During the course of my fieldwork, I attended and took extensive notes on about twelve of these festivals in different villages throughout the state. Because of my interest in local social relations and structures of authority, I was drawn into this festival, which became, quite by surprise, a chief focus of my ethnographic research.

There was one festival in particular that I looked forward to attending. The village headman had been an especially rewarding informant, or guide, and spent many hours telling me about the complex details of social organization in his village and his natu, the territorial unit that was coterminous with the settlement zone of his subcaste group (also called natu) of Kallars, the royal caste in Pudukkottai. He was a patriarch of classic proportions. He told me about the Aiyandar festival with the care and comprehension of a radio cricket commentator, and as the festival neared he even visited my house in town on two occasions to submit to further questions and my tape recorder. I was told exactly when the festival would begin, and we agreed that I would arrive soon after dusk, to participate in the final

preparations which would culminate in the commencement of the festival around midnight (like many of these rituals, it was to take place through the night). When the festival was still a week away, I expected a formal visit from the headman to invite me as an honored outside guest, but when he failed to turn up I assumed he was unable to come because he was enmeshed in the myriad preparations for the festival. So on the appointed evening I drove my motorcycle the requisite thirty five miles across potholed tarmac and dusty bullock cart tracks, only to arrive in a village that was virtually dark, with no visible evidence of any approaching festivities. The village headman looked dismayed and surprised as I rolled up on my Enfield, though less dismayed than me since I heard, as I switched off my engine, the unmistakable hiss of a rapidly deflating tire, the devastating effect of a large acacia thorn's union with my non-radial Dunlop. The headman told me that the festival had been called off, and that he had hoped I would have guessed this since he had not come with the formal invitation. In any case, he said, he could not have come to tell me that there would be no festival, since this would have been inauspicious, and would have made it even more unlikely than it already was that the festival could take place. But, of course, this admirable foresight had not turned things around; the festival could not be organized, a longstanding factional dispute in the village was not in the end resolved, and the festival became yet another casualty of this dispute. My immediate concern, apart from the fact that my tire was flat and I was not carrying a spare, was that I had lost a

brilliant opportunity to match theory, narrative, and practice, to follow up the story of a festival that I had been tracking industriously over the preceding weeks and months. But as my host instructed his son and assorted relatives to hitch the bullock cart to arrange for my long and bumpy transport back to town, my disappointment yielded to bewilderment. For I learned that the festival on which I had such exquisite detail had not taken place for seven years, and that no one in the village had any genuine expectation that it would take place this year.

Most good fieldwork stories are similarly allegorized. We begin with calm self-confidence, our initial assumptions and convictions yet unchecked by the chaotic realities and serendipities of the field. We then find ourselves in some disastrous predicament which, in unsettling us (and sometimes them), enables us to cross the fault line of cultural difference, to familiarize ourselves with the concerns and logics of new social terrains, to achieve new forms of communion with our anthropological subjects, to achieve wisdom. In fact, at the time I was simply seriously annoyed. Yet, I should also note that although I had been aware of the extent to which Aiyandar festivals gave rise to conflict and dispute at the time, it was only then, and increasingly over the years since, that I have realized the extent to which this story illustrates the flip side of my concern with how village rituals reflected and displayed political authority and political relations. I had begun thinking about Aiyandar by using the Aiyandar festival to attack Dumont's notion (which he developed in a number of places but not

insignificantly in an important article on the Aiyandar festival in Tamil Nadu, 1959) that religion/ritual always encompasses politics/power. Having established this, it was still difficult to come to terms with the fact that Aiyandar festivals were always sites for struggle and contestation; that speech about the festivals reflected concerns about ritual order and auspiciousness that were part of a different ritual order than the ritual event itself; that even when the ritual event did not happen it was as significant as when it did. The non-event of the called off ritual was not, in fact, a non-event, after all.

During the rest of my fieldwork I learned that many of the other great events of ritual calendars were similar non-events, that Aiyandar festivals did not happen almost as often as they did, and that when they happened they did not always include everyone in the village, or result in the village communal harmony that I had previously assumed, and indeed that this communal harmony was not disturbed only along the so-called traditional lines of caste or faction but along developing class lines as well. I also learned that while at one level the festival was about the reestablishment of control over the disorder of a threatening nature, it was also about the range of possibilities that existed precisely at the moment of maximal contact between order and disorder. But it is now time to backtrack to the festival itself, before we allow it, as it did that night for me, to deconstruct itself.

In Pudukkottai, Aiyandar was often the principal village deity, though there are villages which include Aiyandar temples in

which the village deity was said to be a goddess. According to most of my informants, the most significant feature of Aiyandar was his role as the protector. He was more specifically called the protection deity, the protector of boundaries, and the one who protected those who took refuge with him. The kutirai etuppu festival -- or the installation of the horses -- began a month before the main festival day. The head of the potters (Velars), the community that made the terracotta offerings and often acted as principal priests for Aiyandar, would take a handful of clay (pitiman) from the village tank. The pitiman was placed in a brass plate and handed to the village ampalam, who then returned it to the Velars, along with the ritual dues. The ampalam had to make this gift, signifying his permission for the festival to begin, to entitle the Velars to proceed with the preparation of the offerings. The gift was made in part in the form of puja, as the blessed return of a gift that was first offered to the superior being. The central position of the ampalam was thus enunciated and displayed at the moment of the festival's inauguration.

Throughout the festival itself, though each one varied in details, the role of the ampalam was particularly conspicuous, as important as the deity. The festival began and ended at his house, the central locus of all village gatherings. There the first ritual action of the festival had taken place a month earlier, when the ampalam returned the pitiman to the head of the Velars. Similarly, the first ritual action of the festival day was often the puja performed to the ampalam's family deity,

adorned with the emblems which represented and encapsulated the family's heritage. Granted by the Raja, and passed from generation to generation within the family, these emblems now symbolized that this festival was sponsored by the village ampalam, a festival at once personal and public, the private puja of the ampalam's family and the public performance of the entire village.

In Dumont's well known analysis of this festival he both places too much importance on the opposition of purity and impurity (deducing from diet that Aiyandar is principally modelled on the Brahman, even though in behavior and legend Aiyandar is far more like the king) and on his contention that Aiyandar's relation to other village deities reflects the encompassment of the political by the religious. The kingly aspects of the deity and the critical role of the ampalam are either ignored or subordinated to a secondary importance. Dumont's failure to provide a fully satisfactory analysis of Aiyandar and his festival is part of his larger refusal to grant that a king can, in certain contexts, encompass and incorporate the divine, the brahmanic, as well as the social and political constituents of caste solidarity and warrior strength. In the village, where the king was represented by the ampalam, the festival at once elevated the ampalam and his political authority, displayed the ampalam's relation to the king, effected an identity between the latter and the village, and produced, through the celebration of a festival on behalf of a god who so dramatically exemplified the

royal function, the conditions under which the village could be victorious against the forces of evil.

But this is not the whole story. For it is precisely the political permeability of ritual that makes possible a succession of contested performances, readings, and tellings. In India kingship had been the dominant trope for the political, but far from the only one. As I stated at the beginning, the Aiyandar festival frequently did not happen, or occasioned everything from violent dispute to multiple celebration, as in one village where three separate village festivals took place under the leadership of three rival castes and their factional affiliates.

For example, in the early 1920s in Tiruvappur, a village close to Pudukkottai town and made up mostly of Kallars, weavers, and service castes, the Velars petitioned that they were under no compunction to give or receive the pitiman from the village headman. With appropriate bureaucratic justification, they insisted that since the headman's inam lands did not specify that he should give the pitiman, there was no other authoritative basis for the claim that pitiman be given only by the headman. The headman in turn petitioned the government that the performance of the festival without his permission, granted through the pitiman, was an infringement of his hereditary right, as proved by the fact that his family had been granted inam lands with the specific injunction to conduct the ordinary pujas and other festivals in the Aiyandar temples of Tiruvappur. Both petitions employed the same colonial logic, giving inams (and the

authority of local headmen) a rational-legal basis they had not had in pre-colonial times.

For the Diwan's assistant, the Diwan Peishkar, the resolution of the case rested first on the proper interpretation of the significance of the grant of pitiman. His inquiries led him to decide quite correctly that the grant of pitiman signified far more than the intended cooperation of the headmen or Nattars. "If it signifies mere cooperation without the slightest tinge of authority or idea of special privilege the villagers would not have objected to the continuance of the system. On the other hand, the grant of pitiman is considered to be a grant of permission by the nattars to conduct the kutirai etuppu. Both the nattars and the artisans view it in this light and it is why the former are unwilling to lose the privilege and the latter anxious to discontinue the system (Pudukkottai Record Office, R.D. no. 1587 of 1923, dt. 30-3-25)." He then had to decide whether this privilege could be sustained under the bureaucratic terms of service implied by the wording of the inam grant, which was vague enough to accommodate both interpretations put forward in the petition and counter petition. The Diwan Peishkar investigated customs in other Aiyandar temples to determine precedent only to find that each case differed, hardly the stuff of precedent. To further complicate matters, the Diwan Peishkar felt that he had to determine whether the dispute concerned the hereditary privileges of the headmen as traditional caste headman or, in a deliberately alienating bureaucratic move, as state functionaries.

The Brahmanical Diwan Peishkar was also troubled by his belief that religion was an individual concern, and that all devotees should be able to commission the Velars to make horses for them without the intervention of the Nattar. Such control over the individual vows of others seemed to him "revolting to a devotee's sense of honour and reason." The Diwan Peishkar recommended that the Nattars be allowed to commission the installation of horses on their own behalf, but not on the behalf of others. The separation of the individual rights of Nattars from their right to commission horses on behalf of the entire village only made sense, however, in terms of a newly formulated bureaucratic conception of religion, since the individual vows of devotees would have been encompassed by the social fact that the festival, even when contested, was a village festival. The Diwan Peishkar's recommendation struck at the core of the headman's objections, since he saw his privilege as an enactment of his authoritative position in the village temple and indeed in the village at large. But in the invention of an autonomous domain and logic of religion, the underlying social issues were ignored. The struggle between the service and dominant groups was a struggle over authority, and thus had its most visible and important expression in the Aiyandar ritual, which itself resisted bureaucratic appropriation by the new Brahman-British religious sensibility (though it succumbed to the bureaucratic definition of the inam).

As it turned out, the Diwan was less zealous than the Diwan Peishkar to upset the local structure of authoritative relations

in Tiruvappur. He recommended that the Nattars continue to be vested with the right to give the pitiman. He did, however, insist that the Nattars had to signify their permission by giving back the pitiman immediately and routinely, thus heading off the mischievous possibility that they might abuse their right, a sacred trust. "Authority" was defended in name, but was undermined by the attempts of the bureaucratic establishment to make religion an individual and private rather than a social and public affair. Although this did not allay all the concerns of the petitioners, they had at least been able to use the language of government to lodge an important formal complaint.

Tiruvappur had been the scene of many similar disputes at least as early as 1885. At one point the local Paraiyars asserted themselves against the ampalam by refusing to beat drums outside the temple. In another instance, the Velars again resisted the authoritative claims of the Kallar headman, denying his privilege to carry the scythe used for the ritual slaughter and present it to the Velars who actually did the cutting. On one occasion they even refused, in their role as priests, to offer praatam from Aiyandar to the ampalam. Again the Diwan upheld the rights of the ampalams, at the same time that he tried to rationalize the exercise of these rights.

Many similar disputes took place, but only a few of them leaked into official view, usually because the disputes were dealt with in summary (and no doubt brutal) fashion by the local dominant groups. So although these files alerted me to a record of contention, it was only in towns close to the court, and also

in bigger towns and temples such as those considered by Appadurai and Breckenridge (1976), that ritual was a clearly contentious affair in the historical record. Many of these disputes concerned the distribution of honors and *pracetam* in temples and locked dominant lineages and their headmen in fervent dispute with each other; otherwise the disputes were usually buried by the dominant group (which had to seek no higher authority). Thus when Appadurai and Breckenridge proposed that ritual in south India involved conflict, they were referring to only one form of conflict, the same form of conflict anthropologists working on India had theretofore recognized and accepted: factionalism. Indebted though I am to their analysis, I only realized the range (and subtlety) of dispute and contestation through my own combination of ethnographic accidents and historical investigations.

And I did find many other instances in which ritual turned out to be a core arena for resistance, particularly for groups such as artisans and untouchables who could resist by simply withholding their services. The closest thing to a municipal strike in the history of Pudukkottai town took place in the early 1930s when the untouchables protested the establishment of a municipal crematorium by withholding their ritual funereal services for all their patron groups. The municipality backed down in short order because of the consternation of one high caste family after another who felt they were dishonoring their dead. And Kathleen Gough (1955) has vividly documented the breakdown of village ritual in rural Tanjavur where untouchable

groups, fired in part by the growth of a local communist movement, have increasingly withheld their ritual services from village festivals. Nonetheless, Gough's assertion that village rituals would not recover from the effects of recent change and growing class consciousness have not been sustained by the experience of the last thirty years. In fact, village rituals continue to be important precisely because of their association with conflict.

Although village rituals were clearly sites for struggle between elite groups and their factions over who was in charge (see Dirks 1987: 358-383), this was only part of the story. Rituals were generalizable sites for struggle of all kinds, including -- as my earlier story suggests -- the struggle between discourse and event. Ritual was a discursive and practical field in which a great deal was at stake and a great deal was up for grabs. But when conflict developed in ritual it always made the ritual a site for appropriation as well as for struggle. The headman of the darkened quiet village appropriated the interpretive function of a ritual that he always knew would not take place, that was an embarrassment only when I pressed my curiosity and showed up without the proper invitation. The Brahman administrators of Pudukkottai appropriated the dispute for their own purposes, of undermining the religious authority of rural Kallar elites and implementing new colonial standards for the evaluation of religious activity and the establishment of religion within a newly created domain of civil society. Anthropologists have appropriated ritual to advocate the

religious dimensions, character, and force of the social, which in the case of Dumont's transformation of Durkheim is located in a world of religiously validated hierarchy. Appadurai and Breckenridge (1976) found struggle at the top level of ritual and argued that temples provided political arenas of dispute. These appropriations--like my own--are all examples of the way ritual has become central to the field of power relations in southern India. Further, these appropriations have never fully succeeded in containing the power of ritual, and they are all checked by the profoundly subversive character of traditional ritual practice (at least as I observed, and didn't observe, it in southern India). Not only did ritual discourse and ritual practice operate at angles to each other, both discourse and practice were open to a multiplicity of contesting and resisting agencies, even when these agencies were themselves constituted by (or in relation to) the concealed agencies of colonial hegemony.

But I have so far completely ignored one of the most important but also complex sources of agency and action in the Aiyandar festival. I do not mean the lord Aiyandar himself, but rather his incarnation in the form of the camiyatis, the people in the village who during the course of the festival were routinely possessed by the lord Aiyandar. Possession was an absolutely critical part of this and other village festivals in the south, and aside from the goat sacrifice and the feast was the most charged event in village ritual practice. Once again I must retell the festival, which I will do here in the form of one specific festival that did take place.

* * * * *

(The Aiyandar festival described here was celebrated in the predominantly Kallar village of Puvaracakuti, in Vallanatu, about eight miles southeast of Pudukkottai town, in early July 1982):

The festival began at the house of the ampalam. When I arrived the ampalam was bathing and a number of village folk and members of the ampalam's family were busy decorating the front of the ampalam's house, festooning it with mango and coconut leaves. The Paraiyars who had assembled some distance from the house built small fires to tune their drums. Flowers, coconuts, and other items for the puja were brought to the front porch of the house. There were five red ribbons to tie on the horns of the horses and bullocks, five towels for the possessed camiyatis and veshtis and towels for the service castes such as the dhobi, barber, and Paraiyars. The ampalam came to the front porch after his bath, and worshipped the images of gods and goddesses hung on the interior walls of the porch.

The emblems of the ampalam were brought out from the vacant house next door, called the big house, which was unoccupied because of a quarrel within the ampalam's family between collateral contestants for the position of ampalam. These emblems consisted of a spear, a sword, a cane, and a club. The emblems symbolized the office and authority of the ampalam, and were said to have been presented many generations before by the Raja. Under a small tiled roof mantapam about twenty yards to

the west of the ampalam's house, they were placed next to the pattavan, a sword representing an ancestor of the ampalam's family who was worshipped as the family deity. The emblems and the pattavan were shown the flame, camphor was burnt, and coconuts were broken, the three most common elements of any performance of puja. After this, the emblems were carried by other Kallars in the village, and the ampalam was summoned. The first procession of the day was ready to begin.

The emblems were carried by Kallars. The entire procession was led by Paraiyars beating their drums. Though the ampalam was the central character, attention was increasingly focused on the camiyatis, here five Kallars who were to be possessed by the god. Initially chosen for possessing special spiritual powers, they were the hereditary camiyatis who participated in the festival each year. They walked immediately behind the drum-beating Paraiyars. Not yet in full trance, the camiyatis began to show signs of possession as they walked on to the beat of the drums, their bodies sporadically quivering at the touch of Aiyanar, who was shortly to enter into them. The procession walked straight to the small structural temple to Aiyanar. A puja was performed for Aiyanar, and sacred ash was distributed to all those present. The camiyatis then picked up bags of ash and began walking back to the village, accompanied by the Paraiyars. As they walked through the village, the women of each house came towards them and poured water over their feet to cool them. The camiyatis blessed the women with the ash they carried. We walked through the Kallar section of town via the ampalam's house, to the Velar

settlement on the eastern side of the village. There the procession was welcomed by the playing of the mela telam by the Melakkarars (the pipers) of a nearby temple and by exploding fire crackers. Six terracotta figures, each about four feet high, were lined up on the Velar street -- one elephant, three horses, and two bulls -- in the final stages of decoration. They had been whitewashed, painted with colored stripes, and crowned with stalks of flowering paddy and the ribbons from the ampalam's house. The five Kallar camiyatis stood in front of the terracotta figures. A Paraiyar from a nearby village came forward, and carefully dressed the camiyatis in special clothes. The Paraiyar wore a garland made of silver balls, his head was wrapped with a red cloth, his chest was draped with multicolored strands of cloth, a new towel was tied around his waist, and garlands of bells were wrapped around him. His face was painted with vermilion and sandal paste. This Paraiyar was called the munnoti, the leader or the one who went first. In a few minutes he became possessed on his own, to the music of the drums and nadaswaram played by the Melakkarars. He began to jump wildly when the incense and camphor smoke was shown to him and he stared fixedly at the sky. He suddenly leapt into the crowd, snatched the ampalam's spear, and began to beat the ground with it. He was jumping and running around and through the crowd, all the while circumambulating the six figures. The ampalam then came up to him, garlanded him and smeared sacred ash on his forehead. After this, the munnoti led the other camiyatis into states of possession. Someone whispered in my ear that the munnoti was the

burning lamp which lights other lamps. Full possession was achieved when the munnoti held the camphor up to the camiyatis, one by one.

Now that the camiyatis were fully possessed, the procession was ready to commence. The Paraiyars went first, followed at some distance by the Melakkarars, then by the munnoti and the five camiyatis, then the terracotta offerings, with the elephant in the lead, followed by the smaller offerings of individual villagers. Behind them walked the ampalam, surrounded by many of his kinsmen. As the procession moved around the village, on its way back to the Aiyanar temple, villagers came up to the camiyatis to be blessed, often asking questions about the future which the camiyatis answered. When we reached the temple, the eyes of the terracotta figures were opened with the blood of a cock, sacrificed by the munnoti (who was then given the cock). The terracotta animals were then installed in front of the temple. A grand puja was held to Aiyanar. The Velar priests offered tamarind rice, broke coconuts, and then showed the light, after which they offered ash to the worshippers. Then the pujaris left the Aiyanar shrine, shutting its doors. Aiyanar was said to be vegetarian, and ought not to see the sacrifice to Karuppar, the fierce black god whose shrine is always next to Aiyanar.

Moving to Karuppar, the priests performed puja again. The villagers surged forward en masse to obtain some ash. One of the priests laid a stone a few yards in front of the Karuppar temple. The villagers assembled in a circle; finally a goat was brought forward, and judged proper. The fifth camiyati came forward

bearing a large sword taken from the Karuppar shrine. With one swift slice he cut off the goat's head. As they intently watched the spilling of blood and the final convulsions of the goat's body, the crowd became increasingly excited and jubilant. the carcass of the goat, which had been donated by the ampalam's family, was now handed over the Velar priests.

A cloth was laid on the ground for the ampalam to sit on. The Velars brought him the huge bowl of tamarind rice and all the pracatam from the puja: flowers, coconuts, and plantains. sitting there the ampalam distributed the honors, first to the Kallar lineage heads, then to the Valaiyars, and the artisans. Finally, the village elders took up the ampalam's emblems once again, and beckoned to him to lead the procession back to the village. All returned to his house, where the emblems were returned to their accustomed place in the big house. This concluded, the village Pallars and Paraiyars were given their pracatam in the village square in front of the ampalam's house, along with sufficient rice and a chicken for a feast of their own.

* * * * *

The final distribution of honors both confirmed the authority of the ampalam and displayed the hierarchical relations of all the caste groups in the village. Or so it seemed. This harmonious village festival began to deconstruct itself when I came to realize shortly after I attended the festival that a

rival group of Konars, traditionally harders but now an increasingly powerful agricultural caste, had seceded from the ritual performance and instead held their own kutirai etuppu, some weeks later. Thus the appearance of harmony that presented itself so forcefully began to unravel as soon as I began to poke into the affairs of the village. After what I have already argued in this paper, this is hardly surprising. But here I will comment on one important aspect of the festival that I completely ignored in my earlier analysis. From the account it is clearly seen that possession was a central part of the ritual drama. However, what was possession all about; what did possession signify?

Most of the literature on possession deals with the nasty kind, when it is the devil rather than the lord who has taken up residence within this our mortal coil. And so rather than the exorcist we have its opposite -- a man whose skill and power is precisely to induce possession rather than rid us of it. But this too is an extraordinary form of power, and one that has many dangers. It is significant that for this role an untouchable is chosen; while all the regular camiyatis are of the dominant Kallar caste, the one person who makes their possession possible could never be invited into their houses nor be allowed to dine with them. And his power was not completely contained by hierarchy, for there were moments of real fear when he seized the ampalam's spear and began dancing wildly about, and the fear of Aiyandar was clearly enhanced by his choice of this unruly Paraiyar as his principal vehicle and agent. (When I went to

visit him he was completely drunk, and he combined in his person an exaggerated deference and a smoldering bitterness. On the one hand he acted as if he was deeply honored that I should visit him, that he failed to recognize me for a moment or two seemed due more to drink than any difficulty remembering my presence in the festival through the daze of his own possession. On the other hand, he was the one who told me that there was a rival festival in the village hosted by Konars or shepherds, and as he told me this he almost laughed at the hollow claims of the Kallar headmen who could no longer control an inferior caste group).

Indeed, this was not the only moment of danger, not the only reason why containment was a live issue throughout the festival. Aiyandar was clearly hard to handle, and his agents in possession had to negotiate a delicate balance between play acting and overacting. I was repeatedly told that the possession was real, that it took many years to learn how to accept the visitation of the lord, that it required the supervision of a man of special powers both to learn and to do, and that after a spell of possession it would take days and sometimes weeks for the possessed person to return fully to normal, exhausted and shaken by the experience. And I was told that if a camiyati turned out not to be really possessed, simply play acting, they would ridicule him and exclude him completely from the festival and its proceedings. After all, the festival was critical for the well-being of the village, and if Aiyandar was misrepresented by an imposter, then the festival might fail, and certainly the advice handed down by the lord to the anxious and enquiring villagers

would be spurious. But there were also times when possession could prove too much; the camiyati was called the vessel, and when this vessel could not contain the concentrated power of the lord it might crack. In such instances the camiyaati would not recover from possession, would stay deranged and disturbed, and then there would be need of an exorcist.

It is possible to account for all of this with a traditional view of ritual. Van Gennep (1960) was keenly aware of the danger and disorder that was part of ritual, and built this into his explanation of liminality and ritual transformation. But his theory has a tendency to contain danger too readily, too automatically, and to assume that disorder is epiphenomenal. I would propose here that possession was yet another aspect in which ritual practice was genuinely dangerous and always already subversive. Part of the subversiveness had to do with what we have already considered, the constant possibility of conflict, fission, paralysis, and hermeneutic if not agonistic explosion. But the subversiveness had also to do with the politics of representation and misrepresentation, inherent in both the role of the headman and that of the camiyatis.

First, the festival was a powerful spectacle precisely because of the role of the possessed camiyatis. The festival seemed to me at times, particularly since I attended many different festivals in different villages, like theater. Victor Turner (1969) has already commented on this correlation, using the term "ritual drama," by which he meant that ritual could be analysed as if it was an unfolding drama with the participants

actors who engaged in the unseen forces of life through the vicarious agencies of ritualistic enactment. But if what I witnessed was theater to the participants, it was very different from what has come to be accepted as theater in the West. Stephen Greenblatt has noted that, "the theatre elicits from us complicity rather than belief (1988: 119)." But in rural southern India there were elements of both complicity and belief; there were roles and masquerades that depended on far more than skilful artifice and conceit. This was "theater lived" not "theater played," as Greenblatt observed when citing an ethnographic example (1988: 111). But even this opposition does not capture the full power of this ritual experience. For there was the possibility that something could go wrong, and this provided an urgency and unpredictability to the drama that renders a theatrical metaphor too dramatic and possibly sacriligious. One of the inescapable implications of the camiyati's predicament -- the risk that possession could be inauthentic -- was that all agency and all representation in the ritual was at risk as well. Identity was most fragile at the moment of its transformation and multiple reference. And the risk that the possessed might be faking it no doubt raised the possibility that the headman, whose authority and connections with the king were in the festival both celebrated and renewed, might also be faking it. After all, every one knew (though at the time I did not) that the headman claimed a sovereignty over the entire village that was not granted by the rival shepherds. Thus, participation in the festival was highly politicized.

Indeed, even the role of the lord was thus politicized; on whose side was which god on? But it was the compelling, contestable, and dangerous components of the ritual drama that also raised the stakes; the spectators did not simply gaze, they vied with each other to participate more actively and more centrally in the festival, to interlocute the camiyatis, to see the cutting of the goat, and to collect and consume the prasada -- the transubstantiated return -- of the lord. They also vied with one another to celebrate, to control, and to interpret the ritual.

I have given just a few illustrations to suggest what I might mean by the subversive nature of ritual practice and discourse. I will close with one last observation. Each ritual event is patterned activity to be sure, but it is also invented anew as it happens. When I witnessed one festival, there was frequent confusion about what was to be done. At one point a participant in the festival leaned over to me, realizing that I had seen many similar festivals, and asked me, what I thought they should do next. At the time, I thought that I was already intruding too much on the authenticity of the ritual event, and that to offer an opinion -- and by the way I did have one -- would be to go across the fragile threshold of legitimate participation implied in the oxymoronic motto of anthropology: participant observation. But I was wrong, for the authenticity of the event was inscribed in its performance, not in some time and custom sanctioned version of the ritual. And the authenticity of the Aiyandar festival was in particular inscribed in its uncertainty and its contestability. Even when it didn't actually take place.

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