

**Suspected Gods: Spirit Possession, Performance, and Social  
Relations in Multi-Ethnic Suriname**

**by**

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to the loving memory of Emma Losa, Da Tony African, and William H. Earle.

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## Abstract

This dissertation describes how contemporary Afro- and Indo-Caribbean communities use oracular spirit possession to construct distinct sensibilities of social relation I label *coalition* and *encompassment* in ethnically plural, post-colonial Suriname. Afro-Surinamese Ndyuka Maroons and Indo-Guyanese/Surinamese Hindus differently employ oracular possession to diagnose the hidden causes of misfortune and restore correct relations between people, gods, and spirits. I argue that, for both populations, *how* gods and spirits become materially present in ritual interaction provides knowledge of the genuine ontological content of their social relations. By making people's daily struggles with sickness and other problems into signs of the relations they embody, Hindu and Ndyuka oracles instill their patients and devotees with distinctive forms of awareness about who they are and how they should be. This dissertation examines both how oracular possession accomplishes this, and explores the often-paradoxical consequences these different relational sensibilities have for wider Surinamese society.



## Introduction

“Indeed everyone is not fit for or capable of the Knowledge of the Eternal and Temporal Nature in its mysterious Operation, neither is the proud covetous World worthy to receive a clear Manifestation of it; and therefore the only wise God (who giveth Wisdom to everyone that asketh it aright of him) has locked up the Jewel in his blessed Treasury, which none can open but those that have the Key; which is this, viz. ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: The Father will give the Spirit to them that ask him for it.”

—Jakob Böhme

In the last thirty years, due to limited educational and economic inclusion, Suriname’s Maroons, members of six ethnic groups descended from escaped enslaved Africans who fled Suriname’s coastal plantations in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to establish autonomous communities in the country’s rainforest interior, have migrated *en mass* to Paramaribo, Suriname’s capital. Formerly separated by hundreds of miles of rainforest, Maroons and Hindus<sup>1</sup>, the offspring of 19<sup>th</sup> century indentured South Asian laborers brought by colonial governments to work what were then the sugar plantations in British and Dutch Guianas<sup>2</sup>, have increasingly been forced by rapid urbanization and demographic expansion to share the same spaces and institutions. Hindus—including large numbers of recent immigrants of South Asian descent from neighboring Guyana—

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<sup>1</sup> Because I deal with both Surinamese and Guyanese Hindus resident in Suriname, I switch between three different identity terms. I use Hindu Surinamese to specifically refer to Sarnami speaking Surinamese born Hindus; I use Hindustani to refer to all Sarnami speaking Surinamese of South Asian descent, regardless of religion, while I use Hindu Guianese to refer to both Surinamese and Guyanese Hindus.

<sup>2</sup> As I use it, Guiana refers to the region of contemporary Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana as a whole, and Guianese to inhabitants of that region.

and Maroons are now also Suriname's two largest ethnic/religious populations with the greatest potential impact on Suriname's social future (Suriname Census 2012).

Despite demographic ascendancy, both Hindu and Maroon identities are still widely conceived to occupy polar ends of a Surinamese ethnic/religious spectrum that also includes Afro-Surinamese Creoles, Javanese, Muslim Hindustanis, Chinese, Native American, Syrians, and Brazilians. Members of these other ethnic/religious groupings frequently consider Hindus and Maroons inassimilable outliers, a situation that leads many Maroons and Hindus alike to often attempt to justify their belonging to broader Surinamese society through mutual negative reference to one another.

Mistrust between Maroons and Hindus is unquestionably mainly the inheritance of Dutch colonial policies that wielded European racial ideologies to keep subaltern populations divided (Van Lier 1971). Contemporary ethnic antipathy, however, cannot be limited to the colonial past. Current prejudices reveal how members of colonially constituted ethnicities like Maroon and Hindu continue to adapt the rationales of historical racism to the present intra- and inter-ethnic politics of Surinamese pluralism. Such adaptations intersect with semiotic ideologies—habits of evaluating the causal power of signs as embodied in their material form (Keane 2007)—that arose from the distinctive histories of how Maroons and Hindus created autonomous practices of social relation in the shadow of the colonial and then post-colonial state.

When the Hindus and Ndyuka Maroons—members of the second largest and perhaps most prominent Maroon ethnic group in Surinamese history and politics—I knew talked about each other, they routinely stressed what they perceived as conflicting physical, linguistic, ritual, moral, and social differences. My Ndyuka and Hindu friends

searched these materials for signs of what they assumed kept them distinct from ethnic others. These distinctions notably hinged on assessments of how members of other ethnicities communicated, and the relations and obligations people perceived to be conveyed by these formal differences in message, mediation, and address, especially in ritual. Hindus and Ndyukas alike also understood such differences in ritual and other communicative practices as intrinsically dangerous. Members of both groups saw the others' practices as trafficking in relations with spirits and gods that threatened their own personal agency—their capacity to meaningfully act (Ahearn 2001)—and the ethnically and ritually delimited social relations and values that many Ndyukas and Hindus felt imbued their personal agency with consequence.

This dissertation analyzes how communicative forms influence this sense of forcefully distinct semiotic sensibilities of social relation among members of ethnic populations who otherwise share Suriname's neighborhoods and nation. Focusing on oracular spirit possession—a contentious but important source of social knowledge for many different types of people in Suriname—the dissertation describes how the communicative practices of Ndyuka Maroons and Indo-Surinamese and Guyanese Hindus are part of the production and maintenance of discordant concepts of relatedness amid Suriname's multi-ethnic society. I isolate dominant (but not exclusive) communicative modalities and ideological emphases within otherwise similar practices used by members of both populations. These modalities, I label, respectively, *coalition* and *encompassment*<sup>3</sup>, and argue for their important influence on how the Hindus and Ndyuka I worked with perceived and evaluated their social relations.

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<sup>3</sup> Intended to collapse distinctions of form and content, coalition and encompassment are “ideal type” (Weber 1949) terms that attempt to condense what is both common and idiosyncratic about how the

Because coalition and encompassment are simply analytic glosses, both terms—like the identity labels Hindu and Ndyuka which owe as much to Dutch colonialism as to self-ascription—are likely insufficient to describe the complexities of either Hindu or Ndyuka social practices in general or oracular practice in particular. Neither can these terms designate *exclusive* Hindu or Ndyuka methods for communicating, conceiving, and organizing their social relations. Instead, these terms are heuristic distillations of the preponderant practices and discourses I encountered during my fieldwork with members of both populations. Medium and message, encompassment and coalition encapsulate both preferred sensibilities of relatedness and the procedures that objectify knowledge about the relations these sensibilities index; the terms thus represent my best efforts at exemplifying the “pattern that connects” (Bateson 1980: 8) diverse ritual practices to the varied and conflicting domains of Hindu and Ndyuka sociality.

Accordingly, encompassment and coalition highlight what often amount to subtle yet socially consequential divergences in how many Ndyukas and Hindus make and evaluate relations and their semiotic mediation. Coalition and encompassment are meant to show how similar communicative forms can sustain divergent evaluations of persons, agency, and relatedness. More than this, the appreciable overlap of coalition and encompassment divulges a necessary interdependence; a “Ndyuka” or “Hindu” preference for one or the other modality at a specific moment testifies to the complex, ongoing relation between Suriname’s different ethnicities, semiotic ideologies, and the formal practices of communication that erect these differences. That is, encompassment and coalition can helpfully be approached as labels for provisional and shifting strategies

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communicative forms of Hindu and Ndyuka rituals make their practitioners aware of themselves as embodiments of their traditions’ relational and agentive assumptions.

that simultaneously create and contain relations of otherness—be they between humans or humans and spirits—particularly those that arise from confrontations among different interpretations of the necessary goals of ritual and other communicative practices.

To demonstrate what I mean, in what follows I provide two scenes that succinctly emphasize first, a modality of coalition, and secondly, a modality of encompassment.

### **Scene 1**

On a day in May 2013, I am sitting inside the Ndyuka Maroon spirit medium Da Sabun's shrine room (*gadu/winti osu*) in one of Paramaribo's predominantly Maroon suburbs. Sitting across from me, Ma Tranga, Da Sabun's third wife, is possessed by one of her three presiding spirits, an indigenous man named Da Kodyo. Temporarily using Ma Tranga's body, Da Kodyo sits on a low stool in front of his altar dressed in the red and white clothes of his family of spirits.

It is around 2 o'clock in the afternoon, and Da Sabun and Da Kodyo have just summoned the next of many waiting patients inside the shrine. A man in his thirties comes in. Sitting down, he complains about problems with money that he feels must be connected to his co-workers. He has recently been made a manager at his job, causing his fellow workers to resent him. He says that he hasn't yet accepted these new arrangements; he has become testy, while he feels he is stuck in alternative states of extreme energy or total exhaustion. "Some days I can work through (the night) until the next morning, at other times even getting up is too difficult. I continue to go to work, but

when my body is weak, I'll stay at home for two or even three days.”<sup>4</sup> He feels that one of his co-workers must be “doing something” (*du wan sani*) to bewitch him.

After some conversational back and forth between Da Sabun and the man, and in spite of stating that he is unable to see the problem clearly, Da Kodyo finally pronounces his diagnosis. The man suffers from a “family thing” (*famii sani*)—an afflicting witchcraft demon (*bakuu*) internal to his lineage. Da Kodyo tells the man that he can exorcise him by taking him to wash in the forest with a medicinal formula (*obiya*). This treatment, however, requires a great deal of money. Da Kodyo tells the man:

“But you have to do it [the treatment] quickly. I can resolve [your problem], do you hear? I need a lot of money when I work for you. And my money doesn't give immediate returns. When I work for you, you have to give me all of my money. When you don't pay me, and everything is all right today, but nothing works out tomorrow, you can't come and yell at me. I will withdraw my power (*krakti*), you hear? Mmm. I'm not in [my medium's] head when I'm hiding, hear? I am an Indian, do you hear? Mmmm. I am sure I don't fool people. I know I don't fool humans. Mmmmm. When I resolve [your problem], I will resolve it completely. I don't know how to make medicine (*obiya*), but I can inform you so that you are able to make it tomorrow, hear? Mmmmm. If you know you will pay my money, I can write down (the medicinal formula) for you, but if you don't pay. I won't write it.”<sup>5</sup>

With a quickly grunted yes, the man accepted and Da Kodyo began to dictate a list of all the ingredients he would need to conduct the ritual. In a week's time the man would return and (as described in chapter 4) we would all go together to a glade by an

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<sup>4</sup> Son leisi mi kon go a wooko seefi te mamaten, son lesi fu opo go a wooko seefi na wan problem. Mi e go ma son leisi te mi sikin ná e tanga mi e tan tu dei dii dei a osu.

<sup>5</sup> “Ma a mus du esi esi, yere. Mi kan kapu smuru, yere? Mi abi furu sensi yere. Te mi wroko gi yu yere. En mi sensi ne'e sribi, yere. Mmmmm. Te mi wroko gi yu yu musu poti ala mi sensi, yere. Te no poti mi sensi, tide yu fende bun, ma tamara te yu no fende bun, yu no mu kon bari mi na koko, yere. Mi o teke mi krakti baka, yere? Mmm. Mi no de tap' koko de mi kibri, yere. Mi na Ingi, yere. Mmmmm. Mi de seeka mi no kori libisma. Mi de seeka mi no kori libisma. Mmmmm. Te mi o kapu smuru, mi o kapu smuru bun nanga yu. Mi no sabi meke dresi, ma mi kan konkru gi yu fu kan tamara, yere. Mmm. Efu yu sabi taki yu o kon pai a sensi, mi kan skrifi gi yu, ma te yu no man pai, mi nee skrifi, yere?”

abandoned plantation sluice gate to re-compose his body's wellbeing through Da Kodyo's ritual efficacy (*krakti*).

To relieve himself of the afflicting spirit of witchcraft, the man must enter into a new relation with yet another alien spirit. In exchange for the "power" of cash, Da Kodyo will extend the man his own protean efficacy. This exchange binds together human and spirit capacities, enabling the man to re-compose the relations he embodies through the incorporation of the spirit's invisible power.

By bathing the man in the forest with a medicinal recipe (*obiya*) he provides, the man's connections to his offending family will be scrubbed away. Through Da Kodyo's mediation, his corrupt human relations will be replaced and compounded with new spirit relations, his whole physical-mental composition remade through alliance with the spirit. This support, however, is hard won. The man must accept the spirit's power despite the risk of financial loss. To act in accord with the spirit is to negotiate one's weaknesses with the spirit yet retain one's own aims. The man does not simply acquiesce, but rather brings the spirit into active participation in his own embodied capacity. In doing so, the man augments his human feebleness to enable his renewed ability to act effectively in determining the terms of his social existence. In this way, Da Kodyo invites the man into *coalition* with him.

## **Scene 2**

The temple gleamed, strands of flashing lights playing off the sheen of richly painted gods adorned in brilliantly colored metallic garments. Though small, hot, and crowded, the temple (*mandir*) emitted otherworldliness in spite of its location in the backyard of one of Paramaribo's more dilapidated neighborhoods. It was already well

into the afternoon on Fathers' Day, a day that had commenced with intensive preparation for all the temple's regular devotees. Now, one young Hindu Guyanese immigrant sat before the temple's "Guru". The stridency and clarity of the guru's words alone revealed that he was not himself but rather Lord Shiva—whom members of the temple regarded as the supreme deity and ultimate identity of the universe. Shiva spoke to the young man, praising him for his dedication and attentiveness in assisting the temple. As a reward, Shiva gave the young man a *mala* (a string of prayer beads) and instructed him in his native English:

"I give my *mantra*, myself, towards you my child. Through this (the *mala*), you continue to do your chanting. (...) More you chant, more your blessings. More your knowledge it flows, more you will receive. More you understanding, more people will respect you, for I will be there always. And the time will come when one's long... one become what you are. Take care of you, you become one with me. You see myself within you, and I see myself in you, you see yourself within me, and I see my... yourself within me."

With a look of apprehensive awe, the young man accepted the *mala* and promised to take it home with him to do his "devotions." Shiva has taught the young man that he *is* Shiva's *mantra*. Every time the young man diligently recites Shiva's name he intensifies his fundamental identification with, and subordination to, Shiva. Shiva instructs the young man that such prayerful encompassment by the deity is the only appropriate end of human action. More practically, through synchronizing divine will and personal need, Shiva tells the young man that his piety will result in greater "respect" among his peers.

Shiva reveals that he, his name, and the world, are all identical. Through diligent recollection of this the young man can bring himself into accord with the divine agency fundamental to his and the universe's existence. Rather than negotiate with Shiva, Shiva instructs the young man to forget himself entirely within the power and possibility that



Shiva himself incarnates in his medium and the world. Such devotions enable the young man to be *encompassed* by Shiva, to see Shiva within himself, and himself within Shiva as a subordinate part to Shiva's containing universal totality.

### **Forms of Dependency in Relation**

As can be seen from the two scenes of ritual mediumship just recounted, the variances and affinities between them are concurrently subtle *and* sweeping. The first scene may appear to be a simple overture to a contractual cash transaction, the second scene merely an ardent invitation to greater piety. Nevertheless, I argue that these scenes express coalition or encompassment as preponderant yet unstable emphases in certain Hindu and Ndyuka ritual performances and the relations they strive to communicate.

Starting with the similarities, Hindu and Ndyuka oracular consultations like those recounted above—though often unsuccessful—equally work to make perceivable and important the invisible relations that explain human infirmity and dependence. These and other oracular consultations I witnessed during my fieldwork concentrated and confounded participants' reflexivity about their agency, performatively merging persons, words, and things in interaction to generate a dizzying sense of the limits of human knowledge. At the same time, by filling in the relations that determined their patients' fates with the names of gods, spirits, and kin, oracular performances restrained the vertiginous uncertainties they provoked. Though frequently anguishing, recognition of their personal vulnerability outfitted patients with new identities encompassed by, or in coalition with, more powerful non-corporeal agents like gods and spirits. Because of this, the patients of both ritual traditions could learn to see themselves as the dependencies of the social relations oracles revealed them to be composed of, granting them new moral

identities as victims, allies, mediums, and devotees. This empowered Hindu and Ndyuka patients to innovate the social relations oracles divulged, sanctioning the ritual severing or strengthening of their social interdependencies with kin, friends, spirits, and ethnic others.

Now compare what I have just portrayed to the famous definition of religion offered by the prominent liberal Christian theologian Schleiermacher in *The Christian Faith*. Schleiermacher proposed that the essence of religion is the feeling of “absolute dependence” on that which is greater than one’s self—God. “To feel oneself as absolutely dependent and to be conscious of being in relation with God are one and the same thing; and the reason is that absolute dependence is the fundamental relation which must include all others in itself” (Schleiermacher 1928: 17). Schleiermacher’s attempt to define the universal existential grounds of religion yields a highly specific yet completely abstract phenomenology reliant on the term *relation*. Through designating dependence as the chief quality relating humanity to God, Schleiermacher—like Durkheim *avant la lettre*—wishes to reduce religion to a single core capable of overcoming any diversity of opinion or custom.<sup>6</sup>

Though dependence undeniably isolates many important elements of the “religious” impulse, its robust abstraction discloses Schleiermacher’s historical and

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<sup>6</sup> Unintentionally, but inevitably, Schleiermacher produces both a Post-Hegelian theology and a highly contingent account of liberal German protestant Christian rhetorical and ritual practice in the romantic period. In his extrapolation of the polarity between the ego and the divine, in his insistence of prostrate reliance on a wholly transcendent deity, Schleiermacher summarizes Luther and Calvin’s fixations on grace and the Pietist movements’ insistence on feeling as they exist in an official state Church opposed to “superstitious” reliance on ritual. In his definition of religion, we have a synthesis of every didactic sermon and each prayer of the previous centuries of German religion. In this way, Schleiermacher’s philosophical abstractions reflect the embodied rhetorical practices of the established, “purified” (Latour 1991; Keane 2007) Prussian church. This inadvertent parochialism is the most likely fate of any attempt to define universal principles or elementary structures beyond the mediating practices that enable their conceptualization.

sociological particularity as much as it divulges nonspecific tendencies in ritual practice. As Marilyn Strathern notes “...it is precisely in its abstract form that the concept of relation often seems to carry a positive value” (Strathern 2014:4). Encompassment and coalition are my own attempts to avoid the abstraction of “relation” and provide an empirical account of how variable modalities of relational dependency/interdependency are entailed by the communicative repertoires of Ndyuka and Hindu oracular performances. In the chapters that follow, I endeavor to puzzle out the implicit patterns of relatedness and dependence performatively assembled by Hindu and Ndyuka ritual traditions.

Such an analysis addresses a need in contemporary anthropology. To quote Strathern: “As the more so-called ‘bounded’ notions of society and culture are held up to criticism, along with the systems and structures that were once their scaffold, the more relations, relationships, the relational, relationality, are evoked as prime movers [of sociality] in themselves” (2014: 4). Echoing Bruno Latour, rather than regard relation or relatedness as a generic “material” of sociality, I approach relations as a “type of momentary association which is characterized by the ways it gathers together in new shapes” (2005: 65). The question remains how people know which—or even if—a given set of relations exists and with what effects on the perceptions of the broader expectations about social action that people stake their lives on. The very abstruseness of this problem leads us to the empirical details that connect any set of momentary associations. Strathern and Latour similarly suggest that we can never have a description of relation *qua* relation, only given instances of the ways people come to understand that a cousin or a spirit is a certain type of agent and should be considered in some common way.

## Relations of Agency

The issues raised by Strathern are the outcome of the focus on “relationalist” sensibilities in the ethnography of Melanesia (Wagner 1974; Strathern 1988; Robbins 2004). The ethnographic origins of Strathern’s insights show the extent to which disparate traditions differently assess and evaluate the relations of dependency that constitute people’s selves and subjectivities. These differences not only alert us to the constructive power of relatedness in defining all facets of human self-conception and potential but also reveal how talk about those relations transforms and embeds certain patterns of relational practice in the conduct of collective life (Palmié 2013; Urban 2001). In this sense, coalition and encompassment are both modalities of communicative form and the subjectivities these forms aim to instill.

While it is very easy to label relations, to reckon this or that kin system or institutional organization, it proves far harder to predict the specific range of possibilities that can emerge in personal relations with others: “...an adulterer is not to be observed in his adulterous behavior much more easily than a witch” (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 269).<sup>7</sup> I accordingly start with the assumption that relations are only conceivable in terms of the heaped interactive particulars that authorize descriptions and evaluations of relatedness to take affective and rhetorical shape. Rather than abstractions, I describe the semiotics—the materiality of words and things as signs in action—that provoke different peoples with dissimilar histories to understand certain relationships with other people, deities, and

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<sup>7</sup> Whatever the designation within a structure of relations, the outcomes of human interactions are always tentative. The very fact of relations needing to be performed in certain ways seems to lead to doubts about them. No amount of interpellation on a relational matrix can predict *exactly* how mother’s-sister’s-sons or co-workers will relate to each other. In this sense, however sophisticated the categorical mapping of peoples’ relative positions to one another in a lineage or a corporation, it is always possible for relations to provoke doubt.

spirits as necessary, if not always self-evident. This dissertation consequently asks how people come to conceive of themselves as essentially dependent on or different from the actions of specific kinds of others, be they gods, maternal cousins, or representatives of another ethnicity.

My subject is thus how this necessity is performed so that it is perceived as a distinctive natural constraint on human action. In this sense, this dissertation is, unashamedly, yet another entry into the “apparently irrational beliefs” tradition of anthropology. Rather than ask, “What would the Azande have to believe” for witchcraft to exist *or* “What would the world actually have to be like for these statements to be consistent?” (Graeber 2015: 3; Vivieros de Castro 2015) I prefer the far more modest formulation “what kind of knower is postulated by a specific genera of interaction so that what is made known can be recognized as (provisionally) real?” Though this admittedly smacks of Kant, my interest is only in the conditions under which circulable descriptions of knowledge about agency become possible. As opposed to anchoring knowledge in universal facets of the human mind, in the systematic categories of a given social or cultural whole, or in the objective characteristics of an unmediated reality, I wish to narrowly consider the pragmatic relational processes whereby limited kinds of knowledge become available and actionable.

Coalition and encompassment are, consequentially, intended to demonstrate how repertoires of performative practice interactively create knowledge among the Hindus and Ndyukas I worked with that certain relations broadly circumscribe their agency (Ahearn 2001, Gell 1998; Keane 2007; Kockelman 2013). Following Hull (2003) I contend that perceptions of agency are both context dependent and distributed through the relations

that restrict possibilities for allocating agency. In this sense, encompassment and coalition describe the “looping” (Hacking 1999) process by which perceptions of agency and relatedness emerge recurrently one from the other. To quote Keane (2007: 53): “The sense of agency works in conjunction with distinctive forms of self-understanding about the internal constitution and dispositions of human subjects.” This dissertation argues that the distinctive ways the Ndyukas and Hindus I knew conceived of human agency emerged from often-slight differences in how members of each tradition performed knowledge of the relations they held to define the limits of human action and self-awareness.

Oracular possession, of course, is just one of an assortment of practices used by the Hindus and Ndyukas I engaged with to objectify relational knowledge. Oracular mediumship’s controversial authority as an extra-human means for the discernment of knowledge about relations practiced by both Ndyukas and Hindus, however, makes oracular communication an especially compelling genre through which to examine how subtle differences in performance create disparate expectations about relations. Stated another way, a narrow focus on oracular ritual enables me to depict how performative traditions make distinctive relational knowledges perceivable to practitioners that these same ritual traditions portray as inadequate to ritual knowledge.

### **Relations, Possession, and Caribbean Ethnogenesis**

My concern with theorizing relations brings me to more regional issues. Since Herskovits (1945), Caribbean and African American anthropology has been disproportionately marked by theories of ethnogenesis, mixture, and authenticity—variously mediated by concepts like creolization and syncretism (Khan 2001; Palmié

2007; 2013). In this dissertation, I choose to think beyond these categories, which, because of a new recognition of globalization in the 1990s, came to stand in for a wide range of anthropological insecurities about the discipline's theoretical reconfigurations. In this I take up Aisha Khan's (2001: 272) call to "examine what the Caribbean experience means before we construct the Caribbean as an encapsulation of the world." With Khan, I agree that the problem is that, rather than being unique to the Caribbean, these concepts "obtain everywhere else" and that this "ubiquity suggests that creolization's reputed specificity to the Caribbean is a particular fiction that invents the region."

Like creolization, coalition and encompassment are theoretical glosses for local practices whose patterns remain largely tacit in connections between social domains. Unlike creolization, however, with these terms I am endeavoring to designate the aggregate consistency of the different historically conditional communicative strategies Caribbean populations have used to constitute distinctive experiences of agency and "community" (Khan 2013) in the face of often-ruthless diasporic insecurity. I do so keeping in mind Khan's (2007) criticism of discussions that inadvertently attribute agency to second order theories like creolization as autonomous, teleological processes. Consequently, in isolating coalition and encompassment as distinguishing labels for modes of relational practice, I seek to highlight how Caribbean peoples continue to construct their agency against and beyond European ideological hegemony (Johnson 2014). I want to show the vigorous ways in which different Caribbean peoples' strategies for communicating agency structure their perceptions of the relations that make their

sense of community—including with non-human agents—both what it is and how it should be.

Though with different intensities of violence and social alienation, slavery and indenture analogously forced brutalized migrants into industrial agriculture in distant, generally unknown, places. To quote Khan: “In other words, the association with slavery, forced migration, and questionable culture lend a multilayered symbolic significance to both the political economy and epistemological constructions attached to the plantation” (2010: 172). Both forms of labor similarly sought to completely subordinate the enslaved and the indentured to logics and routines of agro-industrial production inimical to the societies from which they came.

In colonial Suriname and Guyana, as elsewhere in the Atlantic world, slavery was premised on the “social death” (Patterson 1985) of the enslaved. Transformed into wholly alienable property, slaves were subject to the near absolute legal power of their masters (Price 1976; van Lier 1971). Even in indenture, where such unmitigated alienation was temporary and made to appear voluntary, the wrenching reality of legal subservience to a total institution thousands of miles from the familiar exercised a profound influence on laborers’ selfhood. In both labor regimes, intense doubts about agency and identity were central to the system of domination that enabled a few thousand Europeans to control tens of thousands of first enslaved Africans and then indentured South Asians. I argue that these conditions of ruthlessly enforced subservient uncertainty led to a particular, if variable, concern with techniques of revelation like oracular possession.

As explained in chapter 2, 18<sup>th</sup> century Surinamese Maroons seeking refuge in Suriname’s vast rainforests were doubly removed from the procedures of authority in



their West and Central African homelands and on the coastal plantations. At least according to the histories preserved by their descendants, the existential insecurity of slavery and maroonage appear to have made issues of legitimate knowledge especially acute for early Maroons. In response, oracular divination assumed a major role as a leading means for objectifying social relations and establishing coordinated social action and evaluation between people from diverse African societies attempting to undue the social assaults of slavery (Price 1983; Thoden van Velzen and Hoogbergen 2011).<sup>8</sup>

Because oracular divination exercised so decisive a role in creating the knowledge with which Maroons constructed diasporic sociality, it is of considerable interest that oracular divination is of much more marginal authority in the Indo-Surinamese and Guyanese Hindu tradition. As will be discussed in chapter 3, though ritual possession is a significant practice throughout South Asia (Smith 2006) and attested to in both Guyana and Suriname from an early date (Bakker 1999; De Klerk 1951; Younger 2010), it is only since the 1960's—a period of tremendous unrest in Guyanese life—that ritual innovations in Guyana have made oracular possession an especially prominent form of communal Hindu ritual practice (Singer, Araneta, and Naidoo 1969; Stephanides and Singh 2000). Such public influence, however, is largely limited to Guyana. In Suriname, though it is evident that Hindustani Hindu Surinamese continue to search out both Hindu and non-Hindu oracular mediation, these rituals remain largely underground, without the highly visible temples that dot coastal Guyana.

The Maroon and Hindu cases show with unusual clarity why oracular possession is an important communicative genre through which to examine how Caribbean peoples

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<sup>8</sup> It should be said that these were extensions of ritual centered processes already happening on the plantations from which Maroons escaped, the influence of which is still pronounced in the ritual practices of non Maroon Afro-Surinamese “Winti”.

have come to reflexively conceive of what might be called the “morphology” and phenomenology of the relations that define their social realities. In exploring how these relations are in part constructed in oracular consultations, I hope to provide an interactive sociology capable of empirically linking discrete moments of personal and collective uncertainty to the vivid knowledges of the larger ideological coherences of kinship, ethnicity, religion, and nation that frequently constrained the social horizons of those Hindus and Ndyuka I met during me fieldwork. In the chapters that follow, I suggest that current divergences in the authority of oracular possession substantially result from the unwieldy intersection of sensibilities of coalition and encompassment with often-paradoxical apprehensions about race, religion, and respectability inherited from Suriname’s colonial past of violent racial hierarchy.

### **Rhetoric, Poetics, Performance... and Ontology**

With a concerted focus on the emergent, socially inventive, energy of language in interaction, linguistic anthropological methods provide a means to look past terminological reifications like creolization that have hamstrung Caribbean anthropology. A growing body of linguistic anthropological research on rhetoric, poetics, and performance extensively influences my analysis of oracular practice. This literature makes it clear that no account of relations could be complete without a description of how communication in interaction brings people into differential awareness of what they are doing, where, and with whom. Accordingly, I pursue an account of the construction of relatedness that takes face-to-face linguistically mediated interaction as my point of departure.

Language is the preeminent medium of communication, the engine of both social stability and change (Bate 2015; Bauman and Briggs 1990; Fleming and Lempert 2015; Keane 2015; Silverstein 2004; Wirtz 2014). Because of this, language should not be seen simply as a disembodied representational code (Bauman and Briggs 2003; Sidnell 2005). Nor should it be limited to the words, syntax, or morphology that make up its spoken or written instances. Instead, I understand speech as one element in a broader linguistic complex of signs like gestures, “paralinguistic” features like sighs or moans, and the manipulation of objects embedded in malleable contexts co-constituted by communicative practice (Lempert 2012; Enfield 2013).

The extent to which the Hindu and Ndyuka oracles I observed were capable of affecting transformation in patients’ knowledge of self and others was critically dependent on how oracles used performances—linguistic, paralinguistic, and kinesic—to interactively “objectify” (Keane 2005; 2008) relations of difference and similarity in ritual consultations. Rhetoric is one means of analyzing this interactive process of objectifying relations. Rhetoric, according to Bate (2014: 538), can be defined as “phenomenologies—ideologies and aesthetics—of communicative functionality or strategic language use that may be operating in a specific society.”

Such perceptions of the ways language works to modify the world are strongly felt. These ideologies both emerge out of the conduct of interaction and impinge upon its subsequent reiterations (Keane 2008; Silverstein 1993, 2003, 2004). In doing so, rhetorical practices create the forms of meta-awareness that are embedded in either explicit theories about rhetoric or, more frequently, in ethical discourses about what comprises correct conduct within different genres of interaction (Keane 2015; Lempert

2013). Drawing on these principles, I explain much of what happens in Hindu and Ndyuka oracular interactions I recorded as the outcome of different expectations about the appropriate relational ends of communication. In this sense, coalition and encompassment describe distinct rhetorical/performative sensibilities about *which* sources of communicative authority should constrain human action (Keane 2013b; Stasch 2009), and concentrate the politics of how the Hindus and Ndyukas I engaged with made knowledge of the relations they regarded as being both natural and moral.

The persuasive power of these stipulations derives from how the rhetoric of each implies a specific kind of actor imbued with certain goals and abilities. As the end of rhetoric, persuasion entails the “natural” constitution of the kinds of persons rhetorical performances attempt to persuade. Such apparent naturalness, I argue, is pointedly derived from the “cross-modal” poetics—the integration of speech, space, gesture, and objects—that takes place in all interactions, and in ritual in particular (Enfield 2013; Fleming and Lempert 2014; Lempert 2012; Silverstein 2004; Stasch 2011).

Jakobson (1960) famously defined the poetic function as projecting “the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination” to “focus on the message for its own sake” (358, 356), like “how rhyme elevates “form” over “content” (Fleming and Lempert 2014: 471). The ways this “focus” is rhetorically accomplished in ritual performance is what generates the strong sense of “indexical”—“the felt quality of causal, spatiotemporal contiguity between one element and what it additionally makes present” (Stasch 2011: 161)—connections between the various materials and goals animated in performance (Keane 2003). These indexical connections are what sanction co-participants in a given interaction to perceive themselves as enacting specific genres

of action, role-identities, and knowledge (Fleming and Lempert 2014; Silverstein 2004; Urban 1990). Such “global” or “hypertrophic” (Fleming and Lempert 2014) poetic qualities of ritual action produce the “exceptional quantity and vividness of the general types that are felt as present in [a ritual’s] concrete particulars” (Stasch 2011: 160).

Poetics depends on performativity—“the power of signs to effect change in the world through the creative power of their indexicality” (Wirtz 2014: 66) to create equivalence between the material qualities of all the objects of action mobilized in a communicative event like a ritual. Performativity summarizes the process whereby the practices that mediate the materiality of communication in interactions convince participants to “accomplish” (Butler 1999: 179) the embodiment of specific kinds of subject positions and self-awareness.

All of this makes how the distinct poetics of Hindu and Ndyuka oracular ritual performances shape interaction one of this dissertation’s major themes. In what follows, I describe oracular rhetoric in interaction in terms of *epistemic performativity*—the practices that lead participants like patients in oracular interactions to acknowledge that they occupy positions of asymmetrical knowledge in relation to those like oracles with whom they interact. I contend that it is this epistemic asymmetry in interaction that makes it possible for participants to accept relations of coalition or encompassment as objectively present within their personal experiences.

Recursively, epistemic asymmetry is also what supports the sometimes-vertiginous “ontological effects” (Espirito Santo 2015) that warrant possessed oracular mediums to describe the hidden relations that *really* determine their human patients’ existences. Even though coalition and encompassment can be described as relational

ontologies, I do not intend to simply “erect a typology of possible relations in this world and in the other, human and non-human” or “examine their compatibility and incompatibility” (Descola 2005: 137).<sup>9</sup> Rather than assume that oracular consultations merely instantiate fully formed, pre-existing “ontologies”, I understand coalition and encompassment as overlapping, provisional possibilities emergent from the ways in which historically conditional “semiotic forms” mediate patterns of connection across socially contingent interactions (Keane 2015).

As Michael Lempert observes (2013: 371): “Events require communicative labor to happen and are hence precarious achievements.” I therefore approach epistemic performances like oracular mediumship as acts of ontological brinkmanship that imply metaphysical coherence even as they deny human co-participants equivalent access to such knowledge. By this, I do not mean to suggest that these ontologies do not “exist,” just that, like any other description of reality, such ontological descriptions are also punctuated happenings within a broader process of alteration and revision. Instead of inductively assembling reductive “Hindu” and “Ndyuka” cosmological unities, I want to show how the mutual constitution of ontological and pragmatic knowledge in interaction “illuminates the labor and methods through which actors strain to make...” relational knowledge “...not just effective but *intersubjectively* evident” (Lempert 2013: 371, my emphasis).

### **Intersubjectivity, Interaction, and Relations of Otherness**

As should already be apparent, to adequately understand how Caribbean peoples differently construct the relational sensibilities that define their agency, it is necessary to

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<sup>9</sup> “...à dresser une typologie des relations possible au monde et à autrui, humain et non humain, et examiner leurs compatibilités et incompatibilités.”

examine the ways in which these relations come to be perceived in everyday interactive sociality. This is most robustly distinct in intersubjectivity—“the direct relation between two or more subjects, usually based on what they share” (Hanks 2013: 263, see also Duranti 2010 and Fabian 2014). While normally construed as elementary to the collaborative co-attunement of social cooperation, intersubjectivity is, as Hanks observes, “a dynamic process that harbors as many differences as commonalities between subjects” (2013: 265).

Intersubjective difference is critical to “otherness as a relation”, which Stasch (2009) has shown is what instills the self-awareness of the social roles/identities that make practicable peoples’ complementary involvements with one another. Stated another way, otherness is an intrinsic property of relation, “the difference that makes a difference” (Bateson 2000: 315), and a sign of the many “hazards” (Keane 1997) people everywhere confront in trying to know the relations they have. If kinship is “mutuality of being” (Sahlins 2011: 2), then any attunement or rejection of attunement between people is a result of the differential intersubjective coordination that simultaneously binds people together and drives them apart.<sup>10</sup> Whether as exclusions or attempts to “draw others into relations” (Stasch 2009: 14), the activity by which persons and collectivities become varieties of mutually constituting agentive others is based on intersubjectivity as an open-ended and ambiguous process of negotiated recognition (Keane 2015; Lempert 2013).

Empirically, such socially emplaced awareness of otherness is an emergent property of the unfolding uncertainties of interaction (Enfield 2003; Hanks 2013; Lempert 2013). Whether face-to-face or mass mediated, each nominal instance of

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<sup>10</sup> A process beautifully represented on a large scale in classical ethnography (Bateson 1937; Evans-Pritchard 1940; Leach 1954).

negotiating the self with another subtly alters the assumptions people make about the categories and the members of the categories that comprise their social worlds (Bateson 2000; Ricœur 1992). Every person must find her or his way through the tangle of partially and ill understood encounters that continue even into the internal dialogues that structure personal consciousness (Bakhtin 1981; Du Bois 2011).

Familiar to my Hindu and Ndyuka interlocutors alike, the ambiguity of intersubjective otherness as a relation of difference is particularly critical in the frayed, multi-ethnic plait of contemporary Suriname. Not only were members of the Hindu and Ndyuka communities I worked with frequently suspicious that they were being harmed by close kin who practiced witchcraft, but these fears equivalently indexed uncertainties about how the actions of numerous categories of ethnic others should be understood. The diversity of these others and the numerous factors that impinged on their classification as allies, enemies, or indifferent neutrals, added poignancy *and* ambivalence to quotidian Surinamese struggles to fathom the implications of their relations. My research indicates that suspicions about others—and by implication, of the meaning and sensation of difference—are latent in any interaction between Surinamese people, but especially intense as regards the hopeful apprehensions of oracular consultations.

Oracular interactions in particular refract many of the discourses of otherness Hindu and Ndyuka people rely on to negotiate their plural social realities, drawing on quotidian ethnic expectations to alter knowledge about the relations implicated in any given consultation.<sup>11</sup> The range of these uncertainties renders intersubjective otherness an active, innovative, element in oracular ritual. As will be seen, the ubiquity of Hindu and

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<sup>11</sup> Self-otherness—the mode of ritually constituted otherness I speculate as being the most potent in its social effects—comprises an additional mode dormant within each of these other three.



Ndyuka suspicions about the legibility of difference extend even into their assessments of the “internal” psychological and physiological phenomena that condition personal self-knowledge. In the chapters that follow, I illustrate how the Ndyuka and Hindu possession performances I recorded differently used on-going intersubjective asymmetries between oracles and patients to reveal relations exceeding human consciousness in ways that constructively unsettle ritual participants’ self-understandings.<sup>12</sup> By molding intersubjectivity, oracles redefine what ritual participants can know about themselves (see Hanks 2013). In this way, the Ndyuka and Hindu oracles I observed generated the feeling that the social relations they described were viscerally present in patients’ lives and actions.<sup>13</sup>

Such asymmetries in knowledge are an important element of ritual, and especially spirit mediumship, throughout the world (Barth 1987; Boddy 1989; Bubandt 2014; Hanks 2013; Johnson 2002; Lambek 1981, 1993; Simmel 1906), and both Hindu and Ndyuka oracular ritual practice could be fruitfully understood through the concept “secretism”—“the active, milling, polishing, and promotion of the reputation for secrets” (Johnson 2002: 3). In what follows, however, I am less interested in the production of secrets than in how intersubjective asymmetries in performance create the revelations that transmute

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<sup>12</sup> In a recent book Webb Keane (2015) describes a variety of contemporary scientific experiments that “undermine any sense that people might have that they are masters of their own ethical lives or have any real insight into others” (80). One of my goals is to show that such apparently secular demonstrations of human limitations are, in a rather different manifestation, used by the ritual traditions I describe to create their own knowledge. And, just like the open-ended re-writing of scientific suspicions in face of new experiments, these forms of “traditional” knowledge are not fixed.

<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the most common statement made by people in Suriname of all ethnicities about oracular ritual (and, indeed, religion more generally) was “You mus’ (must) believe” (*I mu biibi; toke biswas kare ke*). This was a nearly ubiquitous contention, implying that it is the confrontation with doubt that enables ritual efficacy. For my purposes, these statements are interesting in that they represent belief as a possibility defined by a relation of doubt. Beyond the impact of activist Christian discourses or new age rhetoric, these sentiments posit the self-aware participation of those addressed by oracles in evaluating and acting on what oracles reveal. Talk about belief presents sterling evidence of the complex ways in which Hindu and Ndyuka practitioners are aware that it is because of their participation in ritual that “...it is so very real, so very autonomous” (Latour 2001: 275).

hidden knowledge into an index of essential relations of difference. The otherness cultivated between possessed mediums and their human patients facilitated the collapsing of epistemic into ontological asymmetries in oracular ritual (see also Wirtz 2005; Schieffelin 1985). I accordingly detail how intersubjective asymmetries in oracular interactions erect relations of differences between participants to make them identifiable tokens of namable types of persons and beings.

As labels for overlapping patterns of communication and the experiences of their perception, encompassment and coalition encapsulate how understated differences in the forms of Hindu and Ndyuka ritual sculpt intersubjectivity to simultaneously disclose and subdue relations of otherness. The knowledge this generates spans a variety of intersecting interactive domains—between members of the same kin or ethnic group; between members of different ethnicities, and between humans and non-human spirits and gods. In my analyses, I describe how the organization of oracular rituals attempt to structure participants' intersubjective coordination so as to knit together these domains and suffuse the forms of otherness they divulge with a preponderant sensibility of either encompassment or coalition. Fittingly, the labels coalition and encompassment thus highlight parallels between the two traditions *and* illuminate how differences in ritual form, performance, and rhetoric contribute to widespread ideologies of innate differences between Ndyukas and Hindus.

### **Field Site and Methods**

The fieldwork for this dissertation was undertaken, on and off, between July 2007 and August 2013. Despite a number of visits to the Ndyuka homeland on the Tapanahoni River in east-central Suriname, almost all of my intensive recording and observation was

conducted in Paramaribo—Suriname’s capital and only city—or in Wanica, the administrative district that surrounds Paramaribo. During this time I mainly lived with a Hindu Indo-Surinamese family along the main road into Sunny Point, the largest Maroon squatter settlement in Suriname.

As a place Sunny Point appreciably impacted my fieldwork. Sunny Point is the result of homeless Surinamese of all ethnicities having seized a nearly complete government housing project during a dispute between the Surinamese state and the contractors who built it in the late 1990s. Though without running water or electricity, people took the opportunity to occupy almost finished concrete homes. After the military was called in to drive the squatters out, Sunny Point became nearly exclusively Maroon, as Maroons were among Suriname’s poorest populations and the only one that had recently migrated *en mass* to the city, a migration that had left many Maroons badly in need of adequate housing. Despite this Maroon influx, Sunny Point remained surrounded on all sides by Hindu and Muslim Hindustani families, many of who had inherited the land from grandfathers who had been granted the land by generous colonial subsidies to encourage Asian agriculture. Though sometimes separated by no more than a few yards, Maroons and Hindustanis remained almost completely apart, the nearby public grammar school and Chinese supermarkets providing the only places where both communities interacted.

While resident in Sunny Point I involved myself in the life of the neighborhood and made contact with a number of Hindu and Ndyuka oracular ritualists living in and around Paramaribo. During this time, I attended more than sixty rituals and séances at ten different Ndyuka oracular shrines, and observed at least seventy Indo-

Guyanese/Surinamese Hindu oracular rituals and healings. Of these, the preponderance of my participation and recording was with four Ndyuka ritualists (*lukuman/bonuman/obiyaman*) and at one Hindu Shakti temple (*mandir*) where multiple ritualists/mediums (*pujari*) consulted.

Given the considerable suspicion that prevails between Hindus and Ndyukas, I approached each group differently, even as my position as a privileged white male foreigner enabled me to move quite easily between the two populations. My identity forced me to work on two parallel tracks, requiring me to try and equally divide my time between Hindu and Ndyuka ritual events. My work with the Ndyuka was enormously assisted by my field assistant John Willems who, in addition to being enormously knowledgeable about all facets of Ndyuka life, also helped me meet oracular diviners and record, interpret, and transcribe rituals. Though my tremendously kind Surinamese Hindu landlady Rosita Chinkoe occasionally assisted me, most of my work with Hindus was conducted on my own with me doing my best to record, observe, take notes, and transcribe ritual events. Since the majority of Hindu oracular practitioners are Indo-Guyanese who conducted their ceremonies in Guyanese English in both its creole and more “standard” registers, there was also less need for help with transcription.

When not at rituals I spent my time attending the assorted events of both Hindu and Ndyuka life like weddings, funerals, and football matches. Most of my time outside of ritual contexts was spent at home in Sunny Point hanging out with either Ndyuka or Hindustani friends from the area. Because of Sunny Point’s segregation, I had to alternate between Maroon and Hindustani households, which resulted in significantly more discontinuity than I would have liked. Though I spent a lot of time in formal interviews,

as often as not, I tried to accustom people to my presence so that they could ignore me as much as possible and go on with the routines of everyday life. This has resulted in more of my ethnography being based on observation than on secondary elicitations in interviews.

This dissertation represents my best attempts at integrating the methods of sociocultural and linguistic anthropology. My analysis of oracular interactions thus draws rather promiscuously from both the linguistic anthropological canon and adjacent fields like conversation analysis. Despite my ready acknowledgement of the many ways in which transcription “is theory” (Ochs 1979), my own theorization of my transcripts has been minimal. I have divided each transcript into four registers indicating speaker, direction of address and relevant gestures, what was said, and my translation or clarifying gloss in standard American academic English. As a Sociocultural Anthropologist, and for the sake of time and clarity, I have wholly avoided more detailed line-by-line linguistic analysis, while fully recognizing the many ways this would have contributed an even more rigorous and in-depth analysis.

## **Chapter Outline**

Given the comparative nature of the work, I have organized the dissertation in chapters that, depending on the theme, either diverge or converge to treat Hindu and Ndyuka discourses and practices separately or together. While this strategy regrettably suggests a false sense of “essential” difference and separation between Hindus and Ndyukas, I judge this chapter organization indispensable to demonstrate how practices common among these traditions of ritual communication contribute to ideologies of intrinsic distinction subscribed to by members of both populations. In Chapter 1, I

provide a historical overview of Suriname's colonial and post-colonial history with special reference to the roles of race, ethnicity, and religion in defining contemporary Surinamese "plural" society. Chapter 2 presents first a detailed definition of coalition and then describes its role in creating the patterns distinctive to Ndyuka history and sociality. The chapter argues that an emphasis on coalition is found distributed across the many territories of Ndyuka social action. In doing, so it demonstrates how coalition provides an organizational sensibility capable of connecting overlapping fields of ritual, political, and communicative practice to the authority and efficacy of the Ndyuka ancestral past.

Chapter 3 defines encompassment and describes the ways it patterns the history and sociality of Surinamese and Guyanese Hindus. The chapter details the historical origins of Hindus in the Guiana region and depicts the different ways British and Dutch colonial policies informed how the Guyanese and Surinamese Hindus I worked with understood what Hinduism is and what it should be allowed to be. The chapter introduces the social position of "orthodox" Hindus in Suriname and shows the complex intersection of relations and discourses of ethnicity, race, and religion that unite and divide Indo-Surinamese Hindus from the predominantly migrant Guyanese practitioners of "heterodox" "Shakti" oracular Hinduism.

Chapter 4 gives a detailed description of common Ndyuka ritual practices with special reference to the possession performances of the Ndyuka oracular healers I observed and how these healers made and applied ritual medicines (*obiya*). The chapter explains the poetics that organize the performance of coalition and imbue it with efficacy. Chapter 5 analyzes the rhetoric and performance of encompassment. It begins by describing and analyzing the oratory of a few orthodox Hindu priests (*pandit*) then

considers the links between the rhetoric of priestly sermons and the more insistently dialogical practices I recorded among Shakti oracular mediums. The chapter concludes with a focused analysis of the general interactive strategies with which all the Hindu oracular mediums I engaged with destabilized the self-understandings of their patients/supplicants/devotees they address.

Chapter 6 provides a comparative consideration of how pain acts as the premier sign that similarly compels members of Ndyuka and Hindu ritual communities to experience themselves as embodiments of relations of coalition and encompassment. It argues that the “co-construction of reality” (Schieffelin 1985) in both traditions of oracular mediumship transduces physical pain and other qualities of suffering into articulate voices that persuasively index peoples’ encompassment by or coalition with spirits, gods, witches, and ghosts. Divided in two halves, the chapter lays out the different performative rhetorics mobilized by different Hindu and Ndyuka oracles to convert pain into identities that communicated the relational sensibilities of their respective ritual traditions.

By way of a conclusion, chapter 7 moves beyond oracular ritual to depict the many complications and paradoxes produced by encompassment and coalition in the context of “wider” contemporary Surinamese society. It catalogues some of the ways these assumptions about relatedness fail to address the many problems posed by a multi-ethnic Surinamese society still defined by the liberal ideological limitations of the post-colonial Surinamese state. I approach state liberalism as another incompletely accomplished relational ideology the power of which is largely provisional on the frequently insufficient or incoherent control exercised by the Surinamese state. This is

especially true as regards questions of sovereignty and land rights. The chapter illustrates the paradox that results for many Hindus and Ndyukas when encompassment, coalition, and liberalism collide in controversies over who has sovereignty over the Surinamese land and its natural resources.



## **Chapter 1**

### **Historical Overview of Suriname**

To understand what I mean by coalition and encompassment and how these modalities of relational emphasis are communicated, in this chapter I provide a general historical overview of Suriname, and the place of the Ndyuka and Indo-Surinamese and Guyanese Hindus in Surinamese society. By territory and population, Suriname is the smallest country in South America, with a land area somewhat larger than Pennsylvania. Situated on the continent's north east coast, its northern border is the Atlantic Ocean. It hosts a miniscule but enormously diverse population (541,638 according to Suriname Census 2012): Afro-Surinamese (together comprising 37% of the population)—the descendants of enslaved Africans, both Creoles who remained on coastal plantations and Maroons<sup>14</sup> like the Ndyuka who fled to establish autonomous communities in the interior; Amerindians from a score of first nations (3% of the population); Hindu and Muslim Indo-Surinamese whose ancestors were indentured as laborers in Northern India (27% of the population); Javanese (13% of the population) brought to replace Indo-Surinamese in the fields when Britain abolished the “coolie” system; a substantial mixed race group (13% of the population); assimilated Chinese (2% of the population) indentured in the nineteenth century and recent shop keeping, timbering, and mining immigrants from

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<sup>14</sup> The six officially recognized Maroon ethnic groups/polities are the Ndyuka, the Saamaka, the Matawai, the Paamaka, the Aluku and the Kwinti.

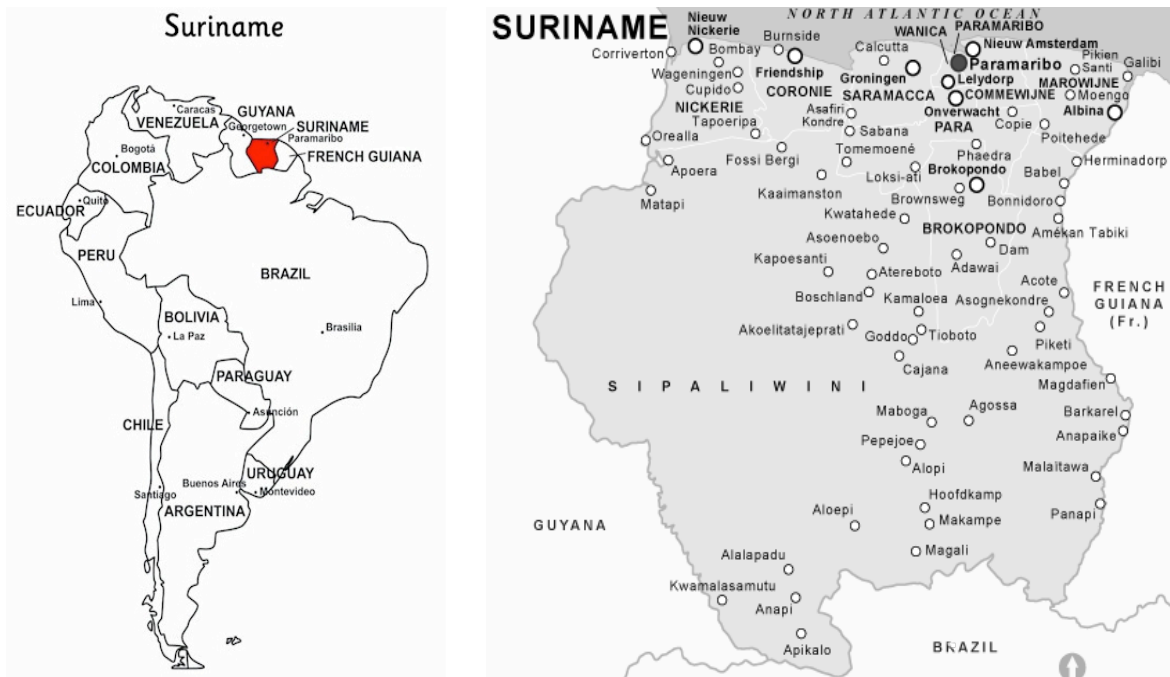


Figure 1 Suriname maps (courtesy of activityvillage.co.uk)

China; Arab merchants from the Levant; contemporary Guyanese and Brazilian economic refugees; a vestigial number of the once numerous and influential Jewish community, all crowd into the vicinity of Suriname’s capital and only city, Paramaribo.

Despite the continued presence of distinct indigenous people (primarily speakers of Carib or Arawak languages), Suriname is thus an overwhelmingly migrant society, mainly the descendants of the enslaved and indentured victims of the European empires’ two major regimes of forced labor. “Plural” (van Lier 1949) since its founding by the British (1650) and then seizure by the Dutch (1667), Suriname has been consistently characterized by immense ethnic and religious diversity. From Suriname’s colonial establishment as an outpost of Barbados’ nascent slave system, until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, tens of thousands of enslaved Africans were brought to have their lives and labor devoured by the colony’s plantations. Originating alike from highly urbanized states and

acephalous collectives from along the entire coast of West Africa and deep into the continent's center, the enslaved were divided between innumerable evolving identities, many of which were only recognized after arrival in the Americas (Palmié 2013). Though considerably less varied than the enslaved, enslavers too were drawn from throughout Protestant and Jewish Europe. Dutch and German profiteers attracted to the rich incentives of slavery mingled with displaced Jews, Huguenots, and Religious utopians (like members of the Labadist sect that hosted the pioneering naturalist Maria Sibylla Merian). All were drawn to the colony's great wealth then being wrested from the labor of the enslaved in fields of sugar, cotton, cocoa, coffee, and indigo.

The Dutch who captured Suriname from the English recognized the land's low lying and alluvial affinities with their native province of Zeeland. Adapting the techniques of Dutch hydro engineering (the *polder*) to the slave system, they quickly found ways to drain the waterlogged land for cultivation. With already work intensive crops, and the deadliness of water born diseases, the polder "model"<sup>15</sup> created particularly harsh labor conditions. The average plantation consisted of 5 to 10 miles of drainage and irrigation trenches and canals that had to be dug and maintained in addition to planting, harvesting, and processing agricultural produce. Given the ready availability of newly imported Africans, plantation owners preferred to work those they enslaved to death rather than support their upkeep. Even the Europeans who benefited from this system of "hydraulic slavery" (Van Stripiaan 1993; Oostindie and Van Stripiaan 1994), emphasized its cruelty: "the compleat (*sic*) number of negro slaves consisting in 50,000 Healthy

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<sup>15</sup> Without doubt, this is a perverse irony as the Dutch so often represent the genesis of their particular democratic success as deriving from the polder system.

people is exactly extinct every 20 years Which is truly Shocking to Human Nature” (Stedman 1988: 533).

The same tropical climate that made Suriname so appealing to the swelling plantation economy also made it a haven for escaped slaves. During the colonial period almost all of the colony’s plantations were laid out on the banks of one of three rivers—the Suriname, the Commewijne, and the Cottica, which share a common mouth on the Atlantic about five miles north of Paramaribo (Van Stripiaan 1993). These are but three of the many rivers that flow from the country’s interior. Extensive coastal swamps, and a narrow belt of savannah give way to a vast area of virgin rainforest covering a scattering of low mountains that roll away south over the border into Brazil. Apparently a trackless wilderness sheltering “no one” but Amerindians, this enormous hinterland was a mystery to Europeans. Clinging to the rivers that connected them to the Atlantic trade, plantations backed onto densely forested and largely unexplored country that gave exquisite if harsh cover to the plantations’ African victims.

As in all such Caribbean plantation colonies, the Europeans that ran these slave labor camps were vastly outnumbered by the enslaved, in some places by as much as 1 to 65 (van Lier 1971: 53). These demographic disparities, when combined with the violence and isolation of scattered plantations hacked out of riverine rainforest, bred frequent uprisings and escapes. From Suriname’s very inception as a colony, refugee communities began to take shape in the swamps and jungle, often just outside of plantation land. Dependent on raiding the plantations for basic necessities like weapons and tools, and constantly threatened by European reprisals of dramatic violence, these Maroon communities rapidly cohered into autonomous societies. Founded on a quickly adopted

Amerindian subsistence base and aggressive raiding for new members and materials, Maroon settlements proliferated, comprising an estimated six to seven thousand people out of the colony's total population of around 50,000 in the mid-eighteenth century (Price 1996; van Lier 1971: 58). After many unsuccessful campaigns, the colonial government finally concluded that it was simpler to make peace with the main existing Maroon groups. In 1760, the first of such treaties was successfully signed at Dyuka creek with the group of people known from then on as the Ndyuka/Okanisi Maroons (Thoden van Velzen and Hoogbergen 2011).

As in all plantation colonies, white planters had near total power over those they enslaved and a compulsive need for evidence of slave subordination. In Suriname, planters' fears about the real vulnerability of their supremacy drove a cycle of punitive violence and counter-violence through maroonage and localized uprisings that continued throughout the period of slavery. In Suriname as elsewhere, race developed as a justification for the inherent violence and exploitation of the plantation system. Travelers to Surinamese plantations consistently describe a vicious world of planter capriciousness, where punitive or "motivating" violence was applied unpredictably with often-deadly effect (Van Lier 1971: 61, 70). Combined with the continued foment of slave populations in which most people rapidly died off (the average life expectancy for an enslaved person was 22 years) and were replaced by the newly arrived, these circumstances gave rise to intense suspicions about others and their hidden motives. In the alarmed atmosphere of maroonage that permeated Suriname throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, enslaved people were chronically uncertain as to the trustworthiness of those around them, terrified by both the prospect of unpredictable violent punishment and death at the hands of white enslavers

and spies and witches among their fellow Afro-Surinamese (Price 1983; 1991). While the contexts have drastically changed these suspicions remain pronounced to the present day.

As total institutions defined by similar practices of managing and delegating work in the midst of both tremendous African cultural diversity and suffering, plantations quickly gave rise to a new Afro-Surinamese social synthesis. With the emergence of two closely related English based Creole languages (Sranantongo and Dyutongo) and some degree of intergenerational continuity, plantations became home to a distinctive Afro-Surinamese sociality that understood relatedness through the shared experience of attempting to make moral lives in the midst of deadly exploitation (Van Stripiaan 1993). Being born, laboring, and dying on one plantation imbued both Creole Afro-Surinamese who remained in slavery and the Maroons who escaped with reconstituted kin and ritual connections that separated both modes of Afro-Surinamese life from any African antecedents (Price and Mintz 1992). To this day the word “plantation” (*paandasi*, *pranasi*) means a person’s home village in all the Afro-Surinamese languages (Oostindie and van Stripiaan 1995;).

Ritual, I would argue, was integral to this process from Suriname’s foundation. Dramatic performances of shared ritual necessity enabled the enforced proximity of enslavement to become acutely felt social roles and obligations. Instances of a pan-African tradition of “cults of affliction” (Turner 1968), for both Maroons and Creoles, rituals of possession, divination, and oath taking integrated a diversity of African derived practices to create common knowledge (and limits to knowledge), accountability, and purpose capable of specifying which social relations should matter among those who were initially a random assortment of strangers (Price 1983; Bilby 1997; Davis 2011). In

either plantation slave quarters or Maroon rainforest camps, the ritual communication of hidden knowledge established shared concerns across doubt plagued Afro-Surinamese collectives continually bereaved by unpredictable death and violence.

Like all such plantation economies, Suriname was the result of an explosive mixture of emerging capitalist markets and racial violence (Palmié 2011). Despite its vaunted wealth, after an economic collapse in the 1770s (brought on by speculators on the Amsterdam stock exchange spreading rumors about the colony's imminent sacking by Maroons), Suriname never recovered its extractive promise (van Lier 1971: 40). While it was—along with the neighboring Dutch colonies of Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo that would become British Guiana in the wake of the Napoleonic wars—the premier Dutch sugar colony, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Suriname was overshadowed by French Saint Domingue and British Jamaica, and in the 19<sup>th</sup>, by rapidly mechanizing plantations in Cuba and Brazil. At the same time, the Netherlands devoted ever more of its resources to consolidating control over archipelagic South East Asia, soon making Sumatra and Java more lucrative plantation economies by far.

Suriname could never recover from the panic of the 1770s. Fear of Maroons joined with over extended credit to cause the near extinction of resident estate owners, turning over most of Suriname's plantation land to Dutch municipal corporations and absentee investors (van Lier 1949; van Stripiaan 1993). The French revolution and the declaration of the Batavian Republic did nothing to arrest Suriname's economic troubles. These persisted even after the British returned the colony to the newly formed Kingdom of the Netherlands after its occupation during the Napoleonic wars. Distracted management by *administrateurs* sent from the Netherlands to supervise sometimes as

many as 60 plantations for stock owners four thousand miles away was thus combined with perennially brutal slavery in an already insalubrious environment (van Lier 1971: 42). Declining populations brought on by bad management, rampant disease, and the abolition of the slave trade, guaranteed Suriname's relegation to the status of permanent colonial backwater. Even as the Dutch rapidly expanded and consolidated their imperial possessions in what became Indonesia, Suriname remained a depopulated problem for Dutch colonialism well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century (van Lier 1949; Hoefte 1998).

Perhaps the two defining moments of 19<sup>th</sup> century Surinamese history intentionally occurred 10 years apart. On July 1<sup>st</sup> 1863, slavery was completely abolished in the Dutch Caribbean, freeing some 40,000 Surinamese slaves. Almost immediately, the freedmen began to use strikes and riots to demand better working conditions and higher wages (Van Stripiaan 1993). Thirty years previously, following the 1833 abolition of slavery in the British Empire, British planters in neighboring Guiana had faced similar attacks on their absolute power. Wishing to stifle opposition and retain control over the price of labor, Guianese planters almost immediately began to push for imports of cheap Indian indentured workers. In 1838 the first indentured Indians arrived in British Guiana from Calcutta. Their disembarkation was timed exactly to coincide with the end of the "apprenticeship" period that had, in return for a notional wage, temporarily kept freed slaves bound to their former plantations after abolition (Tinker 1993). Seeing Indian indenture as slavery reborn, opposition from the still muscular abolitionist movement swiftly discontinued the importation of Indians to the Caribbean, which was not resumed until 1845. From that date on, however, with only occasional interruptions (like during the Indian uprising of 1858), tens of thousands of Indians arrived throughout the



Caribbean, and to Guiana in particular. Eyeing the success of this strategy in the British and French Caribbean colonies, in the wake of abolition Dutch Surinamese plantation interests also began to agitate for Indian indentured workers. In 1873, the year that the Dutch Caribbean's own onerous period of "apprenticeship" expired for former slaves, the first group of "British" Indian indentured laborers arrived in Paramaribo (Hoefte 1998; Gowricharn 2013).

The period around emancipation also sealed the ethnic separation of Maroons from coastal Creoles.<sup>16</sup> This was specifically so after the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century after the mass conversion of enslaved Creoles to either the pietistic Moravian church or Roman Catholicism.<sup>17</sup> Conversion was central to the colonial government's new policy of active assimilation, designed to obliterate persisting "Africaness" from the lives of the newly manumitted (Jap-a-Joe 2001: 200; Jap-a-Joe 2005: 135). Colonial officials and missionaries made any practice they deemed "superstition" (*afgoderij*, literally idol worship) punishable by both imprisonment and forced labor (Samson 1946: 378). These policies made "recognition in the church" (Jap-a-Joe 2001: 199) a prerequisite for eventual formal political recognition—granting European ideologies a further hegemony over the values determining the Surinamese public sphere.

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<sup>16</sup> While the treaties put an end to active Ndyuka and Saamaka raiding, new Maroon communities continued to form (the Lebimusu, the last Ndyuka clan to form, was comprised of revolted enslaved militia men, only came into existence in 1805—35 years after Ndyuka freedom. With the end of the transatlantic slave trade and then increasing Creole Christianization and then large scale relocation to Paramaribo, the many interchanges that had kept Maroons in contact with their Coastal family and friends lapsed.

<sup>17</sup> Missionization had actually begun with the Saamaka in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the defining moment of which was the conversion of Saamaka paramount chief Alabi to the Moravian church, along with a number of upriver Saamaka villages (Price 1990). Similarly, in the mid-nineteenth century the Matawai paramount chief Johannes King had converted the entire Matawai nation to Christianity after having become a kind of visionary prophet (Green 1974). However significant Maroon adoption of Christianity, coastal Surinamese of all ethnic and religious backgrounds still tend to think of them as "heathens" (*heiden*).

With their cultural autonomy protected by what were then nearly hundred-year-old treaties, Maroons stayed predominantly outside this new coastal system. During the period of Creole assimilation, Maroons increasingly came to embody an unrepentant African alterity that was simultaneously denigrated and idealized by a Creole population attempting to wrest some degree of dignity and authority out of emancipation (Legêne 1998). Though Creole ritual practices of African origin retained a critical vitality—particularly among a large majority of the Creole poor (*volkscreolen*)—Christianity, and the European norms it iconized, remained a key justification for Creole political activism for economic inclusion and the disqualification of non-Christian Maroons and Asians from equivalent rights.<sup>18</sup>

The arrival of “British” Indian indentured laborers drawn overwhelmingly from the Gangetic plain (then the Bengal Presidency, today the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar) began a demographic re-making of Suriname that undermined the nascent project of Creole self-determination. Between 1873 and 1916—when indenture was abolished in India through pressure from the newly formed Congress party—34,304 Indian indentured workers arrived in Suriname (Hoefte 1998: 61), 80 percent of whom were Hindu. Of these, 21,500 chose to stay in Suriname rather than return to India (Gowricharn 2013: 396, 397). Though their numbers pale in comparison to neighboring Guyana (where the British imported more than 125,000 Indians), “British Indian” emigrants nonetheless transformed Surinamese society. From this mass of Indian plantation laborers a common “Hindustani” community soon emerged, introducing a new diversity to Suriname that

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<sup>18</sup> The Afro-Surinamese ritual complex now labeled was illegal as late as 1971. Only recently has it become a census religion, though one that is still largely unrecognized as a primary identity in the Surinamese public sphere.

was quickly compounded by the arrival of Javanese and Chinese emigrant indentured laborers as well (van Lier 1949).

The late 19<sup>th</sup> century influx of Asian immigrants added new complexities to the basic threefold hierarchical racial division into Whites, Blacks (including those of mixed race), and Amerindians that had previously defined Surinamese society. Colonial administrators and local elites vacillated between different strategies to control these changes. Many officials—and particularly the “colored” mixed race “middle” classes—preferred minimal integration so as to actively encourage Asians to return to their homelands. When it became clear that the majority of Asians would stay, these same interests groups—especially those within the Catholic and Moravian churches—vehemently promoted a policy of enforced Asian assimilation to their version of “respectable” Dutch bourgeois values (Jap-a-Joe 2001; Hoefte 2011). Still others like Johannes C. Kielstra—perhaps Suriname’s most influential 20<sup>th</sup> century colonial governor—made a concerted attempt to remake Suriname along the lines of the plural “pillar” (*verzuil*) system that had regulated 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Dutch domestic politics and guided Dutch policy in the East Indies (Hoefte 2011).<sup>19</sup>

A trained orientalist with administrative experience in the Dutch East Indies, Kielstra opposed the heretofore-dominant policy of Asian assimilation.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps Kielstra’s most significant action was forcing through pivotal legislation that recognized

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<sup>19</sup> To quote Hoefte (2014: 205): “Originally this term (in Dutch *verzuiling*) describes the politico-denominational segregation of Dutch society. It meant that several segments or “pillars” (*zuilen*), according to different religions or ideologies, vertically divided society. In Suriname ethnicity or religion was the basis of pillarization. In the metropole these pillars all had their own institutions including political parties and trade unions, newspapers and broadcasting organizations, banks, schools, and universities, hospitals, and (sports) clubs. Pillarization in the Netherlands came under attack in the 1960s, but its remnants remain visible in the early twenty-first century.”

<sup>20</sup> Before the war, Kielstra had even advocated mass Javanese settlement (Hoefte 1998; Dew 1978: 44). If the outbreak of the Second World War had not intervened, this would have transformed Suriname into a colony substantially composed of Javanese peasant farmers administered by indirect Dutch rule.

marriages solemnized by Hindu and Muslim religious leaders in 1941 (Hoefte 1998, 2011; Dew 1978: 46-47). Though the legislation was intensely resisted by local Creole elites, by granting Asian kinship and ritual practices legal standing it set the stage for the multi-ethnic multi-party politics that completely defined Suriname from the time the Dutch granted the colony home rule in 1948 until the military coup of 1980.

Though a victory for pluralism, Kielstra's legislation further contributed to an irresolvable struggle among Suriname's ethnic groups for both ethnic exceptionalism and equal rights. Each ethnic faction sought to replace Europeans at the top of the social hierarchy *and* retain the protections of a supposedly ethnically blind liberal legal regime (see Williams 1991 and Khan 2004 for excellent discussions of similar situations in Guyana and Trinidad). This fraught impasse of an ethnically governed state's attempting to implement ethnically neutral justice and retain secular sovereignty remains central to Surinamese political life.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the growing technological ability to exploit Suriname's remote natural resources intensified the conundrums of developing liberal discourses of Surinamese pluralism. In the years between the first and second world wars, bauxite—the major ingredient of aluminum—was discovered in Suriname in until then unequalled quantities. As bauxite became ever more essential to global industry, the colony found itself increasingly economically dependent on its mining and processing.<sup>21</sup> This brought Suriname firmly into the sphere of US influence, the US being both the home of Alcoa—the parent company of Suralco, Suriname's major mining

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<sup>21</sup> This reached its apex with the construction of the Afobaka hydroelectric dam in the 1964. The dam was built to provide power for a major alumina processing plant—both of which continue to be the largest infrastructure projects in the country.

company—and the mineral’s primary industrial consumer. This relation was sealed during World War Two, when the American military occupied Suriname to protect its bauxite and rubber resources from Nazi sabotage (Dew 1978; Konig 2011).

In the wake of promises by the Dutch government in exile of greater colonial autonomy, the sudden prosperity produced by insatiable war demand for bauxite facilitated the creation of Suriname’s multi-party parliamentary system. When Suriname gained independence from the Netherlands on November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1975, it did so under a unicameral parliamentary system dominated by ethnically based parties dominated by Creoles and Hindustani’—then Suriname’s two largest ethnic groups. While Surinamese politics has always been divided between a large number of parties—some organized around labor issues, others around religion—ethnicity has until only recently remained the decisive factor in public political life. Of these, the United Hindustani Party (VHP) and the National Party of Suriname (NPS) historically had the greatest influence.

The Afro-Surinamese dominated NPS was the prime driver of Surinamese independence, a goal to which the Hindustani VHP was largely opposed. The promise of increased bauxite extraction was critical to achievement of independence. The Creole dominated NPS declared that the opening of a massive (and still unimplemented) new bauxite field in western Suriname would fund Surinamese development after achieving independence, a possibility that—along with other promises of vastly expanded environmental exploitation—continues to fuel post-independence Surinamese politics.

Though now supplemented by oil and gold, bauxite thus remains pivotal to Surinamese political economy. Such dependence, however, has also meant that the Surinamese economy remains almost exclusively reliant on the export of natural

resources. Economic development—perhaps the central trope in Surinamese politics—is accordingly generally synonymous with ever intensified environmental exploitation. All facets of Surinamese politics bears witness to this extractive dependency, in which various ideologies of ethnic exceptionalism struggle with an egalitarian rhetoric of *verbroedering* (fraternization), that depicts all Surinamese regardless of ethnicity as sharing equally in rights to the wealth of the Surinamese land (Dew 1978: 102; Hoefte 2014).

Though independence severed legally mandated Dutch interference in Surinamese affairs, it did not significantly weaken the hegemony of Dutch colonial culture. The new nation's parliamentary political system was deeply affected by its architects' Dutch education, and Dutch liberalism still sets the standard for contemporary Surinamese pluralism, stipulating Surinamese conceptions of law and how it should be implemented. Dutch remains the sole official state language, relegating Suriname's Sranan, Ndyuka, Saamaka, Sarnami Hindi, Javanese, Chinese, and at least 9 Amerindian languages to purely unofficial domestic and religious uses. Accordingly, however much Surinamese may actually depart from colonially enforced norms of “respectability” and “reason”, the post-colonial Surinamese political system actively maintains the assumptions of Dutch derived ideologies of sovereignty, law, personhood, and property. Paradoxically, this “enregisterment” (Agha 2005) of Dutch as both the sole official code and the default norm for “respectable” interethnic interaction often further compels the pronounced ethnic, religious, and linguistic compartmentalization of Surinamese society. Though an increasing number of Surinamese from all ethnic backgrounds are fluent in Dutch, a sometimes-stark discrepancy remains between the standards of “official” Dutch mediated

public discourse and the ethnic and religious differences that sustain Surinamese multi-party democracy.

The struggle over independence in the 1960s and 70s generated tremendous animosity between both the political parties and the ethnic constituencies they overwhelmingly represented. In the wake of independence in 1975, ethnically divisive battles between the Creole and Hindu parties continued. People from all ethnicities were fearfully aware of the results of this kind of protracted ethnic-political division. Events in neighboring Guyana—which had a shared history and a similar ethnic make-up—had a decisive impact on these developments, inspiring the how Surinamese thought about their own incipient political independence. Pressure from the US and UK in the 1950s on what was then still British Guiana’s democratically elected leftist government by the early 1960s had incited a split in the colony’s largest political party (the Peoples Progressive Party) along racial lines. This resulted in interethnic riots and then long-term, ethnically exclusive, rule by Forbes Burnham, an elite Afro-Guyanese autocrat.

Along with Suriname’s chronically high unemployment, the acrimony over independence and the uncertainty it created about the future had, by the late 60s, caused an increase in what was already substantial emigration. Anxious Surinamese eager to preserve the benefits of Dutch citizenship immigrated in mass to the Netherlands (Dew 1978; Oostindie and Maduro 1986). As of present (2016), more than a third of people of Surinamese origin live in the Netherlands, producing a diaspora that accounts for much of the continued Dutch influence over Surinamese life.

By the late 1970, the heightened tensions that had resulted from inter-ethnic struggles over Surinamese independence had exacerbated perceptions of widespread

corruption and ethnic favoritism, resulting in widespread distrust of the established political parties. Taking advantage of this heightened atmosphere of dissatisfaction and suspicion, a multi-ethnic group of sergeants in the Surinamese military staged a *coup d'état* on February 25<sup>th</sup> 1980, ushering in eleven years of military rule. Led by Dési Bouterse<sup>22</sup> (who is also Suriname's current (2016) president), the military regime implemented an eccentric leftist "revolution" rather weakly modeled on the "New Jewel Movement" of Maurice Bishop in Grenada (Dew 1994; Hoogbergen and Kruijt 2005; Hoefte 2014).

Though there was palpable relief that the coup had averted violence and repression on the order of neighboring Guyana, the somewhat half-baked, increasingly authoritarian, nature of military government created in a cascade of problems. Summery executions and the suppression of civil liberties combined with economic stagnation and high inflation to produce a period of prolonged crisis. This came to a head in 1986, when Ronnie Brunswijk, an Ndyuka Maroon and Bouterse's former bodyguard, started what became a six-year long Surinamese civil war (more often called the "interior war" (*binnenlandse oorlog*)) (Thoden van Velzen 1989, 2004; Hoefte 2014). Fought between Brunswijk's predominantly Ndyuka Jungle Commando with the financial backing of the Surinamese diaspora and political exiles, the war exacerbated Suriname's already bleak economic situation (Dew 1994), and led to widespread violence, most notoriously the

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<sup>22</sup> Bouterse is by far and a way the dominant personality in recent Surinamese history. He is a populist figure whose flouting of Dutch authority (like his conviction in absentia for drug smuggling) makes him a potent symbol of Surinamese independence. This—in addition to his multiethnic heritage—allows him to perform his personal leadership as standing outside of ethnic competition, but also to use inter-ethnic political competition over patronage to ensure public perceptions of his active inclusion of different ethnic stakeholders.



massacre of 35 residents of the Ndyuka Maroon village of Moiwana by Surinamese Government soldiers in November 1986 (Price 1995).

The war was primarily concentrated in the Cottica River region of eastern Suriname. Its main victims were Ndyukas living along the Cottica and the lower portion of the Marowijne River, most of who were forced to flee to refugee camps in neighboring French Guiana. Though a peace treaty was ultimately concluded in 1992, the war resulted in profound changes in Maroon, and particularly Ndyuka, life (Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering 2014). During the war, Cottica Maroons were almost completely expelled from their villages, while those living in the Maroon homelands were completely cut off from coastal Suriname. This made member of all the Maroon groups even more cognizant of the stakes of exclusion from coastal society. After the peace, not only were these connections re-established, but Maroon migration to Paramaribo increased, for the first time bringing large numbers of Maroon women as well as men into direct economic and political participation in the coastal Surinamese society.

This Maroon migration and the resulting population explosion is one of the most important consequences of Suriname's civil war and return to democracy in 1991, resulting in an efflorescence of Maroon participation in Suriname's national politics. While the Brotherhood and Unity Party (*Broederschap en Eenheid in de Politiek*, or BEP) was active prior to Surinamese independence, the civil war and rapid Maroon demographic growth resulted in both a greater sense of political urgency and the voter numbers to achieve real political clout. Maroon parties have recently usurped the role of parliamentary kingmakers come king makers from the Javanese parties, though intense inter-Maroon rivalry resulted in a poor showing in the most recent election in May 2015.

With Maroons set to surpass Hindustanis as a plurality of the Surinamese population between 2025 and 2030, the social consequences of this avid embrace of electoral politics are still uncertain (Hoefte 2014).

Bouterse's own party, the National Democratic Party (*Nationale Democratische Partij*, or NDP) has used perceptions of Bouterse's personal effectiveness in a political system dominated by ethnic patronage to assemble a multi-ethnic party that currently dominates Surinamese politics (Hoefte 2014; Marchand 2014). Despite the civil war, many Maroons are active participants in the NDP, drawn to its promise of "vigorous development of the interior" (*krachtige ontwikkeling van de binnenlandse industrie*) and "the right of every Surinamese person to own a piece of ground" (*iedere Surinamer heeft recht op een stuk grond*) (NDP 2016).

By appealing to economic growth through the "fair" (*eerlijk*) distribution of natural resources, the NDP continues a long term model of political fraternization that seeks to belay entrenched ethnic divisions through appeal to equitable access to Suriname's natural wealth. In spite of a major ruling by the Inter-American Court in the 2007 case "Saramaka People v. Suriname" that ruled in favor of Maroon rights to title over their traditional territory (Price 2012), factions within and between Maroon groups make the NDP's model of ethnically blind development the default ideological position. This consensus represents both half a century of state ideology and what appears to many as the only valid alternative to the monopolization of the interior's wealth by competing kin groups or ethnicities. Unfortunately, this ideology also promotes the unfettered power of the state to distribute land rights as politicians see fit—most often as personal concession to themselves and their supporters, or to Chinese corporations with almost no

oversight and at the cost of immense environmental degradation. Maroon and non-Maroon politicians alike use the political system to allot themselves the spoils of this exploitation in the name of the Surinamese people, but very infrequently with a mind to the public good (Hoeft 2014: 217). In this way, intense suspicions about the hidden interests of others frequently trump widespread ethical commitments to consensus and equality frequently shared among members of all of Suriname's different ethnic identities.

At present, Suriname is a "middle income" parliamentary democracy. As the least densely inhabited nation in the Americas with the largest proportion of virgin rainforest, Suriname has attracted large-scale migration and investment, particularly from China and Brazil. Though the most numerically significant of Suriname's legally recognized immigrant population are Guyanese economic refugees, Chinese entrepreneurs and companies are the most influential, and dominate the economy as both small scale retailers and large scale exporters of raw materials like timber and gold. Suriname thus remains an immigrant country dependent on natural resource extraction and exportation.

Despite this overwhelming dependence on the resources of the largely inaccessible interior, more than half of Suriname's population lives either in the capital Paramaribo, or in the districts immediately adjacent to it (Wanica and Commewijne). The concentration of state and economic power in the former colonial capital and main port, a fact that guarantees that most facets of historic colonial rule, and especially ethnic animosity, will remain firmly etched into the nation's infrastructure into the foreseeable future.

## Chapter 2

### Coalition in Ndyuka History and Sociality

“How can you leave your family? The family is yourself!” (*Fa i poi fika yu famii, famii na iseefi.*)

Pascal Misidyan (2012)

In the village of Agitiondro, where the fearsome Great Deity of the Djuka has his temple, the players undergo before the game the normal Great Deity ritual for whoever finds himself in danger or uncertainty. “Because of this the other teams cannot defeat them, at best they may achieve a draw. They have become God-boys” (i.e., they have acquired some of the power of the Deity).

Andre Köbben (1968: 57)

#### **Coalition—Knowledge, Relations, and Experience of Ndyuka History**

Sitting with Ndyuka friends on low, mud splashed verandahs in Sunny Point—a Maroon squatter settlement outside of Paramaribo—I would often inquire, or be included in conversations, about how many souls (*akaa*) or spirits (*yeye*) humans have. This was the subject of consistent interest and frequent disagreement. While most people settled on two to three souls, others gave much higher figures. One oracular healer (*obiyaman*) and traditional leader, Captain Maku, told me that we have as many souls as we have experiences. From sleeping and intuition to conscience and intelligence, all tendencies of human subjectivity could be regarded as the effects of our composite, coalitional natures. Another oracular healer, Da Mangwa, explained to me that when you are walking through town and see something in a shop window that gives you an immediate urge to buy it, you must do so. This is your soul expressing itself. Stories abound of people sickening because of their souls’ fear or disgust in a situation of shock or discomfort.

From shivering to startling, the soul's autonomy within an embodied coalition is amply evidenced in our everyday subjective experience. In short, as one of my friends explained: the “body is a house for all the things that live inside it” (*a sikin na osu fu ala den sani di tan de inisei*).<sup>23</sup>



Figure 2 Ndyuka village on the Tapanahoni

Coalition is my term for this modality of relatedness and how Ndyuka communicative practice works to make it a dominant way of thinking about self and other. Coalition refers to the indissoluble connection between Ndyuka conceptions of

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<sup>23</sup> Ndyuka describe the reflexive subjectivity of thinking as a basic sign that the person emerges from a coalition of their relations. It seems that, in attaining objectified knowledge about something “entification” (Mannheim and Salas 2014) occurs, the syntagmatic necessity of describing things as subject/object relations driving a fissioning wedge into personal agency.

knowledge, its rhetoric, and its performance. As shown above, coalition concerns how common practices of communication imbue many Ndyuka people with awareness that they are the kinds of agents specified by Ndyuka ideologies of personhood and relation. By coalition, I am attempting to encapsulate the communicative processes through which Ndyuka come to perceive of their personal identities and capacities and the larger categories of their social life like the house (*osu*), the lineage (*bee*), and the clan (*lo*), as integral assemblages of human and spirit agency. As I use it, coalition is “compositional” (Guyer and Eno Belinga 1995), a means for “the social production of multiplicity amongst singular people...each at their own frontier of expertise, and their situational mobilization for action through social composition” (Guyer 1996: 2). Like a parliamentary coalition, Ndyuka persons continuously find themselves in tense alliance with others with whom they may not desire to work, but with whom they must collaborate if they are to act effectively. Coalition is thus imminent in, and emergent from, the composition of the performative practices with which Ndyuka confront the crises and needs that suffuse this irredeemably relational reality.

The ethnography of Central Africa—from which a significant portion of Ndyuka ancestors came (Van Lier 1971; Postma 1972; Wooding 2013)—has repeatedly demonstrated that people have been conceived as “...singularized repositories of a differentiated and expanding repertoire of knowledge, as well as...structured kin...and generic dependents and followers” (Guyer and Eno Belinga 1995: 120). As Guyer and Eno Belinga define it, composition is a modification of classic theories that African economies as defined by “wealth in people” (Gluckman 1941), where social influence is measured by the abundance of relations a given person can mobilize. According to Guyer

and Eno Belinga, knowledge is the means by which people throughout Central Africa attempt to integrate their competing relational demands into effective social identities that enable them to act with these relations. While this knowledge can be seemingly quite mundane, for instance skill at carving, more frequently it is also a dangerous and protean thing whose sources are found beyond living persons in the world of the dead manifested in the “natural” world of the rivers and forests beyond the village (MacGaffey 2000: 28). In this context, “each individual person’s power is itself a composition, put together through various means” (Guyer and Eno Belinga 1995: 102). These means are assembled from the opportunities afforded by lineage position, affinal alliance, age, and gender. Just as for the Ndyuka, “unbounded and volatile, knowledge” is “embedded in persons by nature, by purchase, by capture and by conservation, resulting in a vital variation that could be aggregated only through compositional social processes” (Guyer and Eno Belinga 1995: 103). Given the correct social coordinates, people can claim knowledge that distinguishes them from others, expanding their capacity to act *through* their relations to human kin, enemies, and non-human spirits (*gadu/winti*).

Here is an example. One day during the initial months of my research, I got word that my good friend and soon to be research assistant John, was back at home after a protracted stint gold mining in the interior. When I arrived at his house, his children informed me that he was indisposed. After I waited for fifteen minutes, John emerged bleary eyed from his room. I asked him what he was doing, and he said that he was preparing for a “communiqué” (*buskopu*). He had fallen afoul of an ongoing dispute over mining rights among his matrilineal relatives who claimed the land. Unemployed with many dependents, John retreated to his room and waited. He told me that his “*sani*” (lit.

things) that “stand with” him (*tan anga*)—God (*Masaa Gadu*), his ancestors (*Gaanwan*), lineage spirits (*obiya*)—would tell him what to do if only he listened intently enough. He interpreted his failure as a sign he had insufficiently acknowledged that these beings were resident within him and determined his fate. He could not know how to act, but the many who were implicated in his presence in the present would be reliable in telling him. At a moment of great uncertainty, he retired to hear their voices as they percolated within him. As others had thwarted his attempts at living, a new path must be cut. At this moment of failure, John’s will was re-revealed as a heterogeneous agglomeration. This recognition was the necessary step for restoring certainty, establishing the clear continuity of the agency of his antecedents in the conduct of his individuated—though not individual—life.

As John’s case shows, for many Ndyuka agency is the result of knowledge that is at its clearest when recognizing that it implies that the person is a coalition of further agents, whether ancestors, witches, or spirits. Each Ndyuka person is the result of still more relations, a compounding of their dependency on the lineal past and the expansive social present Ndyuka matrilineages have engendered by reproducing themselves through their living members.<sup>24</sup> As in John’s example where kinship is the framework for consciousness, such discourses attempt to intuit the moral parameters of sociality innate in personhood. Such ideologies disclose a defining tension in Ndyuka thought: that living persons must distinguish themselves as accomplished “individuals” while also remaining

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<sup>24</sup> Roy Wagner influentially described this figure as the fractal person—“an entity whose relations (external) with others are integral (internal) to it” (1992: 159). For Wagner, what makes this model of personhood fractal is the maintenance of “sociocentricity” across scales—people reiterate the same relational assumptions in thinking about the composition of skin bound persons as for territory bound clans.



purely derivative embodiments of their lineages' collective histories and the inherited ancestral relations these histories entail.

Otherwise said, coalition conveys the phenomenology of Ndyuka history as continually collectively worked out through the practices Ndyuka use to understand themselves. To adequately appreciate this history, in a way at least moderately satisfying to Ndyuka and non-Ndyuka scholars alike, in what follows I explore coalition through a broad survey of Ndyuka history. I combine a sweeping synthesis of the secondary literature with Ndyuka reflections on how they know, to demonstrate the decisive role of coalition in the ongoing formation of Ndyuka sociality.

### **Maroons as Afro-Surinamese**

At present, Maroons account for 117,567 out of Suriname's total population of 541,638 (Suriname Census 2012). Of these probably some 60,000 are Ndyuka.<sup>25</sup> Surinamese Maroon societies like that of the Ndyuka cohered in complicated interrelationship with the distinctly Afro-Surinamese cultural forms that emerged on 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century coastal slave plantations. Maroon history testifies that though maroonage offered refuge from the protracted torture and humiliation of the plantations, the lives of the escaped were maybe even more precarious than the lives of those that stayed behind. Destined for brutal retaliation (like amputation, drawing and quartering, or hanging by a hook through the ribs and being left to die) if caught, Maroons needed to evade European pursuit and sustain themselves through gardening and hunting in an often unfamiliar environment while remaining close enough to the plantations to access basic provisions

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<sup>25</sup> This is based on my best rough estimate regarding the wide diffusion of the Ndyuka population between Suriname, French Guiana, and the Netherlands, along with systemic under reporting by the Surinamese census. My figure for the Ndyuka is an extrapolation based on Price's (2002) estimates.

and maintain contact with family and friends unable to escape (Price 1983; Hoogbergen 2008).

Members of all Maroon groups remember their early history as tortuously uncertain. Oral history recalls the fraught interaction between recently arrived Africans and the first generations of Afro-Surinamese in improvised forest camps under constant threat from betrayal and attack. Problems with communication and social co-ordination between refugees of diverse backgrounds and abilities presented elementary obstacles to successful collective survival (Oostindie and van Stripian 1995; Price 1983).

Contemporary Maroon sociality is accordingly very much the result of the varied solutions the first ancestral generations used to overcome such difficulties and establish some degree of social and moral consensus amidst these immensely inauspicious circumstances (Mintz and Price 1993).

Despite of the divergent histories that resulted from Maroon escape from the plantations, it is amply apparent that Creoles and Maroons shared a common Afro-Surinamese heritage. Many Creoles, like Maroons, continue to pursue slash and burn swidden agriculture, planting, among other things, a mixture of crops indigenous to both South America (like cassava) and Africa (like okra). Along with hunting, this shared subsistence base is intimately implicated in both populations' ritual and kinship practices (Wooding 1981; Mintz and Price 1993; Stephen 1998).

There are also close linguistic relationships between Maroons and Creoles, and similar practices of ritual and kinship focused on relations with clearly delineated classes of spirits associated with the earth, the forest, the water, and the dead (van Wetering 1995; Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering 2004; Wekker 2007; Wooding 2013). These

commonalities are evidence, I argue, of a shared coalitional sensibility that still produces similar Creole and Maroon ways of communicating about selfhood and personhood.<sup>26</sup> On the whole, however, it is the differences between Afro-Surinamese populations that are of the greatest import for present day Surinamese society (Thoden van Velzen 2004; Wooding 2013). Maroon and Creole similarity has also come to specify the terms of their divergence, the points of contention with which Afro-Surinamese communities still stoke a centuries long process of “schismogenesis” (Bateson 1937). Though Maroons are often the targets of vehement Creole prejudices, they may also be seen as representatives of a common history of suffering and adaptation that both populations feel justifies the priority of their political and economic claims.

These processes are amply observable in language. The living Afro-Surinamese languages comprise a continuum that can be roughly organized into three major groups.<sup>27</sup> On one end is Sranantongo—the predominantly English substrate creole that is at once the “ethnic” language of Creoles and the lingua franca of Suriname’s markets and streets—marked by a long history of immediate proximity to official Dutch. At the other end of the continuum are the central Maroon languages spoken by the Saamaka and Matawai Maroons. These are Anglo-Portuguese substrate creole languages that evolved from “Djutongo”—the language historically used on the plantations owned by

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<sup>26</sup> I borrow Kockelman’s definition of selfhood as “being the means and ends of one’s own actions or being the object of one’s own private and public representations”, while personhood is the “sociopolitical capacity” the “rights and responsibilities attendant on being an agent, subject, or self” (Kockelman 2013: 1).

<sup>27</sup> The Afro-Surinamese languages seem to have rapidly effloresced during the seventeen years when Suriname was an English colony. By the time the Dutch gained legal control in 1667, the ancestor of what became the major Afro-Surinamese languages had already taken shape.<sup>27</sup> Linguistic difference is highly marked. Coastal people of all ethnic backgrounds direct considerable stigma at the Maroon languages of whose differences they are generally unaware of. Thus all Maroon languages become “Djuka”—a pejorative term for Maroons as a whole, and clearly distinguished from *Ndyuka*, the predominant name *Ndyuka* use for themselves.

Suriname's large Sephardic Jewish community. The eastern Maroon language is divided into Ndyuka, Paamaka, and Aluku, which, despite speakers' ideological commitments to their linguistic difference, are only distinguished by different accents. The eastern Maroon language falls midway between the two poles of Sranan and Saamaka, and though based on a dominantly English substrate also has more appreciable Portuguese and African lexical influence than Sranan.<sup>28</sup> Ndyuka vocabulary overlaps with both Saamaka and Sranan, but is only mutually intelligible with the latter (most of the major differences are phonological though there is appreciable lexical divergence).<sup>29</sup> In line with general segmentary processes alive across Afro-Surinamese populations, people use these linguistic divisions as either icons of un-bridgeable differences or indexes of the essential commonality that unites all Afro-Surinamese.

Among the most distinctive divergences between Creoles and Maroons is the strong matrilineal emphasis of Maroon kinship and the traditional political system it mediates. Coastal creoles practice an ambilineal descent system. While Maroons stress the importance of descent through the father's line, members of all Maroon ethnicities accord the mother's lineage decisive social preeminence. It is this matrilineal political kinship that sets apart Maroon society, and plays a crucial role in defining their history.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> A sixth Maroon language, Kwinti, is found further to the west of the Matawai but was more closely related to the Eastern Maroon languages and is now largely extinct.

<sup>29</sup> In French Guiana all the Eastern Maroon languages are collectively referred to as *Nengee* or the more pejorative *Taki Taki*, which is still often used to refer to either Sranan specifically or all Afro-Surinamese languages as an undifferentiated mass.

<sup>30</sup> The relative contribution of the patriline versus the matriline in the formation of Ndyuka personhood is summarized in the saying: "It is your mother's avenging spirits that kill you, but your father's taboos" (*Yu mma kunu kii yu, ma yu dda kina kii yu*). This means that, whereas you inherit collective guilt (and thus political identity) through your matrilineage (*bée*), you receive basic constraints on personal comportment like dietary prohibitions from your father. Ndyuka persons are consequently described as developing from the mixture of maternal blood that confers rights to land, titles, and full political participation, with paternal capacity, which is guarded by distinctive prohibitions and protections. While Ndyuka people experience these inherited constraints through the sicknesses and misfortunes that mark fractures in each person's

## Coalition, Witchcraft, and Ndyuka History

Since settlement in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Ndyuka territory on the Tapanahoni River (*Mama Ndyuka*) has been divided between 13 matrilineal clans (*lo*), each of which consists of a number of villages and their surrounding country.<sup>31</sup> In fact, older Ndyuka people often prefer to refer to themselves as “the twelve” (*den twalufu*)—with the paramount chief’s Otoo clan adding the 13<sup>th</sup>.<sup>32</sup> As I will endeavor to show in later chapters, this logic of defining a unified set in relation to an additional element that is at once different from it but intrinsic to its unity, is elementary to the ways in which Ndyuka perceive coalition across the variegated spheres that define their social lives.

When present day Ndyuka recount the ancestral colonization of the Tapanahoni, it is in terms of a tension between destined settlement and the mysterious power of unifying transgression. Early Ndyuka history (*fesiten*) is narrated as the movements of clan ancestors between known locations, generally streams, mountains, villages, and plantations. In each place, some act is accomplished, the most significant of which are acquisitions of relationships with spirits and the powers of their *obiya*. Some stories describe enormous anacondas (*mboma*, *eunectes murinus*) and Harpy Eagles (*ngonini*,

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constitutive coalition, humans are not held to be able to recognize these relations unaided. It is only through diverse forms of divination that Ndyuka become capable of establishing the effects of these historical relations on everyday life in the present.

<sup>31</sup> The clans are: Dyu Akuba Lo, Beei Lo, Dikan Lo, Kumpai Lo, Misidyan Lo, Pata Lo, Pedii Lo, Piika Lo, Pinasi Lo, Lebi Musu Lo, Otoo Lo, Lape Lo.

<sup>32</sup> While these titles are sought after and important, they are only one element of Ndyuka and other Maroons’ consensually based gerontocratic politics. When I asked people who was the most influential person in a village, it was often not the captain but the *gaantiyu*, the most senior matrilineal “uncle” who was indicated. Given that all the Afro-Surinamese languages have “Hawaiian style” kinship terminologies, where every member of a person’s bilateral kin group are only distinguished with respect to sex and generation, the senior “uncle” is merely the eldest male within a community. Since villages are divided in sections (*pisi*) that correspond to a matrilineal’s branching segments, any given lineal segment/residential group can have its own senior most male who is often the one who concludes the most important legal/ritual arbitrations. Thus, while titles are important and prestigious, essential to the correct performance of essential rituals, they are still very much subject to collective consensus-based mediation.

*harpia harpya*) yielding the primeval river in the face of the ancestral approach. Others retell more enigmatic incidents:

*After they [the ancestors] came to the confluence of the Tapanahoni and the Lawa rivers, they saw an unknown person sitting on a stone. And when this person saw them, it began to laugh uproariously. They walked around the stone hoping to catch a glimpse of the being's face, but were unable to see it. The being continued to laugh, laugh until it died. So the ancestors buried the person there, at the confluence of rivers. They never knew if it was a human being, never knew what it was.<sup>1</sup>*

The pivotal moment of ancestral arrival at their new homeland was met with mockery, which served simultaneously as autochthonous reproof and surrender. As will be discussed, Ndyuka conceptions of coalition pointedly arise from the inevitability of entanglement with others, especially through trespasses against other's autonomy. Though not known, it is sometimes implied that the being described in this story was a forest spirit (*ampuku*) spirit associated with the autochthonous deity of Suriname's rainforest, Tata Ogi. The being's death was a sign granting the Ndyuka permission to lay claim to the Tapanahoni but—as can be inferred from the inability to see its face—also a forewarning that their new land would be shared with others beyond human understanding. Given that the Ndyuka I knew generally imbued even the most disreputable of their ancestors with gravitas, the being's mysterious laughter rebukes the pretensions of even the most powerful, a warning that humans will inevitably misrecognize their own importance and self-control.

The story continues that the ancestors then buried the being where it died, erecting a shrine that remains important protection for the Ndyuka homeland. Since for Ndyuka death initiates a new relation between the living and the dead (who experience expanded efficacy through the loss of their physical bodies), the fact that contemporary Ndyuka

hold that ancestral settlement was begun by an act of burial is noteworthy. The being's death is a cryptic, morally fraught, negotiation over the terms of settlement. It suggests a form of coalitional *détente*, in which, from the very beginning of their history, Ndyuka are forced to live in perplexed error in relation to the Tapanahoni's aboriginal beings. Acts of recognition—such as the shrine erected to propitiate the unknown being and ensure its continued tolerance—are the only practical measures humans have for coping with this uncertainty and attempting to ensure continued access to the means of subsistence. The mystery being's death by laughter and ensuing burial portray these dynamics of misrecognition as inexplicably stamped into the earth. Burying a body furthers the identification of place and personhood, collapsing the two in one fluid gesture of coalition.

Ndyuka history is perhaps best understood as the politics of revealing and contesting the unfolding implications of such matrilineally mediated coalitions. For the Ndyuka, the coalitional force of matrilineal descent is thus inseparable from their history of resistance (*fositen* or *fesiten*). Though the topic of heated controversy and concealment, for all the Maroons their unique histories of matrilineal political formation in the face of European violence sets them apart from both Creoles and one another. The Ndyuka relation to their history is eloquently summarized by the proverb (*odoo*), “the ears hear *fositen*, but the eyes do not see it” (*Yeesi yee fositen, ma ain á si*). The past is a still generative secret that must be divined from powerful stories that are simultaneously accounts *and* embodiments of the spirits and ancestors (*fositen sama*) who lived it.

Ndyuka history can be roughly divided into periods, beginning with Ndyuka 18<sup>th</sup> century ethno-genesis from a confederation of different Maroon groups during the

ancestral flight from slavery and migration to the Tapanahoni river basin. Most early Ndyuka history (*fositen* or *fesiten*) is about the earliest period of enslavement (*katibo*) and escape (*loweeten, lonten*). This includes memories of the slave trade and the plantations, battles with pursuing Europeans, and the negotiation of the 1760 peace treaty with the Dutch administration.

As charters for the conduct of contemporary Ndyuka sociality, “first time” stories provide some of the clearest descriptions of the logic of coalition and how it determines the Ndyuka experience of history. This history is dominated by stories of competition between the founding ancestors and the clans they originated for political authority and territory, and the role of the diverse spirits, gods, and medicines that Ndyuka ancestors either brought with them from Africa or encountered in Suriname’s interior in arbitrating these conflicts. It is these beings that are shown as guiding and adjudicating ancestral decisions, leading the Maroon ancestors through unknown territory to their promised land and providing warrant for settlement and its arbitration (van Velzen and van Wetering 2004; van Velzen and Hoogbergen 2011).<sup>33</sup> These stories continue to frame continued competition between clans and lineages as they assert their prerogatives with and against others (van Velzen and van Wetering 2004). As a relational sensibility, coalition describes how Maroon ancestors and clans composed their specific accomplishments and prerogatives from the history of each groups’ distinct relations with gods and spirits, other clans, and even other kinds of people, like Europeans (*Bakáa*) and Amerindians (*Ingi*).



As it exists today, the matrilineally based political system shared by all Maroons developed out of the interplay of West and Central African political kinships, the organization of plantation labor, and the post-treaty relations Maroons developed with the colonial state. In addition to their freedom, peace treaties granted Maroons recognition as semi-autonomous subjects of the Dutch crown. Colonial treaties encouraged the six recognized Maroon peoples to organize themselves under the layered leadership of titleholders like the paramount chief (*gaanman*), matriclan and lineage chiefs (*kabiten*), and their lieutenants (*basiya*)—who fill a variety of roles from announcing events and amplifying formal talk to enforcing collective decisions. Collectively, this system of political kinship is referred to as the *lanti*. Such titleholders are understood to express the whole lineage of succession that has led to their investiture. The predecessors for whom they speak occupy them, their insignia the signs of the endurance of their authority (*tii makiti*). Like mediums performing (*pee*) their spirits, titleholders are whitened with sacred clay (*pemba*) upon ascending to their positions.

However impregnated with animosity, at present many Ndyuka regard their colonial treaties as powerful endorsements, not only of ethnic distinctiveness, but also of their primacy among Afro-Surinamese populations, Maroon and Creole alike. This focus on treaties also describes a major historical instance of the logic of coalition. Rather than merely assert their autonomy, the Ndyuka I talked with emphasized the peace treaty as a relationship of recognition, which, through its tribute of political insignia, imbued Ndyuka leaders with political effectiveness. Thus, much as various rituals of divination and kinship brought the three original federations of Ndyuka clans into coalition (Thoden van Velzen and Hoogbergen 2011), the 1760 treaty with the Dutch created a new relation

of proportionately familiar and dangerous difference that gave Ndyuka leaders the authority to reorganize Ndyuka society for peace.

Since the Ndyuka people I knew often depicted their particular coalitional matrix of lineally defined relations as determining their capacity to provide for themselves and their kin, Ndyuka history can in important ways be read as a struggle to balance the need for imported wealth like alcohol and cloth—the exchange of which ensures relations with both spirits and affines—and the constant threat that such wealth poses to the maintenance of matrilineal authority and gerontocratic consensus.

This tension has significant roots in annual tribute payments the Dutch colonial government made of valuables previously raided on the coast to maintain Maroons as allies and encourage them to stop harboring newly escaped slaves. Importantly, as part of this tribute the colonial government provided formal insignia like uniforms (*lanti kosi*) and staffs (*tiki*) to officially acknowledge Maroon political titles—a practice continued to this day by the independent Surinamese state. These titles support the matrilineally mediated conceptions of collective ownership that, as political title or territory, make a matrilineal (*lo*) and its constituent matrilineages (*bee*) the true holders of property like the villages in which they live and the lands on which they farm and hunt.

This coalitional logic is particularly apparent in the organization of intra-lineal relations, in which—in classic segmentary fashion—many branching lineages alternatively testify to distinction and unity. Ndyuka history is largely a story of the complex ways these different segments of Ndyuka society have conducted their relations with one another. Although generically outlined by their victory over the whites and the desire to participate as equals in coastal wealth, more practically Ndyuka history is the

story of lineages and their representatives as they grapple with one another while attempting to preserve an always-volatile moral order imposed by the anger of the myriad non-human agents with whom Ndyuka share their environment. This order, however, is also always under threat from the internal witchcraft that wells up again and again in Ndyuka history (Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering 2004, 2013). These tensions represent the field of antagonisms across which coalition as both an ethical and existential imperative unfolds.

One example of these politics is a narrative widely known among adult Ndyuka that explains how, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century period of warfare with the white, the Otoo—the smallest of the clans—became the lineage of the paramount chiefs through the intervention of Sweli Gadu, the god of oaths. The ancestors of the Otoo brought this deity from Africa. The central component this cult was a poison ordeal that acted to reveal witchcraft and enforce oaths. The Otoo were competing with the Nyanfai, who would become a major clan among the downriver (*bilosei*)<sup>34</sup> Ndyuka after Ndyuka settlement of the Tapanahoni.

Sweli Gadu provided the Otoo with proprietary expertise that enabled them to act as arbitrators for all the other clans, a right which served to ensure their backing by the Misidyan—the most numerous of the nascent clans. During the migration south from the plantation zone, the Ndyuka ancestors took turns at cutting the path for the assembled group. The story is that members of each of the present clans made an agreement that whichever clan saw the Tapanahoni first would supply the hereditary paramount chiefs. Alternating the exhausting work of slashing their way through the deep forest between

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<sup>34</sup> A series of rapids at Futupasi roughly bisects Ndyuka territory, creating a division between upriver (*oposei*) and downriver (*bilosei*) clans that has important political and ritual consequences.

members of all the clans provided each an equal chance to rule and rest. A day before they were supposed to arrive at the river, the Otoo's Sweli carry oracle (*tyai a ede*) alerted them that they would arrive at the Tapanahoni the next day. The Otoo were then on scout duty but volunteered to take over for the Nyanfai, who were next in the rotation, and cut for an additional day. In this way, members of the Otoo were the first to see the Tapanahoni and so became the hereditary clan of the paramount chiefs. (see Thoden van Velzen and Hoogbergen 2011 for a few different versions).

As can be seen from the story, most Ndyuka narratives speak of matrilineal clans as single agents with unified interests. Though many Ndyuka histories emphasize the power of specific ancestors, this power is almost always a sign of these ancestors "ripeness" (*lepi*) as potently ideal embodiments of their relations to specific deities and power conferring medicines (*obiya*). Similarly, it is the particular inborn coalition between the Otoo and their deity that the Ndyuka who gave me different versions of this narrative stressed was responsible for Otoo seizure of political predominance, even if their alliance with the Misidyan was acknowledged as guaranteeing this authority's recognition by the other clans. Sweli Gadu is thus seen as the real producer of the knowledge that enabled the Otoo's decisive collective action. Whatever the accuracy of this particular version of the story, it elegantly conveys coalition between deities and clans, and the kinds of knowledge and collective action coalition makes possible.<sup>35</sup>

Though traditional Ndyuka titleholders are the sole category of people invested with formal political authority, this authority is highly conditional. Both senior lineage and clan members and diverse divination objects and medicines need to approve what is

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<sup>35</sup> It is interesting to note that it is the Otoo's Sweli that shown to be leading all of the Ndyuka together, suggesting that the Otoo had already gained some degree of precedent in the production of knowledge.

otherwise the traditional titleholders' narrow authority to ratify collective decisions made by councils (*kuutu*) of senior men and women about social issues as diverse as disagreements between wives and husbands, fishing rights, funerals, and large scale inter-clan violence.



Figure 3 A village *kuutu* structure, mortuary (*kee osu*), and ancestral shrine (*faaka tiki*)

Every Ndyuka village has a *kuutu osu*, in which these councils meet to decide any such collectively significant coordinated social action. During important events, such as funerals, during community wide crises, marriages negotiations, illnesses, or even disputes between siblings, senior men and women will gather at the *kuutu osu*—usually a square roofed structure with open sides. The *kuutu osu* is almost always paired with the *faaka tiki*, the ancestral shrine that officially proclaims that a settlement is recognized as a

village—meaning that its matrilineally mediated titles and land are formally recognized by the Paramount chief—and the *kee osu* (the mortuary) where corpses are prepared and stored before burial.

During a *kuutu* participants arrange stools or chairs around the *kuutu osu*'s perimeter to face a *basiya* (crier) who occupies the center of the circle so created. The *basiya* acts as the designated *pikiman* (answerer) who ensures that every formal statement is matched by the appropriate backchannel response that affirms the *kuutu* as an occasion of authoritative speech, and issue about which formal Ndyuka political oratory is obsessively concerned. Women and younger men traditionally sit just outside the *kuutu* circle and generally keep quite while it is in progress but who may influence its decisions in a variety of ways.

*Kuutu* may occur at all “scales” of social organization, from the immediate family (*osu, wan mma pikin*) to “big” (*gaan*) *kuutu* that concern the Ndyuka nation as a whole. However large, most *kuutu* involve three groups: one representing each of the disputants and a “neutral” one, also known as the *lanti*. At intervals, participants “withdraw” (*tampu, go a wan sei*) to consult among themselves. Another important facet of Ndyuka *kuutu* is that the proceedings do not include the people discussed. It is instead the elders and deities alone who are supposed to speak to come to appropriate decisions for the parties discussed (Köbben 1969: 238).

As in Ndyuka social life generally, the central concern of the *kuutu* is to constitute “respectful” (*lesipeki*) communication—both between those senior enough to speak, and between the living and the dead. Judged from what appeared to be a shared assumption among most of the Ndyukas I engaged with, peoples’ subjective consciousness is

profused with the agency of ancestral agents who directly influence their actions in the present. In traditional Ndyuka oratory as I heard it, to speak forcefully was to invoke oneself as a particular coalition of such relations, a mobilized aggregate whose power was in actuating alliances of living and dead, human and spirit in everyday political action.

The Ndyuka *kuutu* I witnessed began with libations (*towe wataa*), followed by orations given by the senior-most people present—often, but not always, titleholders. Everyone who the senior participants in a *kuutu* assesses has the right to speak can then speaks, while those in attendance respond in unison, particularly through slow, steady handclapping, to prompts from the *basiya* about whether they understand and affirm what has been said. Deities and spirits might themselves speak at *kuutu*—most regularly through the medium of carry oracles, the most prominent Ndyuka divination device. Only after affairs have been thoroughly talked over, collectively decided upon, and approved by the most senior people present, can a course of action be officially undertaken.

*Kuutu* are a paradigmatic “model of, and model for” (Geertz 1972) Ndyuka sociality, and thus comprise a paradigmatic example of coalition. Even though *kuutu* would appear the exclusive domain of senior men, women and junior men also employ the same basic communicative form during events the adduce to demand collective consensus among their social peers. In this way, the *kuutu*’s formal structure simultaneously performs gerontocracy and consensus. Those whose lives are the subject of a given *kuutu* are *supposed* (even if this is in fact very often contested) to accept its outcome as an expression of their existential derivation from ancestral sources of

authority.<sup>36</sup> This ideological commitment to the impartial power of ancestral authority is explicitly performed when the elders representing two antagonistic parties in a *kuutu* reverse their roles, each then speaking from the position of other, demonstrating the complex, reversible ways in which elders embody both a coalition of lineages *and* mediate ancestral authority.

*Kuutu* are a chance for everyone deemed to have sufficient cause to speak within the constraints of a ritual procedure that ensures that participants speak to, for, and with, the ancestral past as the final arbiter of legitimate social action. In the *kuutu*'s standardization of backchannel affirmations to ratify the speaker's sufficient animation of these ancestral voices, answers to any authoritative statement greeted with exclamations like *kweti kweti* (absolutely). This procedure recapitulates the ways in which the Ndyuka I worked with often represented their own thoughts as derived from an ongoing internal dialog between themselves, spirits, and ancestors, thus affirming that what is said in *kuutu* is accurate because derived from sources beyond the interests of any of the people present. For many Ndyuka—all of those I knew were quite pessimistic about other people's motives—that decisions can be arrived at in *kuutu* at all is seen as proof of ancestral involvement (*den fosiwan, den gaanwan*).

Such a concern with distributed authority is actively materialized in the carry oracle (*tyai a ede*). A carry oracle consists of two bearers who support either end of a plank on their heads to which a spirit's sacred bundle (*pakáa*) is bound. The "heaviness" of the spirit in its bundle causes the silent bearers to move in designated ways in answer to an oracle operator's (*basi fu a gadu*) questions. Such consultations almost always take

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<sup>36</sup> Of course, these decisions are often resented. To *kuutu* someone also means to talk about them behind their back.



place in front of some version of an audience (also known as *lanti*) that supplies and confers over the enquiries asked and answered.

Along with carry oracles (and oracular spirit mediumship, which will be discussed in chapter 4), the *kuutu* is the communicative form that does the most to shape Ndyuka perceptions of the origins of rectitude and authority in coalitional processes. As with carry oracles, one reason for the *kuutu*'s influence is the way its organization maximally distributes agency to enact its authority as derived from elsewhere. Just as those subject to a *kuutu*'s decisions are supposed to turn themselves over to the mediation of more senior kin, so members of a *kuutu* portray themselves as speaking for the invisible authority of the distant past by virtue of embodying the accumulated power of all the ancestors who have similarly spoken in the past. Participants therefore strive to speak in proverbs (*odoo*) and other received formulas of ancestral influence that downplay personal volition.

Beyond being merely the central means of Ndyuka political action, *kuutu* and oracles also appear to model Ndyuka perceptions of personal subjectivity and the origins of knowledge. This is well conveyed by my friend John's statement that, "If I alone could think, my attention would be more focused" (*efu na mi wawan di e denki, da mi denki be o moo letiopo*). Like in *kuutu*, where ritual control vies with vehement disagreement to create collective action, John's statement suggests that the babble of thought is itself a sign that every person is a coalition, a particular assembly of the varied relations that define the capacity to act. As thought is poly-vocal, so must one's consciousness be multi-agentive. Under such conditions of suffused profusion the forms of mediation performed by *kuutu* and oracles are, not only the most audible expression of the

pervasiveness and divisibility of agency, but also the best means for establishing responsibility. In creating firm knowledge through an emergent process of collective consensus, both communicative forms limit the agencies and relations that can matter to a given controversy—be it over chiefly succession or a dispute over land. It is this that defines the coalitions from which both particular persons and kin groups emerge “holographically” one from the other (Wagner 1991).<sup>37</sup>

Despite this fixation on collective unity in Ndyuka political discourse, these processes are inherently segmentary, as is the power that emerges from any composite human-spirit agent. As much as a *kuutu* strives for consensus, it also creates animosities and tensions repressed by the very effectiveness of the *kuutu* form. This failure is contradictorily expressed as both an intrinsic failing on the part of some human beings, and the deficiency of traditional Ndyuka practices for creating knowledge (something which I’ll return to below). Either way the result is the cancerous presence of the witch (*wisiman*).

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<sup>37</sup> The Ndyuka reliance on the collective production of coalitional knowledge suggests something basic about the co-conditioning of Ndyuka politics and ontological description. In making sure that the limits of personal knowledge are clear, the Ndyuka people I knew were also making assertions about essential constraints on their ability to act. In doing so, they were indexing necessary and desirable boundaries for others’ actions. For the Ndyuka I worked with to say that they didn’t know about some feature of reality hidden from them except through collectively approved revelation was as much an ethical stance—an evaluation based on shared values in interaction (Lempert 2008; Keane 2015)—as a claim about their natural ability to know.

Such epistemological assertions did not support one ineluctable truth so much as limit who was qualified to make declarations about truth in the first place. In indicating that individual humans do not know, however, The Ndyuka I spoke with were equally implying that, through coalition with ancestral and non-human spirits, living people can still arrive at effective knowledge. Accepting that spirits intervene in uncomprehending human lives authorizes people to conceptualize their actions, thoughts, and feelings, as the result of being in integral coalition with spirits mediated by the different collective histories their presences indexes. In deriving knowledge from beyond restricted human capacities, spirits enable the effective knowledge that renders both the gerontocratic and egalitarian impulses of Ndyuka politics ethically possible.

The Ndyuka I worked with perceived witches as generally close kinsmen whose “ugly hearts” (*takuu ati*)—innate propensity for greed, jealousy, and spitefulness leads them to physically consume their close relatives for their own gain thus “breaking the lineage” (*booko a bée*). Witches subvert the implicit morality of coalitional personhood’s composite agents. Instead of being another facilitating link in a lineage’s continuity, witches negate intergenerational reproduction. They no longer speak as though they are their defining relations, but as pure appetite. Witches fatten themselves on others, reducing the blood and bodies that are the substance of kinship to sterile individuality. Such voracious desires distinguish witches from moral human beings who smoothly reproduce the lineage across generations. In their monstrous individuality, witches can only speak as witches. Because of this inherent self-serving deceit, truth about witches can only be found in their affect on others, not in their own perfidious claims.

Witchcraft fears reveal how difficult Ndyuka self-descriptions of effortless ethical continuity are to achieve and maintain. The sources of agency that a specific person claims are always open to alternative description as malevolent self-interest. As in the *kuutu*, Ndyuka morality depends on persons being righteous aggregates of the ancestral past. Ndyuka assumptions of coalitional consciousness are only clear when the ancestral and spirit agents of this multiplicity are recognized as collectively holding the floor. And yet, as the innately mendacious witch reveals, however convincing a person’s performance of their interests and opinions as derived from elsewhere, contrary descriptions of personal actions and intentions always pile up. Even in speaking as another, the relational conditions that permit final social recognition of such benign

mediation often falter, producing the acrimony and distrust often characteristic of Ndyuka politics.

Despite such constant controversy, however fleetingly, in the midst of the *kuutu*, or in full public possession by a spirit, the overwhelming power of the spirit others that make Ndyuka persons moral may stand revealed. When a titleholder takes his or her place on their official stool and launches into particularly persuasive oratory, doubts about their motives can momentarily subside. In performance and interaction then, even while heightening the ambiguity that affords suspicion, the ultimate multiplicity of coalitional subjectivity may be glimpsed, momentary suppressed amid collective acts of revelation.

### **Ndyuka History and Ritual as Politics**

Though many Ndyuka still vividly recall the time slavery and active combat against the “whites” (*bakáa*), their ancestors’ 1760 treaty with the Dutch colonial government, produced a time of “freedom” and “peace” (*fiten*) that has largely persisted into the present. However momentous, most of Ndyuka history has obviously transpired in the more than 250 years since the Ndyuka ancestors met with colonial officials at Ndyuka creek to swear to peace. Since the treaty, Ndyuka history has roughly followed a trajectory of increasing integration into coastal Surinamese society (de Groot 1977). The history of this progression is also a chronicle of the unceasing power of witchcraft to stipulate the key controversies of Ndyuka life (Thoden van Velzen and van Watering 2004).

In the immediate aftermath of the treaty of 1760, the newly recognized Ndyuka mainly remained in their new homeland on the Tapanahoni River. Until the abolition of

slavery, the terms of the peace treaties made with the colonial government barred Ndyuka and other Maroons from the coast. Before abolition permitted freer access to coastal commodities, the Ndyuka gained a portion of needed goods like guns, powder, machetes, salt, cotton cloth, and alcohol from annual tribute payments made by the colonial state.

This tribute was never sufficient. Already by the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ndyuka had begun to move beyond the Tapanahoni to take advantage of the coastal economy and its valuable commodities. This migration initially consisted in Ndyuka settlements just beyond the plantation zone, first along Sara creek on the Suriname River, and then on the upper reaches of the Cottica River in eastern Suriname, as both rivers provided direct river access to Paramaribo. These outposts allowed Ndyuka to acquire cash and commodities by selling provisions and timber, the then dominant building material, to the plantations, and—more controversially—hunt for escaped slaves. As the enslaved Creole population continued to decline with the cessation of the Dutch transatlantic slave trade in 1814 (Van Lier 1971), the plantation zone's need for all of these services only continued to increase and Ndyuka men happily to advantage.

Cutting wood perfectly suited Ndyuka ideals of gerontocratic matrilineal consensus (Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering 2004: 36-8). 19<sup>th</sup> century Ndyuka timber crews were generally led by a matrilineal uncle and staffed by his nephews who shared proceeds on the basis of seniority. Cutting down huge forest trees and processing them into planks required the maximum coordination of all participants. The mother's brother—the figure who the Ndyuka matrilineal system had the most immediate authority in the lives of his nephews and nieces—was the perfect person to organize such labor in ways that satisfying competing claims among his sister's children.

This matrilineally organized work strategy was an outgrowth of Ndyuka kinship organization and the distinctive ways in which it divided productive capacity, especially how it used gender to allocate domains of labor. In Ndyuka, women are often referred to as “*boliman*” (cooks) and men as “*ontiman*” (hunters), a division that correlates with practices of poly-local residence favored by Ndyuka men. Though all Ndyuka males have residence rights in their matrilineal villages, “typical” Ndyuka men are still presumed to circulate between a few different wives/partners who own homes in settlements along the major rivers (and increasingly roads) over which they travel between economic opportunities and social obligations.

In contrast to male mobility, until the last thirty years or so, most Ndyuka women stayed in their maternal villages, foraging, planting gardens, and raising children. In exchange for male provided labor, meat, and commodities, Ndyuka women were expected to provide the conjugal and residential privileges that guaranteed the continuity and stability of their matriline. At present, the Ndyuka men I knew who lived in traditional Ndyuka territory, or had access to land near Paramaribo, were still likely to contribute the heavy labor of clearing new gardens (*goon*), while women and their children continued to provide much of the principle work of planting and harvesting.

Until recently at least, Ndyuka women were understood to use their reproductive potential to domesticate male economic contributions like cloth and meat wrested from the dangers of the coastal economy and the uncultivated bush. In doing so, Ndyuka women could convert the proceeds of male strength and mobility into the fluid reproduction of the matrilineal clan and its segments. For instance, traditionally when a woman attained socially recognized reproductive maturity, Ndyuka fathers—who

Ndyuka incest rules stipulate must be from another lineage, but not another clan—were expected to “give” (*gi*) their daughter “a woman’s skirt” (*pangi*) (almost exclusively made from mass produce “madras” style textiles bought on the coast) and build a house with which the daughter could create an independent household in her mother’s village. As this example shows, female sexuality is tightly associated with social reproduction, and a woman’s desirability is closely linked to her ability to provide men domestic comforts like abundant cassava, care for children, and a place to sleep. As the Ndyuka adage goes “there are no ugly women”.

In this way, Ndyuka women continue to imagine themselves as attempting to leverage what is considered greater male physical-economic capacity (*kankan, kaakiti*) to reproduce the matrilineage. Masculine strength is reckoned to simultaneously stem from male physical difference *and* from the unique powers conferred by the paternal lineage. Male affines (*konlibi*) and their lineal relations confer their progeny with a variety of extended capacities and protections. Patrilateral connections provide father’s children (*dda meke pikin*) access to ritual knowledge about spirit-medicine complexes (*obiya*), rights to a share of property (mainly fungible property like guns and boats), and recourse to mediation (or intimidation) in disputes from “brothers and sisters” (*baala anga sisa*) from the father’s lineage. To this day, traditional Ndyuka politics is predominantly concerned with negotiating this tangle of matri- and patri-lateral relations to establish appropriate regulation (*weiti*) of any specific Ndyuka person’s prerogatives as they emerge from overlapping entitlements of age, gender, and descent (Köbben 1969).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> The ethics of such regulation is perhaps best summarized by the common Ndyuka proverb (*odoo*) that “Life makes family” (*libi meke famii*). While kinship is the basis for coalition (*libi makandii*), it is also the premise for the corrosive forces of greed and jealousy that engender witchcraft and threaten human

Though Ndyuka people work to present themselves as at the center of multiple moral coalitions, the tension between the value of age rank and common belonging to a single family continues to imbue Ndyuka politics with an intense, and often resented, combustibility in which carefully negotiated consensuses conflict with people's perceptions that they possess unique entitlements acquired through descent and personal skill.<sup>39</sup> For the Ndyuka I knew, any personal skill, whether in farming, business, or hunting, needed to be negotiated with a person's relations. The successful were urged to maintain a "humble" (*saka fasi*) attitude and a willingness to contribute to collective activities like funerals. Most Ndyuka I spoke with emphasized that persons of both sexes and all ages should avoid the kinds of behaviors that incite jealousy or lead to other forms of interpersonal resentments.<sup>40</sup> Despite this focus on interpersonal politesse, it is also widely understood that it is impossible to evade such resentments because of other

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flourishing. For many Ndyuka, kinship is duty and destiny, but like all such unsought obligations, it is also a hazardous confinement from which people seek escape as much as affirmation.

The saying "life makes family" comments on the problems Ndyuka matrilineal descent raises for other forms of relatedness. The proverb is used when people otherwise unrelated come to rely on one another. The proverb states that kinship—or at least its positive elements of mutual care and collaboration—is not to be found uniquely in "blood" (*buulu*) relations. It implies that the "ordinary ethics" (Lambek 2010) of daily interaction *might* be a better means of assessing genuine interdependence than birth. This ideal, however, is imminently fragile, continuously in danger from a widely shared Ndyuka imperative to distrust others. "Life makes family" can then also refer to the inescapable ways in which human actions involuntarily produce collective relations with spirit and human others. Ideally, people would be independent, and self-sufficient. The conditions of life—gardening, procreation, mining—however, continually impose further relations and greater responsibility to others—be they kin, affines, or spirits.

<sup>39</sup> Since for most of Ndyuka history the only real division of labor was between men and women, until very recently almost all Ndyuka were economic generalists who divided their time between wage earning, gardening, and hunting/foraging activities. A person's reputation was—in addition to accomplishments of ritual knowledge and rhetorical skill—thus largely a function of a man or woman's talent at being good farmers, hunters, and foragers. The ability of any specific Ndyuka person's to attain skill/knowledge (*sabi/koni*) at these tasks was seen as endowed by the ways in which specific people synthesized the kin mediated social relations that composed them. Because all such knowledge is conveyed by discrete possibilities conferred by age, gender, and descent, personal skill is never completely *sui generis*.

<sup>40</sup> A good example is the elaborate concealment that traditionally surrounded killing a tapir while hunting. Hunters could not announce their success. Instead they needed to return to their village and request the help of their closest kinsmen to ritually process and retrieve the animal, making sure they were not a target for the animal's spirit masters revenge. After this, they would return to the village with due humility (*saka fasi*) and the meat would be shared out among all the villagers. As with most things, it is considered highly offensive to pry into someone else's affairs, as it is for people to loudly brag (*gafa*) about themselves.



people's innately "ugly hearts" (*takuu ati*). It is this malice that fuels witchcraft—still perhaps the most dominant fear in Ndyuka society. These concerns make consensus like that performed in matrilineally led lumbering central to Ndyuka political life and, I would argue, a primary model for Ndyuka multiple-subjectivity as described earlier in this chapter.

The long history of changing intensities of Ndyuka participation in the coastal and global economies is therefore simultaneously a narrative of the waxing and waning of witchcraft. Rather than see it as a derivative of underlying socio-economic forces, the argument throughout this dissertation is that Ndyuka witchcraft is perceived by many Ndyuka to be correlated with their participation in the coastal economy. Changing jealousies, mistrusts, and angers remain inseparable from the ways in which people experience the tapping and harnessing of new forms of wealth. Substantial economic realignments forced Ndyuka people to find new ways of attaining the knowledge to cope with potent new inequalities and injustices (Brittes Pires and Melo Moura 2015).

Until the 1880s, the timber trade remained the only direct Ndyuka access to the coastal economy. It was then that gold was discovered along the Lawa River in the deep interior of French Guiana, sparking a gold rush. The Lawa is, with the Tapanahoni, one of the two major tributaries of the Maroni/Marrowijne River that flows north to the coast and delineates the frontier between Suriname and French Guiana. The Ndyuka—the most populous if not the best-positioned Maroon group on the Marrowijne—took rapid advantage of the influx of large numbers of Europeans impatient to access to the gold fields. Knowledge of boat building and river transportation made Maroon men the only

means for European prospectors to reach the interior (van Velzen and van Watering 2004).

Ndyuka freight haulers (*bagasiman*) proceeded to create unprecedented wealth from the gold rush. Work in river transport soon brought the cash earnings of young Ndyuka transporters near to salaries of colonial civil servants. By the 1890s, sudden wealth in the hands of young men otherwise without significant political clout in traditional Ndyuka politics resulted in a period of social unrest. This was only allayed when the then Ndyuka paramount chief Oseyse was compelled by the prominent Otoo oracular diviner Da Labi Agumasaka to reassemble the ancestral Sweli Gadu carry oracle from ingredients dug up at the abandoned site of the first Ndyuka capital on the Tapanahoni, Kiyoo Kondee (van Velzen and van Watering 2004).

This carry oracle was composed to replace the decomposed body of a childless woman named Coba. Her postmortem transformation into an anti-witchcraft oracle was central to the origins of the social foment of the 1890s. As remains the case for lower river (*bilosei*) clans to the present day, most Ndyuka place a tremendous stress on finding out the causes of death. Death plays a tremendous role in Ndyuka society. A great deal of personal and collective effort goes into burying and mourning the dead. This involves both elaborate eight-day funerals and many months or years of mourning by the deceased's spouse or spouses (Parris 2011).

Traditionally, Ndyuka authorities only grudgingly recognized "natural death."<sup>41</sup> Instead most mortality was attributed to either 1) witchcraft, 2) punishment for witchcraft, or 3) avenging spirits (which may or may not participate in the first two).

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<sup>41</sup> At present the categories for this would be either Gadu dede (killed by God (or a god), ongooku dede (accidental death), or kawownu dede (death for no reason).

Traditionally the major means of assessing the cause of death was divination with the deceased's coffin. In same manner as carry oracles, two bearers would either place the deceased coffin on their heads, or attach a tuft of hair or other item of the deceased to a plank. The plank was then held to move the bearers in specific ways in response to the question put to it by a council of village elders.<sup>42</sup>

When the people of Puketi—the main village of the numerically largest Misidyan clan—went to interrogate Coba as to why she died, her corpse revealed that she had been both a witch, and that she was part of a general conspiracy of witches that threatened to destroy the Ndyuka people as a whole. The village elders of Puketi then took Coba's casket from village to village to expose witches throughout Ndyuka territory. Thus a major anti-witchcraft campaign emerged, which, at its height, appeared as though it would seriously overturn the political status quo of Ndyuka society (Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering 2004: 83; Parris 2011).

In a move that rapidly contained Coba's corpse's anti-witchcraft crusade, Da Agumasaka's revived Sweli Gadu oracle enabled him to institute a new anti-witchcraft judicial regime. Now named Gaan Gadu (Great God), this oracle would remain the final arbiter of Ndyuka mortuary ritual and anti-witchcraft fears until the early 1970s. The shrine where the Gaan Gadu operated was located in the Gaanman's capital, Diitabiki, in the center of Ndyuka territory. The shrine consisted of both a carry oracle and the associated medicines of the deities earlier incarnation as Sweli Gadu.

As Agumasaka reinvented Ndyuka mortuary ritual, after a person's death, the gravediggers would assemble a carry oracle to divine the cause of death. Upon the

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<sup>42</sup> Traditionally this involved a couple of people from one of the two sodalities (gravediggers (*oloman*) and coffin makers (*kisiman*) hiding in a hut in the deceased's village. The deceased was then requested to find them. If they failed in the task they were a witch and had to be punished accordingly.

divinations completion, its results were immediately dispatched to the Gaanman in Diitabiki. If the person had died because of another's witchcraft, the deceased's family would keep their property. If Gaan Gadu had killed them in retaliation for witchcraft, the family was forced to unceremoniously dump the corpse in the forest. After a critical mass of witchcraft condemnations accumulated in a specific place, the village government sent convicted witches' dangerously polluted property to Diitabiki as the "god's cargo" (*gadulai*).<sup>43</sup> At Diitabiki this cargo would be brought to the Gaan Gadu shrine and cleansed. After the cleansing, Gaan Gadu's carry oracle (which oversaw the whole procedure) would be asked which items the god demanded, all of which become the shrine's property. Items unwanted by the deity were returned to the deceased's village, and the irredeemably polluted leftovers rest dumped in the forest downstream from Diitabiki (van Velzen and van Wetering 2004: 117-121). Despite Agumasaka's system's longevity, this redistribution of other clans' wealth to the Otoo dominated Gaan Gadu priesthood rapidly became a source of acute dissatisfaction for the other clans. In the 1970s, this disaffection would come to have dramatic repercussions for traditional Ndyuka politics.

Gaan Gadu was not the sole divinity with a claim over Ndyuka collective destiny. As Sweli Gadu, Gaan Gadu was seen as the great ancestral enforcer whose oaths had bound together diverse African refugees into the nascent Ndyuka. Whatever his authority, Gaan Gadu was not immune from the challenges of Tata Ogi (Father Danger/Evil), an ancient autochthonous deity who claims rule over the entirety of Suriname's interior.

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<sup>43</sup> According to Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering who began their exhaustive research in the early sixties, in 1963 "two out of every three deceased were judged to have been killed by god" (2004: 113).

Tata Oyii (a title of respect meant to avoid saying his actual name and inadvertently invoking his presence) is understood to be the “king” (*kownu*) of one of the most influential categories of Ndyuka spirits, the *ampuku*. Ampuku are but one category of the diverse spirit inhabitants of Ndyuka life. As serpents (*Papa, Daguwe*); Amerindians (*Ingi*); ancestors (*Yooka, Gaansama*); commercially traded demons (*Bakuu*); ghosts of unjustly killed humans and animals (*Kunu, Koosama*); spirits of war (*Kumanti*); and in rivers; trees; the soil (*goonmama*) and mountains; spirits pervade all the ways Ndyuka go about their lives (Vernon 1993). These beings taught the ancestors the medicines (*obiya*) that enabled them to live in the forest and fight the Europeans. These same medicines and spirits continue to heal illnesses and make people and communities strong through ameliorating therapies, magically extended capacities, or the pure threat of punishment. For Ndyuka, these many beings all exist in established or potential social relations with humans. Without them, neither specific persons nor the matrilineal clans and lineages that comprise Ndyuka society could exist. As avenging spirits, these beings enforce the discipline of the clan, making sure that every member is mindful that their identity is an obligation to the larger kin-based collectivity. Without the spirits, many Ndyuka could imagine neither their history nor their future.

If Gaan Gadu was the classic “Apollonian” force of order in Ndyuka society, Tata Oyii was the antinomian, “Dionysian” principle (Benedict 1934). However the relationship between the two deities is described, it comprises a core antagonism of Ndyuka history over the past two centuries. Simultaneously a conflict between

indissolubly interpenetrated deities and clans, the struggle between Tata Ogii and Gaan Gadu exemplifies the relational logic of coalition.<sup>44</sup>

As presently known, Tata Ogii has his origins in the career of a early 19<sup>th</sup> century Pinasi prophet known as the “Tickler” (*Dikii*) who is held by many Ndyuka to be Tata Ogii’s avatar. The story goes that Dikii’s mother went to the forest to cut Maripa palm (*attalea maripa*) fruits with her sister. In the forest she encountered a strange black being sitting at the foot of a tree with its back turned towards her. Filled with the kind of hubristic curiosity that “intrudes in other peoples’ business” (*go ini a taawan sani, go de ini wan taa sama belang*) that Ndyuka vehemently dislike, she attempted to have a better look, walking completely around being while it remained disturbingly still. No matter the angle, she could only see the strange being from behind. Overcome with curiosity, she cut a stick and poked it. Finally, overcome with fear, she urinated and she and her sister fled (van Velzen and van Wetering 2004: 143). As punishment for her rashness the woman conceived Dikii. Dikii grew up to a life of consummate trouble, using his supernatural powers to satisfy all his desires (*losutu*), killing other men and taking their wives. This tremendous potency soon alienated Dikii from his maternal family—the only people who could protect him from being handed over for judgment by Sweli Gadu.

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<sup>44</sup> As reported by the Pinasi oracular medium André Pakosie to Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering (2004: 124), the competition between the two deities stems from Sweli Gadu breaking of coalition with Tata Ogii:

*When Sweli Gadu arrived at the Tapanahoni River, he felt lonely. All the spirits he encountered were strange to him. He put his complaints before Ogii, the Forest King. Ogii took pity on him and said: “I will give you some of my followers.” So Ogii sent him a number of Ampuku who all carried the same name: Kofi Anado fu Gainsa. Sweli Gadu was jubilant: he was no longer alone in the forest. He brainwashed the spirits so that they would forget their former loyalties and listen only to him, Sweli Gadu. Nowadays these Kofi Anado spirits and are no longer in contact with other Ampuku, they consider themselves Sweli Gadu’s retainer spirits.*

As can be seen from the story, Sweli Gadu become powerful through an act of partnership with Tata Ogii. It is when he forgets his reliance on this partnership that the two deities relations lapse, resulting in repeated Pinasi challenges to Otoo authority.

Without protection, Dikii was accused of witchcraft and forced to undergo two divinatory of Sweli Gadu's priests' poison ordeals. Though he survived both, humiliated, Dikii first fled and then willed himself to die so that he could become an avenging spirit (*kunu*) and revenge himself on his family.

*Kunu* are the products of a complicated accounting of culpability, in which personal guilt fuses with ramifying lineal accountability. Along with complex mortuary rituals and *kuutu*, *kunu* are a defining feature of Maroon sociality. *Kunu* are the creations of trespass against others' personal and collective rights (*leti*), self-respect (*seefi lobi*, *lesipeki*), or independence (*seefidensi*).<sup>45</sup> Violence of any sort is the major cause of *kunu*, but examples include breaking marriage promises, giving testimony that indirectly causes violence, and other, more general bad feelings among people and between people and spirits. Anything that treads on another's *amore prope* or leads to violent discord and death may thus stir up a *kunu*, who will then ceaselessly vent its wrath on the lineage as a whole, causing all manner of misfortune.

For most Maroons of every Maroon ethnicity, it is the matriline that mediates avenging spirits (Thoden van Velzen 1966; Green 1974; Price 1975), and the collectively directed wrath of *kunu* plays a vital role in urging both lineage coherence and fissuring

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<sup>45</sup> Who and what can become a *kunu* attests to the scope of Ndyuka conceptions of moral responsibility and which beings are capable of recognizing that responsibility. Thus, wronged humans, spirits—particularly Ampuku forest spirits—and a number of different kinds of Animal, especially Boa constrictors (*papa sneki*) can become *kunu*. These are joined by a few revealing exceptions to the general rules, like undeservedly killed pets or pregnant animals, or a variety of predators like caimans (*kaiman*) or jaguars (*bubu*) when killed “for no reason” (*kowownu*). Ghosts, forest spirits, and boas account for the majority of *kunu*, however. In moments of collective crisis, *kunu* manifest in their designated mediums, the *kunu masaa*.<sup>45</sup> Along with the eldest matrilineal uncle in a given lineage or lineal segment, the *kunu masaa* is normally the most influential lineage member without a formal title. Through them, *kunu* come to call those guilty into account, uniting lineages in collectivities of suffering.

(Price 1975).<sup>46</sup> When an Ndyuka person creates a human *kunu* through some act of grievous disregard, that culprit's lineage and clan are all equally culpable. In recompense, the offending lineage must offer to acknowledge their guilt, hosting an enormous celebration (*pee pikadu*) in which they pay the offended lineage to intercede on their behalf to lessen their punishment. In spite of such ameliorative measures, the guilty party is held to always remain in the *kunu*'s grip.

*Kunu* are intensely feared. Ndyuka people avoid mentioning them whenever possible. Because of this dread, *kunu* incarnate the ways in which Ndyuka people feel themselves to be ensnared in relations beyond their control. The only way to deal with these unavoidable obligations is to try and bring them into coalition with the general interest of the collective. Beginning as purely destructive furies, *kunu* are slowly transformed into tutelary spirits invested in the respect provided to them by the guilty kin group. Through each lineage's *kunu* medium (*kunu masaa*), avenging spirits come to be decision makers and arbitrators who, in the name of collective punishment, enforce consensus.<sup>47</sup> A new *kunu* creates a new community of suffering whose ritual imperatives are directed towards this *kunu* and away from earlier collective obligations, which, while still recognized are seen as a lesser existential threat. The result is new lineal factions bundled together by a shared sense of fear.

Like all records of *kunu*, Dikii's story summarizes central elements of the sensibility of coalition. Dikii's mother's foolhardy curiosity drove her to trespass the

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<sup>46</sup> As the Cottica oracular diviner Da Mangwa explained to me, when someone is wrongly killed they ascend to heaven where they stalk the halls of the celestial bureaucracy knocking on doors until they are granted the right to pursue the family of those who killed them.

<sup>47</sup> As Price (1972) demonstrated for the Saamaka, *kunu* play a decisive role in Maroon social change. The advent of a new *kunu* targeting a specific lineage segment reifies fissions within notionally inter-generationally continuous lineages.



respectful bounds of human humility (*saka fasi*), rashly inciting an unknown force. In punishment, she conceived Dikii, a human spirit hybrid whose personal power exceeded that of those around him, inciting jealousy and fear. This animus drove Dikii into exile and disrepute. In retaliation, after his death, Dikii and other spirits/forms of Tata Ogi returned again and again to punish the humans who had failed to honor and respect him as a spirit born in retaliation to petty human ignorance.

Lacking the wisdom to accept this, Dikii's Pinasi family further antagonized Tata Ogi, tormenting his avatar by turning him over to another clan (the Otoo), an action that served to make all Ndyuka responsible for his death. Since Dikii, a sequence of Pinasi men have been seized by prophetic careers in the name of Tata Ogi, all of who have met with some version of Dikii's fate. In this way, though Tata Ogi speaks through the Pinasi as punishment, he also grants them proprietary power as the sole authorized mediums of his anger, a situation that has been substantial enough to compel many of the key political battles within Ndyuka society during the past 100 years.

Dikii exemplifies a number of important aspects of Ndyuka sociality and personhood. In spite of (or better, precisely because) the apparently outsized importance of Ndyuka political kinship, persons like Dikii whom Weber would have labeled charismatic leaders have always had a significant social influence. Needless to say, Weber's understanding of charisma as the "devotion and personal confidence in revelation, heroism, or other qualities of *individual* leadership" (2004:34 my italics), presupposes a conception of personhood different from Ndyuka coalitional sensibilities. Dikii is among many influential Ndyuka men who have used their personal dynamism to establish a *foluku* (following, from the Dutch *volk*, people)—large numbers of hangers on

who often take up residency near their leader, often in forest camps beyond traditional leaders' effective authority.

As in the classical case of Melanesian “big men” (Wagner 1992), rather than being perceived as purely self-interested individuals (though they generally become so after a fall from grace) such Ndyuka leaders make themselves vital intermediaries for the variety of superimposed human-spirit-lineage relations that define Ndyuka life. Most frequently, like Dikii, such leaders are powerful oracular healers whose knowledge is capable of defining the fundamental issues and conflicts that Ndyuka people perceive as threatening their collective existence. Between clan and territory, past and present, affines and consanguines, such prophetic figures provide the dangerous efficacy that—at least temporarily—might transform what it means to exist entangled with so many others, specifying which relations have current power to heal or harm. By becoming spirits or deities who embody these complex interdependencies, such mediumistic leaders personify how Ndyuka come to have knowledge of which relations have a hold over their lives. In this way, such prophetic leaders can come to personify an ideal moral order even—and especially for Tata Ogi's prophets—as they enact witchlike contempt for everyday ethical norms.<sup>48</sup>

This pattern is amply evident in the case of Akalali, the second most recent Pinasi man to launch a prophetic mission for Tata Ogi.<sup>49</sup> Speaking as Santi Goon Futuboi, Tata Ogi's delegate, in the early 1970s Akalali dismantled the Gaan Gadu cult, abolishing both the sending of cargos and corpse divination (though only enduringly for the upriver

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<sup>48</sup> It is no accident then that one cause (in addition to snatching other men's wives) of the almost inevitable desertion of these leaders is their consistent violation of incest or menstrual taboos—the most dangerous of Ndyuka prohibitions (Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering 2004: 164, 218).

<sup>49</sup> He was preceded by another of others, like Akule, Dominiki, and Wensi, the last of whom was not a Tata Ogi prophet.

Ndyuka clans). Akalali personally undertook to disassemble the Gaan Gadu cult to save Ndyuka from Tata Ogi's wrath. He did so by accusing Gaan Gadu's priest of corrupting the god with the witchcraft they used to kill members of other clans and seize their property.

Starting with its carry oracles, Akalali dismantled all the sacra of Gaan Gadu's cult. These actions had a significant outcome, discontinuing the onerous but leveling redistribution of imported wealth to Diitabiki. Though welcomed, this innovation overturned what had been the most effective method of containing the sweeping social consequences of witchcraft panics, while undermining peoples' confidence in traditional authority. Since Akalali's time, many Ndyuka feel that they no longer have any efficacious way of controlling the scourge of witchcraft. As the son of one of Akalali's assistant's son's told me, it may have been Akalali's reforms that have resulted in so many Ndyuka converting to Christianity in the years following the prophets fall from influence in the late 1970s (Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering 2014). In this sense, Ndyuka witchcraft comprises the analysis of the effects of different economic regimes on human nature derived from the epistemic resources—and especially oracular performances and increasingly the Christian Bible—Ndyuka continue to rely on to produce authoritative social knowledge.

This change has been part of how Ndyuka witchcraft has been steadily redefined over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At present the paradigmatic witch is no longer the vampire who flies through the night as a glowing orb (*azeman*) that dominated earlier Ndyuka witchcraft panics. Now, Ndyuka witchcraft fears almost exclusively center on *bakuu*—hairy little people that most Ndyuka I knew said were bought from Hindustani

traders on the coast, an accusation that importantly shapes interactions between the two groups. *Bakuu* are purchased spirits—of a sort familiar from other Afro-American communities (Taussig 1980; Richman 2005) and in other parts of the world (Keane 1997; Akin 1996)—that generate wealth for their buyers at the expense of kinship ties. Most Ndyuka I know conceive of *bakuu* as perhaps *the* major threat to Ndyuka society, the prime examples of the corrosive force of greed and resentment that undermines any chance of contemporary social coalition. Since a *bakuu*'s buyer can never fulfill a *bakuu*'s demands, even the *bakuu*'s owner must eventually become a victim of the *bakuu*'s greed (Vernon 1980).

Since Surinamese independence in 1975, and especially with the 1992 cessation of Suriname's civil war which pitted the primarily Ndyuka Jungle Commando against the military government of Desi Bouterse, Ndyuka, like other Maroons, have moved in mass to Paramaribo. This migration has particularly affected Ndyuka women who have come to much more fully participate in the cash economy and take advantage of education and healthcare unavailable in the interior. While Ndyuka men have been enthusiastic participants in the coastal economy for most of Ndyuka history, the novelty of Ndyuka women as direct wage earners has led to substantial new innovations in gender roles. This development is especially apparent in majority Maroon squatter settlements like Sunny Point, where I lived during my fieldwork, or in any of a number of other Maroon majority neighborhoods such as Pontbuiten and Latour that ring Paramaribo in which women are increasingly the major wage earners.

Most contemporary Ndyuka divide their time between various forms of employment. As women have increasingly moved to the coast, Ndyuka men have become

steadily more reliant on artisanal gold mining in carried out at small camps scattered across a vast area of forest in Eastern Suriname. Many of both sexes now work for the state or in business interests in Paramaribo, while others are employed by large internationally owned gold mines like Rosibel and Suralco or Chinese timber consortiums. At the same time, Chinese middlemen have increasingly penetrated Ndyuka territory itself, buying unprocessed gold (generally in the form of gold dust) and selling it on either the Chinese or Brazilian markets. Further, given that mining enough gold to support a family depends on expensive heavy machinery, Ndyuka reliance on gold mining exacerbates economic divisions within Ndyuka society, concentrating more wealth in the hands of the owners of large equipment, who tend to be older people, often titleholders, with strong connections to the coast. Ndyuka men must also often compete with *garimpeiros*—illegal Brazilian prospectors (Hoogbergen and Kruijt 2004). This has led to intense resentment, and compelled the previous *Gaanman* to bar Brazilian men from entering Ndyuka territory.<sup>50</sup> In these ways, gold mining has only further exacerbated Ndyuka economic dependency on international markets about which most Ndyukas have only minimal information and exacerbated social conflicts internal to Ndyuka organization.

The inequalities created by coastal migration, and increased Ndyuka involvement in gold mining and national politics, have all widened inequalities between Ndyuka, exacerbating the smoldering witchcraft fears left un-extinguished by Akalali. In 2005-6, Tata Ogi's most recent prophet undertook the familiar mission of purging the Ndyuka body politic of witchcraft. Though only in his mid-twenties, he used his status as one of

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<sup>50</sup> This has in fact led to riots, most significantly in Albina in 2009.

Akalali's matrilineal relatives to start a popular movement that was especially appealing to younger Ndyuka. Calling himself Da Kownu (Father King) but more generally known as Gangáa (an ancient term of respect), the prophet led a campaign to purify (*keli, seka*) every Ndyuka village from the plight of *bakuu* and corrupt social relations they indicate.

Though opinions differ, *bakuu* are often presented as being transmitted through the material support senior people provide for their more junior dependents. As witnessed in the earlier mentioned disposal of witches' property in the Gaan Gadu cult, anything acquired through witchcraft can further conduct it. This is acutely so in the case of food and other sources of sustenance. Ndyuka living in the Tapanahoni homeland are increasingly reliant on commercial goods provided by their kin on the coast to supplement the proceeds of subsistence agriculture and foraging. Their ready consumption of these goods makes them easy targets for infection by the *bakuu* of their unscrupulous relatives, something frighteningly conveyed by dreams often reported by young Ndyuka women in which they find themselves suckling unnaturally dark *bakuu* "babies" who they can feel draining their bodies of energy and fecundity. In this way, *bakuu* are a direct assault on the principles of matrilineal continuity, turning simple acts like sharing of food—which the Ndyuka I worked said accounts the common why kin share a common physical substance—into suspect evidence of individual greed.<sup>51</sup>

Gangáa's moment was launched during an epidemic of *bakuu* possession among young Ndyuka women in 2005 and 2006. During his campaign, gangs of *bakuu* mediums staggered around screaming in Sranan, the language of coastal commerce the demons favor. Moving from village to village along the Tapanahoni, Gangáa summoned these

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<sup>51</sup> As one Ndyuka expressed it on Facebook: "Don't trust everyone you break bread with..... Ask Jezus!!!"

women and compelled their *bakuu* to confess the identities of the relatives who used *them* to attain success at the expense of their kinsfolks' lives. Gangáa and his following of possessed young women confronted senior community members, often titleholders (who were frequently the wealthiest people in a village because many of them owned gold mining machinery) in a direct affront to Ndyuka standards of gerontocratic deference. Administering beatings, and forcing the drinking of a poison ordeal, senior “*bakuu* owners” (*bakuu masaa*) were made to confess their crimes and then undergo painful purification. Through seizures and burning, Gangáa's campaign also resulted in the loss or redistribution of considerable property (Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering 2013). Finally, after a few months of sustained, frantic success, Gangáa's victims had him arrested on a trip to Paramaribo, where he was sentenced to half a year in prison.

Gangáa's conviction curtailed much of the violent, reforming passion he had unleashed. Though he returned unbowed when his time was up, his absence had considerably reduced his formerly galvanizing affect. When I spent a week with him in the summer of 2009, I found his following diminished to only slightly more than a dozen. When I last saw him 2012, he had resumed his given name and though still serving as an oracular healer, he had largely returned to full time subsistence gold mining like most young Ndyuka male peers.

Though only arrested after flying to the coast, Gangáa's imprisonment signaled a new degree of Ndyuka absorption into the legal system of the Surinamese state. For most of Ndyuka history, Ndyuka villages, and those on the Tapanahoni in particular, have been beyond the state's effective authority. As has become increasingly common, however, those who suffered Gangáa's prophetic rage pressed charges with the Surinamese police.

For the first time, a major Ndyuka anti-witchcraft movement had been ended by the intervention of the Surinamese state. Though many Ndyuka are happy about the ability to have the place available in extreme situations, I have heard a number of Ndyuka living in the interior complain about the state's failure to legally recognize witchcraft which they regard as single the most serious social peril.

## **Conclusion**

The shift from a cash supplemented subsistence base to wage labor shored up by occasional gardening and hunting has substantially changed Ndyuka society. As possibly the most impoverished and discriminated against of Suriname's ethnic groups, Maroons must grope their way through the prejudiced complexity of multi-ethnic urban Suriname (Guicherit 2004). Ndyuka ritual-political life has adapted accordingly. Competing with the rapid expansion of Pentecostalism and the Jehovah's Witnesses, Ndyuka oracular healers have made Paramaribo and its surrounds perhaps the busiest domain of "traditional" ritual practices. Ndyuka and members of other ethnicities—including members of Christian groups who otherwise publically reject "cultural" (*kulturu*) practices—consult Ndyuka and other Afro-Surinamese oracular mediums to resolve a diversity of problems, from sickness and recurring pain to interpersonal conflicts and unemployment. Among these problems, my research showed that finding gold and maintaining cooperative relations with fellow workers are particularly prominent. All these concerns testify to a pronounced sense that, as performed in Ndyuka *kuutu*, people are never really in control of their lives, that lying just beyond human awareness are a diversity of powers and relations that determine both people's capacities and fates.



Ndyuka oracular spirit possession simultaneously performs and salves these fears. From the earliest establishment of Maroon communities during their flight from slavery, along with other, generally more public forms of divination like carry oracles, Ndyuka oracles have revealed the hidden information that animates and resolves Ndyuka misfortunes (Thoden van Velzen and Hoogbergen 2011; Price 1983).<sup>52</sup> Though mediums are frequently doubted, without the knowledge they enact, the power of Ndyuka lineally based kinship would be considerably curtailed. The continuity of these ritual assumptions and solutions has concentrated increasingly specialized Ndyuka oracular mediumistic diviners in present-day Paramaribo along with the principal portion of the Ndyuka population. In scattered forest shrines at the outskirts of the city, in tiny shacks or stately rooms near its center, oracular mediums continue to exercise influence over Ndyuka understandings of their relations.

As Ndyuka life becomes even more absorbed in coastal life and politics, the question of how Ndyuka should respond to threats like witchcraft unrecognized under the laws of the Surinamese state becomes more disconcertingly unresolvable. In 2015 a new Ndyuka *Gaanman*, Da Bono Velantie, was installed to replace his deceased predecessor, Gaanman Matodya Gazon, who had been *Gaanman* from the late 1960s until his death in 2011. Gaanman Velantie has promised to restore the traditional discipline that declined during the later years of the reign of an increasingly feeble Gazon. Whether Gaanman Bono's rule will result in a renaissance of Ndyuka "tradition" however, remains in pronounced doubt.

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<sup>52</sup> The idea that a religious tradition of such staggering diversity and emphatically uncentralized form could have an orthodoxy is highly problematic, but became a key concern of attempts to modernize in the face of colonial contempt.

## Chapter 3

# Encompassment in Hindu Surinamese and Guyanese History

### Encompassment

There is much debate over the appropriateness of the terms Hindu and Hinduism for accurately describing the variegated fields of ritual, power, and authority in South Asia (Balagangadhara 1994; Dalmia 1997; Inden 1990; King 1999; Lipner 2006). Given these controversies, as I use them here, Hindu and Hinduism, are strictly contextual, referring to the outcomes of historical processes by which this identity and religion came to exist through interaction with the colonial state in British India and Suriname (van der Veer 2001). Unlike Hindu or Hinduism, however, because the rhetoric of encompassment is of ancient—if far from uniquely—South-Asian origin, it can permit scholars to think across these otherwise stymieing historical specificities. Accordingly, I argue that encompassment indicates one widely shared modality of practice through which many South Asian peoples, including contemporary Suriname and Guyanese Hindus, have consistently confronted problems of identity and difference.

For those Hindus I worked with in Suriname, the rhetorical performance of encompassment was apparently critical to the perception of divine agency and its embodiment in Hindu ethnic distinction. The *Bhagavad-Gita*—the most famous Hindu text and the one adopted by modernist Hinduisms as the central source of doctrine, particularly in the diaspora—is perhaps the best South Asian example of an

encompassment narrative.<sup>53</sup> In it, the Pandava prince Arjuna confronts despair over the looming battle in which he will be forced to slaughter his own extended family to restore his brother Yudhishthira to rightful kingship. The god Krsna, incarnated as Arjuna's charioteer, dispels Arjuna's anguish through the revelation that this seemingly repugnant killing is his cosmic destiny. Krsna then grants Arjuna a celestial revelation, showing him that he is but an infinitesimal element within the divine whole of the universe, which is Krsna himself. Both physically and morally, Krsna encompasses Arjuna: "Know that all conditions of being... come from me; but I am not in them: they are in me" (Van Buitenen 1981: 29.10). Krsna teaches Arjuna that all apparent paradoxes—agency and determinism, the many and the one, spirit and matter—can be reconciled in the cosmic unity of the ultimate and intrinsically moral transcendence conferred when humans recognize themselves as parts of the divine. For many present day Surinamese and Guyanese Hindus, Krsna's lesson equally enfolds sociology and metaphysics to provide a recipe for the proper ordering of all values in relation to the imperatives of Hindu doctrine and tradition. This chapter provides an overview of the historical and sociological conditions that enable Hindu Surinamese and Guyanese to present encompassment as a dominant relational mode.

While coalition is my own term, encompassment bears some controversial baggage. I borrow the term from Louis Dumont's (1980) Durkheimian theory of caste hierarchy. For Dumont, hierarchy is the "principle by which the elements of a whole are ranked in relation to the whole" (1980: 66). Dumontian encompassment refers to the logical process by which value hierarchies are socially ordained and legitimized. Dumont

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<sup>53</sup> In a post-colonial context where canonical texts are held to be the basic ingredient of religion Sanatan Dharm Hinduism has enthroned the *Gita* as the Hindu "Bible." The *Bhagavadgita*, however, cannot explain or exhaust the influence the workings of tropes of encompassment in contemporary Guianese Hinduism.

gives the example of the Biblical creation of Eve from Adam as the “...the material encompassment of the future Eve in the body of Adam. This hierarchical relation is “...that between a whole (or a set) and an element of this whole (or set): the element belongs to the set and is in this sense consubstantial with it; at the same time the element is distinct from the set and stands in opposition to it” (1980: 240).<sup>54</sup> While Dumont’s structuralist theory of caste is multiply unsatisfying (see for example Marriott 1976 and Dirks 2001), his approach to hierarchy as encompassment does strongly resonate with paradigmatic themes of Hindu cosmology and ritual practice. Once stripped of Dumont’s caricature of Indian society as a stable, ahistorical unity glued together by Brahminical hegemony, encompassment remains an effective analytic for explaining the practices that account for the durability of the Hindu traditions.

Dumont’s notion of encompassment is the logic of hierarchy. But this logic can only exist when performed.<sup>55</sup> This brings it into conversation with McKim Marriott’s (1976) transactional model of hierarchy, which contends that the exchange of “coded” substance is the most important factor for establishing social position and personal value in South Asia. Marriott’s theory is dynamic, attentive to the ways in which giving and receiving relate to how people through out South Asia conceptualize the relation between social dominance and the elementary ingredients of reality.

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<sup>54</sup> Using encompassment to explain the logical structure of caste, Dumont saw Indian society as a singular formation defined by the ideological supremacy of religious values of purity. Like all hierarchical systems, caste was the result of how the cultural value of purity can “encompass its contrary” (1980: 245) to frictionlessly reproduce the dominate social order.

<sup>55</sup> It is also on the point of practice where Dumont’s cognitivism is at its weakest. As Mines (2005) has argued, structural approaches like Dumont’s “...posit ideational systems of symbols (in the mind) that give structures to external cosmology” (140). In classic Durkheimian fashion to Dumont deities are simply projections of the underlying logic of social relations with no purchase on defining them. In her elegant refutation of such approaches, Mines demonstrates how Hindu deities become social agents and affect the practices and discourses of hierarchy in a Tamil village. Given the central role popular Hinduism accords to the gods, it is difficult to understand the varied values of its traditions without analytic recourse to the diverse ways these are recognized to derive from divine action.

Though writing against Dumont, in his study of how patterns of exchange correspond to the position of a dominant caste within a village, Marriott is, in another way, demonstrating the logic of encompassment. Despite the “diversity” of South Asian practices heralded by Marriott, his transactional approach also lacks an empirical description of how the rhetoric of differential, yet interpenetrated substance-identities comes to be accepted by participants in these caste based exchanges. In the Guianas, where concerns for caste substance has been largely displaced by racialized ethnic categories, these questions have undergone further modifications. Whatever the changes, Indo-Surinamese and Guyanese Hindus continue to use the rhetoric and ritual performance of encompassing hierarchies to justify claims about their social position in post-colonial Suriname.

However dominant as a communicative mode, encompassment represents just one of the solutions diasporic Hindus in South America have found to assorted quandaries and contradictions of trying to practice an ethnic religion with universal claims in a pluralistic, post-colonial nation. Encompassment as I use it is a description of how Surinamese and Guyanese Hindus use performances that produce and maintain Hindu ethnic and religious distinction. The term highlights how different communicative modes are performatively integrated to construct an increasingly standardized Hindu tradition seemingly impervious to criticism from other ethnic and religious traditions. In this way, encompassment refers to both a metaphysical doctrine and how that doctrine is received and reiterated through prevalent Hindu strategies of communication.

As a moral claim, encompassment implies that all forms of difference are potentially reconcilable when hierarchically ordered in relation to certain containing

truths. As I use it, encompassment is a conceptual gloss for the cumulative effect of different forms of diasporic Hindu ritual practices on peoples' conceptions of relatedness. At its most focused, encompassment distills the ways in which the agency of the Hindu gods ritually and rhetorically emerges as an evident force in the eventfulness of devotees' everyday lives. More generally, encompassment describes any discourse that invokes the universal value of Hinduism to validate Hindu exceptionalism within Suriname and Guyana's ethnic hierarchies (Williams 1991).

I will address the rhetorical performance of encompassment in the next chapter. For the remainder of this one, I will focus on providing a survey of Indo-Surinamese and Guyanese history, Hindu and Shakti ritual practice, and the complicated politics of Hindu exceptionalism.

### **Indo-Surinamese and Hindus in Suriname**

Hinduism is the second largest religion in Suriname (120,623 practitioners out of an estimated national population of 541,638 (Suriname Census 2012). Surinamese Hinduism is deeply marked by the country's unique demographic and geographic history. With a small but very diverse population occupying an immense area (163,821 sq. km), Suriname has provided unique conditions for the development of diasporic Hinduism. When combined with the changing specifics of Dutch colonialism, these factors have produced a form of Hindu practice particularly focused on the politics of "ethnic" difference and its preservation. The consequence of this has been to transform Hinduism into a more homogenous "genetic religion"—a religious identity preeminently inherited birth—whose traditions are understood as immutable and inheritable. While present day

Surinamese Hinduism still contains appreciable diversity, it is also standardized to a greater degree than is imaginable in India, or even in other diasporic communities.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century indenture system that brought South Asian laborers to Suriname, Guyana, and other parts of the Caribbean, can be considered a “hybrid” form of labor that mingled characteristics of “free” proletarian wage labor with the legally sanctioned coercions of slavery. Whatever its differences from slavery, exhausting work enforced by state violence on generally isolated plantations had a substantial impact on the diasporic culture that emerged in indenture’s wake. This combination of coercion and volition has left a perceptible impress on the ambivalent ways in which Surinamese and Guyanese Hindus think about their position in the plural societies in which they live. Faced with blended hostility and indifference on the part of the formerly enslaved and the colonial administration, Hinduism came to take on both a more generic and more exclusive form. Divested of the vibrant specificity of a panoply of local Hindu ritual paradigms, Surinamese and Guyanese Hindus reinvented Hinduism as a paradox: a universalist ethnic religion. The child of compromise, organizational consolidation, and transnationalism, contemporary Surinamese Hinduism remains a notionally unified front concealing many controversies of practice and interpretation.

### **The History of Hinduism in Suriname**

The overwhelming majority of 19<sup>th</sup> century South Asian indentured immigrants to Suriname and Guyana came from what were then the United Provinces and the Bengal Presidency—the contemporary Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. This area of the Gangetic plain comprised one of the most densely inhabited places on earth, furnishing an enormous, impoverished population readily cajoled into a five-year indenture contract.

Those who came to Suriname represented a cross section of the population in the Gangetic plain. They deriving from every caste, recruited from the huge circulating mass of the landless and indebted searching for any opportunity in the wake of avaricious colonial policy and the revolt of 1857 (De Klerk 1953: 103; Tinker 1974; Hoefte 1998: 36-38). The majority of immigrants were men (73%), as it was more difficult for women to immigrate. Those women who did come were disproportionately part of families who immigrated together (Gowricharn 2013), and who became the major progenitors of the current Indo-Surinamese and Guyanese populations.

These gender dynamics had a pronounced influence on the kind of Hinduism that developed in both countries. The shortage of marriageable women placed special emphasis on social reproduction, particularly as the formerly enslaved Creoles largely withdrew from the plantations, leaving Asian immigrants the dominant population in the plantation zones. Colonial officials hoped that South Asian workers would increase productivity while neutralizing the former slaves' ability to make political and economic claims (Klinkers 1997; Hoefte 1998). In Suriname, sugar plantations were concentrated on rivers adjacent to the coast close to Paramaribo (Hoefte 2014: 37-38). The relative isolation of the plantations nurtured an added perception of the immigrants' ethnic homogeneity and their difference from the lower class Creoles the planters had brought the Asians to displace and marginalize. Accordingly, opposition between South Asians and Afro-Surinamese populations remains present and frequently vitriolic. Indo-Surinamese endogamy is still perceived as racism by many Afro-Surinamese. While this antagonism can be traced to colonial policies of assimilation supported by the Creole



upper classes, today it is even more pronounced between Indo-Surinamese and Maroons, who now make up the second largest of Suriname's ethnic populations.

The conditions of immigration and plantation labor advanced one of the most important changes to Surinamese Hinduism: the decline of caste. Regardless of their caste status, all immigrants were faced with the same degrading conditions of labor servitude, too few marriage partners, and the colonial state's initial preference for their assimilation to European norms (De Klerk 1953; Hoefte 2011). Instead of maintaining caste distinctions, immigrants from diverse caste origins absorbed colonial ethnic and racial classifications, redefining themselves primarily through a collective, endogamous "Hindustani" ethnicity and Hindu or Muslim religious affiliation.

Under these pressures and the shortage of suitable marriage partners, Hindus rapidly abandoned caste distinctions.<sup>56</sup> The Hindi word translated as caste, *jaat* (species) became the Sarnami (Surinamese Hindi) noun for ethnic identity, demonstrating the degree colonial ethnic schemas became accepted as natural categories. Likewise, *dharm*—the Hindi pronunciation of the Sanskrit term meaning to uphold the proper or balanced order (Bakker 1999; Rocher 2003: 102)—was transformed to correspond to the European category of religion. These changes of meaning reflect the conditions of Surinamese Hindu ethnogenesis as diverse Indian immigrants came to define themselves as a homogenous community against non-South Asians and non-Hindus. Hinduism was redefined in terms of ethnic solidarity and Indian origins maintained through shared language, ritual, and kinship practices. This inculcated an intense sense of equality

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<sup>56</sup> Despite this, there is still lingering awareness of caste, and a real perception that some try and use it to create inequalities between people and families.

between Hindustanis and encouraged a perception of cautious superiority to other ethnic and religious identities.

19<sup>th</sup> century Suriname offered an abundance of land left by the large scale abandonment of plantations. When their contracts expired, Indo-Surinamese rapidly abandoned wage labor to settle outside the plantations as independent peasants (Heilbron 1982; Gowricharn 2013). Indo-Surinamese began to acquire land and set themselves up as suppliers to Suriname's under served domestic market (Gowricharn 2013; Hoefte 2014). Coming from the desperate competition of Northern India, Hindustanis used their commercial acumen to dominate local agriculture by pioneering rice and dairy production. By the interwar period, encouraging Asian immigrants to settle in Suriname became official Dutch policy. The colonial government then granted land at no or very low cost to encourage further agricultural Hindustani settlement (Hoefte 2014), a policy that remains a source of resentment for Afro-Surinamese. By 1925, the majority of Hindus were agriculturalists living just outside of coastal Suriname's major settlements (Gowricharn 2013.). Such policies distributed Hindustani small holders' homes and lands widely around major market centers, particularly Paramaribo, and Nickerie, in town in western Suriname on the border with Guyana. Such commodity oriented peasant agriculture prevented the establishment of the South Asian majority villages common in Guyana and Trinidad. This produced a Hindu community of independent small-scale agriculturalists and entrepreneurs with a strongly felt sense of their own equality and importance, but also a deep sense of their Hindustani ethnic difference and the familial obligation they had to reproduce it.

## Contemporary “Orthodox” Ritual Practice

After indenture, the agricultural settlement of Indian immigrants in coastal Suriname is perhaps the feature of Indo-Surinamese history that has most influenced the evolution of Surinamese Hinduism. Smallholding, market oriented agriculture led to a Hindu practice focused on an egalitarian transformation of the *jajmani* patronage system. *Jajman* means sacrificer, and refers to the patron of a Vedic rite for whom the ritual is conducted (Dumont 1980: 98). In India, scholars have understood the *jajmani* “system” as the ritual interdependency fostered by caste specialization, hierarchy, and the power of a village’s dominant caste (Raheja 1988). In Suriname, *jajman* has the more restricted sense of the patron for whom the exclusively male Brahmin priest (*pandit*) dedicates a ritual’s benefits (van der Burg and van der Veer 1986: 586). The relationship between the priest and the patron dominates “orthodox” Surinamese Hindu ritual. It directly maintains a household’s Hindu identity by demonstrating their support for their *pandit* through meritorious giving (*daan*), a system which both expresses the equality of ritual access enjoyed by all Surinamese Hindus, and permits religiously sanctioned performances of material inequality within the community. Hindu families vie to celebrate elaborate weddings and offerings, inviting friends and family to witness their success and sanction their good fortune while retaining a sense of inclusive parity.

Intra-ethnic egalitarianism encouraged decentralized Hindu practices that emphasize the family and household. These practices were standardized under the leadership of the Sanatan Dharm Maha Saba—the local organization of an international “orthodox” Brahminical religious movement to which the majority of Hindus and all *pandits* belong. Much in the manner of a parish priest, a *pandit* sequentially officiates for

a number of patrons and small temples over the course of a week. Temple services largely correspond to its patron deity's sacred day and the major Hindu holidays as synchronized to the Gregorian calendar.

Surinamese Hindu temples are modeled on Christian churches, with pews and a central altar containing statues (*murti*) of the major recognized “Sanskritic” gods (*deo/deotas*). These include Shiva, Parvati, Ganesh, Durga, Vishnu and his various incarnations (*avatar*)—overwhelmingly either Krishna or Rama—Saraswati, Laxmi, and Hanuman. The patron deity and their consort stand at the center of a temple's altar, flanked by smaller statues of the subsidiary deities. A platform, a bookstand, and a brazier, are also kept on an elevated extension of the altar's proscenium. These are for performing the Vedic fire sacrifice (*havan, hom*), where offerings of butter, milk, and food are fed to the sacred fire (*ag*), and the sermon/recitation (*parchaar, katha*) conducted with every offering (*puja/jag*).

Temple rituals are the responsibility of a designated patron (*jajman/kartaa*) from the adjacent community. With their family, the patron will supervise the making of offerings of sweets, fruits, incense, flower garlands, and, for important occasions, new clothes and ornaments for the deities. The patron provides the supplies and offers (*puja/jag kare*) them to the deities' images while the *pandit* officiates. A *puja* proceeds from the seating of the deities (*asana*), through the washing (*abhishek*) and adornment of their images (*vastra*), to the offering of incense, food (*naivedya*), fire (*aarti*), the circumambulation (*pradaksina*) of the images, and the taking of leave (*namaskar*), as accompanied by the clanging of gongs and blowing of a conch shell. The ritual concludes

with the distribution of the food offered to the gods (*prasad*) to all attendees, often to take home to their extended families (De Klerk 1953; Bakker 1999).

While temples are found wherever there is a Hindu population, they are less important than rituals performed at patrons' homes. The building of multigenerational, patriarchal "joint-families" holding and working land was critical to the rise of an independent Hindustani peasantry (Speckman 1965: 184). In both Suriname and Guyana, the preference for the ideal of the joint family and the maintenance of Hindi bifurcate-merging kinship terminology remains central to South Asian ethnic identity (Smith and Jayawardena 1959; Speckman 1965). Hindu smallholding facilitated the re-establishment of paradigmatically South Asian households and the ritual relations they sustain. In such an arrangement, at marriage a woman moves into her father-in-law's home. They will remain there or, if the husband acquires sufficient funds, set up their own household nearby.

While joint-families never became completely accomplishable, the sense of "jointness" (Lalmohamed 1992)—extended family solidarity, often through co-residence on adjacent plots—remains a principal Hindu value. Ritual life is focused on the reproduction of these kinship relations, seeking auspiciousness (*subh*) as conferred by the gods through Brahminical ritual. These rituals are centrally focused on the house (*ghar*) and yard (*jagaha/ prasi*) to ensure family solidarity and the good fortune it creates. Kinship is thus integrally bound with Hindu ritual. This unity of Brahminical practice and household prosperity is best signified by *jhandi*—the ritual flags installed by *pandits* that flutter in the yards of all 'orthodox' Hindus.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> These also designate the establishment of separate households.

The family *pandit* (*kul-purohit*) provides ritual expertise and instruction accompanying all stages of a Hindu's life. Hindu life cycle rituals (*samskaras*) like a child's first haircut, weddings, and burials, and rituals like birthday offerings mark these transitions. Each of these involves hosting complicated, expensive ritual events (De Klerk 1951). While performed on the behalf of a specific household member, the family must collectively contribute work and funds to prepare its celebration. A large offering may last many consecutive nights (2 to 3 days is most common) during which the family pays the *pandits'* fees, and for food and entertainment for the many invited guests. Of these events, weddings tend to be the most opulent because they visibly perform the reproduction of a family's Hindu identity before gathered kin, friends, and neighbors, and well conveyed by the prevalence of temples dedicated to consort pairs of gods and goddesses, like Radha and Krsna or Siva and Parvati, which portray married couples as the primal source of cosmic and social generation.

All these rituals depend on the authority of the *pandit*. During most large rituals the *pandit*—wearing stereotypically “Indian” clothes<sup>5859</sup>—sits on a prominent raised dais surrounded by images of the deities in front the assembled guests. While the ritual achievement of the patrons' wellbeing is the professed reason for such events, the *pandits'* sermon/recitation is the attraction for which people come, particularly as it often ends with the large scale feeding of the guests.

Surinamese Hindus are unique in the Caribbean South Asian diaspora for having preserved a spoken South Asian language. Normally referred to as Sarnami or Hindustani, it is a koiné of diverse Eastern Hindi dialects developed on the sugar

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<sup>58</sup> These also designate the establishment of separate households.

<sup>59</sup> Only the *pandit*, a ritual's patrons, and women, tend to wear “Indian” clothes, providing further evidence of their “essential” Hindu identity.

plantations to facilitate communication between immigrants from different parts of Northern India. Despite the persistence of Sarnami, it is the subject of considerable ambivalence. Most Sarnami speakers' literacy is limited to Dutch, Suriname's sole official language. Wedged between Dutch education and the perceived purity of standardized registers of Hindi, most Sarnami speakers devalue their language, seeing it as an obstacle to middle class mobility and fuller participation in the wider world. While lay Hindus avidly consume standardized Hindi in Indian films, music, and television, very few speak or read it.

Sarnami's awkward status results in lay Hindus generally having no access to Hindu sacred texts. This has deeply affected the meaning of Hindu ritual texts like the *Ramcharitmanas* (the most influential Hindi retelling of the *Ramayana* epic), the *Bhagavad Gita*, or the *Puranas* (the corpuses of Hindu mythology concerning the exploits of the different gods) written in Devanagari script. While Sanskrit is the most august ritual language, standard and liturgical Hindis have become prestige registers associated with the Hindu ethnic purity of pandits.<sup>60</sup> Sermons and textual recitations thus occupy a critical role in maintaining and disseminating Surinamese Hindu orthodoxy. This powerfully confirms pandit authority, as their mediation becomes necessary for even rudimentary religious knowledge.

This is apparent in popular *katha* performances. *Katha* are didactic religious stories designed to impart some teaching to their audience. At a *katha*, a *pandit* will read sacred texts in Hindi and then explain them for the audience, instructing them in the origins and meaning of Sanatan Dharm orthodoxy. This facilitates the broad *bhakti*

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<sup>60</sup> Brahminical mediation is rendered more interesting by the abundance of Indian made Hindi religious programming. Film epics and serials portraying Hindu mythology abound, as do television shows in which *bhajan*—devotional songs—are sung.

devotional ethos most characteristic of popular Surinamese Hinduism while making *pandit* led rituals its effective core (Bakker 1999).<sup>61</sup>

*Bhakti* refers to a variety of devotional movements that have been evolving in South Asia and its diaspora for more than two millennia (Lorenzen 1995; Prentiss 1999). *Bhakti* centers on devotion to a favorite deity (*Istadeva*), often as the personification of the supreme being/reality (*Paratman/Brahman*) (Biardeau 1981; Kelly 1991; Prentiss 1999). Though *bhakti* is a complex category, I would argue that, at least for Surinamese and Guyanese Hinduism, *bhakti* designates the goal of achieving a relation of acknowledged dependence with superiors, be it with a person's parents or with deities.

*Bhakti* is, therefore, above all, about the intensity of identification with the deities, and the concerted capacity to dedicate personal action to them. As apparent in the opening quotes from the *Gita*, the affect of *bhakti* is encompassment. It is a ritual labor of emotional absorption in which people come to recognize their complete agentive subordination to the deities, and through them, to an ideal moral-cosmological order of existence. Despite many points of commonality between Afro-Surinamese and Indo-Surinamese ritual, it is this final soteriological focus on affectively rich existential encompassment that makes the relations cultivated by *bhakti* based Hindu practices so distinct.

Much of this emphasis on *bhakti* comes from the deep influence of Northern Indian devotionalist movements on all forms of Caribbean Hinduism.

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<sup>61</sup> Most Hindu homes have a puja room or corner where they perform *bhakti* devotions. This is often a separate structure where all the images of the gods are worshipped by offering flowers and incense. This building generally occupies a corner of the front yard adjacent to the *jhandi* flags—aniconic images of the same deities.



Vaishnavism—the worship of Vishnu as the supreme reality—has been especially popular in Suriname (Vertovec and van der Veer 1991: 153-154), but always as balanced by the worship of Siva and Sakti (the Goddess), particularly in her incarnation as the demon slaying Durga. Most of the Hindus I worked with professed a preference for Siva, though, as they would say, all gods are ultimately one God (*Bhagwan*).

Since the Surinamese Hindu pantheon was consolidated around an ecumenical Brahminical ritualism, in Sanatan Dharm temples only the main Puranic deities continue to be worshiped, resulting in a drastic contraction in the Hindu pantheon. This contraction produced an important change in the way diasporic Hindus saw ritual space. India is saturated with pilgrimage sites (van der Veer 1988). These can be of local, regional, or national importance, but as signs of the continued presence of mythic reality, sacred sites exert profound power. Surinamese and Guyanese Hindus see both countries as lacking India's sacred geography, with perhaps the exception of reverence for the region's wide, sluggish rivers, which are occasionally approached by Hindus as a version of the Ganges, used as a *tirtha*, (ford), a crossing point where people come to worship.

The cessation of pilgrimage and the sole veneration of deities of purely pan-Indic importance indicates a transformation in people's understanding of the land. In Suriname and Guyana, the gods have become identically available everywhere through Brahminical ritual. This change has further supported the turn towards the home and the family as the focus of ritual life.

Hinduism's development in the Guianas complements universalist claims made by Hindus about Hinduism's uniqueness as humanity's primordial religion. Censure from, and juxtaposition with, other religions—especially hegemonic Christianity—

encouraged Hindus to use bhakti theology to proclaim their tradition's ideological metaphysical encompassment of competing religions. As all souls are fragments of the Hindu Godhead, all other religious traditions are understood as derivations from the originating purity of Vedic Hindu practice. This claim is preserved through careful rhetorical stress on the ultimate monotheistic nature of Hinduism, enabling Hindus to recognize other traditions while carefully subordinating them to their own. As a number of Hindus told me, "When I worship Siw (Shiva) I worship Allah and Jesus." (*Ham Siw ke puja kare hai, hamto Allah aur Jezus puja kare jab*).

### **Arya Samaj, Sanatan Dharm, and the Brahminization of Hinduism**

There are a number of other Hindu religious movements outside or subsumed under the majority Sanatan Dharm. Some are seen to simply complement Sanatan Dharm orthodoxy by teaching meditation or yoga. Many of these are international missions representing prominent holy people from India, like Sri Sai Baba. Others vehemently challenge Brahminical authority. These include the Brahma Rishi Gayarti Sansthan, the Brahma Kumaris, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and the Arya Samaj.

The Arya Samaj reform movement has been especially pivotal in the development of Surinamese Hinduism. Zealously proselytizing, from its 19<sup>th</sup> century origins until today, Arya Samaj continues to propound a Hindu version of Christian protestant reformism. Arya Samaj—which still accounts for 3 percent of Suriname's Hindu population—was started in late nineteenth century Northern India by Dayananda Saraswati. Like other reformers of the period under the influence of Victorian Christian attacks on Hinduism, Swami Dayananda sought to purge Hinduism of "accretions" and

“return” Hindu practice to a purported Vedic monotheism without priests, idols, animal sacrifices, or castes (Kelly 1991: 126). In the place of Hindu ritual diversity, Arya Samajis sought to impose a lay led religion of absolute truth based on expurgated Sanskrit texts and focused on Vedic fire sacrifice and moral instruction. Arya Samaj missionaries were especially successful in the indenture diaspora, providing displaced Hindus with a readymade egalitarian ideology of ancient ethnic pride and independent educational and institutional services (Bakker 1991: 100-05; Kelly 1991.).

Arya Samaj was effective as a discourse of Hindu opposition that appropriated Protestant arguments against efforts at missionization and assimilation. This rhetorical success, however, came at the cost of the devotional ethos and pragmatic concerns that characterized most Hindus’ ritual life. In response to the strident critiques of Arya Samaj and Christian missionaries, and influenced by both newly muscular Indian and Hindu nationalisms, in 1929 the *pandit* Paltan Tewarie founded the Shri Sanatan Dharm Maha Saba Suriname in Paramaribo (Bakker 1999). Sanatan Dharm is generally glossed as “eternal religion” (Kelly 1991: 127), and was the label for a variety of conservative, reformist religious movements that began to consolidate contemporary “orthodox” Hinduism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Dalmia 1997). Similarly influential Sanatan Dharm organizations were established around the same time in Guyana and Trinidad. The official organization of the Sanatan Dharm extended what Peter van der Veer and Steven Vertovec (1991) called the “Brahminization” of Caribbean Hinduism. Throughout Caribbean Hinduism, Brahmins assimilated the diverse concerns of a variety of ritual specialists, Brahmin and non-Brahmin alike. As Vertovec and van der Veer state:

*“Through their monopoly on ritual knowledge and guarded access to ritual texts, Brahmins multiplied their functions to serve simultaneously as teachers and spiritual*

*guides (gurus), family priests (kul-purohits), temple priests (pujari), ritual specialist (karmakandin), funeral priests (mahapatra), astrologers, healers, exorcists, and even practitioners of black magic (ojha) (1991:157).*

Brahmins formed around 15 percent of Surinamese Indian immigrants, a margin sufficient to equally ensure their necessity *and* accessibility. In the parts of India where most Indian migrants originated, Brahmin priests are traditionally hereditary professionals who inherit their particular ritual specializations from their fathers. In Suriname, as elsewhere in the Caribbean, however, Brahmin priests became generalists performing any and every ritual need. This diversification was accompanied by Sanatan Dharm Maha Saba's organizational consolidation of pandit training, making professional certification essential even for pandits from established Brahminical lineages. Such Institutionalization helped lead to official recognition of Brahminical authority, particularly after Governor Kielstra passed legislation (1941) recognizing pandits' rights to officiate at Hindu weddings—a privilege previously limited to Christian and Jewish clergy (Hoeft 2014). Legal endorsement confirmed the pandit's role as the main arbiter of Hindu identity.

At present, Sanatan Dharm is still administered with an eye to Hindu orthodoxy as adjusted to Suriname's pluralistic social situation. The Sanatan Dharm seeks to maintain orthodox practice by certifying and overseeing its member pandits through a central committee (Bakker 1999: 98-99). It also acts to represent Hindu interest to the state through its historical ties to politics—especially the oldest Hindustani political party, the *Verenigde Hindustaanse Partij* (United Hindustani Party (VHP)) (Dew 1978: 75), among others.

Sanatan Dharm emerged in Suriname at the confluence of multiple streams of debate about both India and Hinduism, inflecting its goals with many trends found in middle class Indian Hinduism. These tensions these purifications created can be observed throughout contemporary Surinamese and Guyanese Hindu practice. Specifically, Sanatan Dharm strives to be “modern” in the name of ancient, immutable tradition.

With the Brahminization of previously diverse domains of Hindu ritual practice, many competing sources of religious authority (and the goals they articulated) ceased to independently exist. In particular, the absence of often non-Brahmin ascetics (*sannyasin*, *yogin*) and other inspired teachers has led to the disappearance of renunciation as a ritual aim. While the perfectionist logic of Hindu asceticism remains influential, a formal class of renunciants never existed in Suriname. Their absence underscored the importance of the ritual life of the householder. For most Sanatan Dharm practitioners the central aim of ritual life is the maintenance of Hindu dharma through the ritual recreation of Hindus through ethnic/religious endogamous marriage and the Brahminical rituals that enable Hindu reproduction.

Indeed, unlike in Guyana, where Hindus of African descent are, even if only as a small minority, present, in Suriname, very few Afro-Surinamese participate in Hinduism in more than a polite way.<sup>62</sup> A significant reason for this is the continued dominance of Sarnami as the language of Hindu ritual, which serves as a steep barrier to any but the most interested. The ethnic privacy this engenders has only furthered the Hindustani sense of imperative ethnic difference, providing their exceptionalism with a firm rampart

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<sup>62</sup> I did work with one Ndyuka *bonuman* who regarded himself a Hindu. He, however, was almost universally denounced as a Witch.

that helps Hindus elide the incomprehension of other ethnic and religious groups with animosity.

Ironically, attacks on Brahminical ritual authority premised on Protestant ideologies rejecting ritual mediation enabled Brahmins to consolidate their control over a public Hinduism presented as purified of “superstitions” involving healing, possession, and magic. This did not put an end to these practices, however. Instead, Brahmin priests either assimilated these concerns to their previously specialized ritual expertise, or deflected them to non-Brahminical ritual specialists un-associated with their brand of respectable public Hinduism.

What Surinamese Hinduism is, then, hinges on conformity to ideals of respectability established by a narrowly defined public sphere still in the thrall of Dutch colonial moral discourse. Suriname was and remains a majority Christian society, with 48 percent of the current population—and especially Afro-Surinamese and mixed race elites—identifying as Christian (Suriname Census 2012). While in the early twentieth century Sanatan Dharm Hindu organizations battled tenaciously against assaults by iconoclastic Arya Samaj Hindu reformers and Christian missionaries backed by local elites to establish Brahminical Hinduism as a state recognized religion, it did so on a discursive terrain determined by colonialism. Such colonial ideologies imagined social respect as attendant on assimilation to the idealized moral norms of the Dutch middle and upper classes associated with Protestant Christianity, as somewhat idiosyncratically represented in Suriname by the Reformed and Moravian churches.

Though Hindu and Islamic religious organizations fought to separate notions of Surinameseness from Christianity, they did so by inadvertently accepting the unmarked

Christian character of state secularism and the public sphere it made.<sup>63</sup> Fluency in Dutch—and public accordance with the cultural ideals perceived to accompany it—is still the most ready way to establish a person and their community’s position within Suriname’s social hierarchy. Within this context, the rhetoric of encompassment served to transform immigrant Hindus’ successful submission to Dutch colonial norms into a further sign of Hindu distinction.

### **Hinduism as a Therapy**

Brahminical insistence on Hinduism’s respectability as a religion of the sort recognizable to Dutch administrators supported a concealed complex of therapeutic and magical practices supposedly disassociated from, yet often central to, Surinamese Hinduism’s popular vitality. Interestingly, the same process that made Surinamese Hinduism a respectable religion committed to preserving ethnic Hindu distinction has also made egalitarian Hindus suspicious of pandit assertions of exclusive ritual knowledge. Though Brahmin priests are seen as necessary and are respected, there is a pronounced distrust of their monopoly on ritual mediation (See Khan 2004 for Trinidad).

Such egalitarian impulses fuel a steady interest in ritual alternatives capable of both contesting and supplementing Brahminical authority. This has fueled a peculiar, often ethnicized, division of ritual labor. The great diversity of Surinamese society enabled the distribution of ritual specializations that deal with less respectable anxieties

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<sup>63</sup> In Suriname, one way this played out was through the concealment and censure of Hindu practices deemed insufficiently respectable. Given violent colonial prohibitions on Afro-Surinamese ritual—called *afgoderij* (idolatry), a term still used by Surinamese Christians from all ethnic origins to refer to *both* “heathen” (*heiden*) Afro-Surinamese and Hindus—centered on possession, already controversial practices of Hindu possession became additionally tainted. In Guyana, on the other hand, despite the continuity of many African derived ritual practices, these appear to have been much more aggressively incorporated into a Christian ritual framework, enabling Shakti Puja to displace African versions as the paradigmatic enactment of public ritual possession.

like sorcery and possession across non-Hindu ethnic/religious groups. This segregation relieved Brahmins of associations with stigmatized practices while preserving the ideological primacy of Brahminical Hindu ritual.<sup>64</sup>

Due to the pressure from Arya Samaj and colonial racial and cultural hierarchies, the Brahminization of Surinamese Hinduism entailed the marginalization of a diverse assortment of therapeutic practices, many of which were historically central popular Hindu religiosity (van der Veer 1991). While these traditions of healing, possession, and magic have not disappeared, they have gone underground. Many of these treat *najar* (the evil eye) and other forms of witchcraft (*ojha*), and associated afflictions concerned with demons (*bakru*) and ghosts (*bhut*). Of particular note is the continued, if shadowy, mystique of the *Inderjal* (The Net of Indra), a popular magical manual held to be inherited within the family which enables infamous power through spells (*mantra*) and rituals (*tantra*) (see Khan 2004 for the problem of “semi-demi” in Trinidad).

Publically at least, Most Hindus, and men particularly, repudiate or deny such practices, seeing them as “superstition” (*bijgeloof*), often equating them with stigmatized Afro-Surinamese ritual practices of healing and possession publically outlawed until 1971. As Khan (2004: 103) remarks for a similar situation in Trinidad, “while decrying ignorance, the concept [of superstition] betrays fear as well, conferring disapprobation

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<sup>64</sup> In Suriname, the paradigmatic difference became that between Hindus and everyone else along two axis of graded difference. Though conceived by most other ethnic/religious groups as outside of the norms of respectable Dutch status models, Hindus have attempted to appropriate as much of this respectability as possible in the task of maintaining their difference. Given the colonially constructed antagonism between Asians and the Afro-Surinamese they were brought to replace, Hindustani migrants quickly learned to draw sharp contrasts between themselves and the former slaves. Widespread European discourses about African barbarism readily fed into this project of ethnic distinction. As exposed by the rhetoric of the Arya Samaj and other reformers accepting of European hierarchies, widespread colonial discourses about Hinduism’s own barbarous degeneration, however, equally threatened Hindu claims to redeemable civilization.



and possible censure; the potency and potential danger of illicit and marginal beliefs and practice are not in doubt.” Disavowals, then, often express a vivid uncertainty about the consequences of acknowledging the power of such “ethereal agents” (Khan 2004: 103)—and the ethnic others they are frequently associated with—over one’s life.

Peter van der Veer’s (1991) work among Indo-Surinamese migrants to the Netherlands, and my own in contemporary Suriname, both indicate that, in spite of energetic public rejection, Hindustanis commonly resort to such therapeutic and divinatory means. When a Surinamese Hindu is persistently sick or unlucky they will frequently seek healing “outside” (*bahar, dorosei*) of the allopathic medicine that is their first resort. While *pandits* are at the forefront in offering healing through practices like astrology and prescribed ritual devotion, numerous other specialists may also be consulted. These range from Afro-Surinamese oracular diviners (*bonuman, obiyaman*), Muslim holy men (*maulvi*), as well as non-Brahmin Hindu ritualists and healers. This may be an older member of the family who specializes in “sweeping” (*jhare*) away bad influences by passing their hands, a knife, or a feather over the sick person’s body.

### **Indo-Guyanese and Shakti Puja in Contemporary Suriname**

The forms of healing described above are commonly combined with oracular deity mediumship, which—while also the subject of considerable reticence—is actively present. Spirit possession is an influential practice throughout South Asia (Fuller 1992; Smith 2006).<sup>65</sup> In Suriname, possession by Kali or another Goddess is attested to from the

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<sup>65</sup> Though the ethnographic record is equivocal on the influence of possession in Northern India, it is widely attested to (Babb 1975; Fuller 1992; Parry 1994; Smith 2006; Sax 2009). In his work on funerary rituals in Banaras (1994), Jonathan Parry describes the then (1970-80s) dominant discourses on possession in the Gangetic heartland as similar to those of Suriname. He describes stark caste inequalities in access to status endowing Sanskritic knowledge invigorating an active discourse of superstition (*laukik*, literally worldly) which men from dominant castes used to shore up their own authority by distancing themselves

1950s (De Klerk 1951: 84; Bakker 1999: 122), in direct continuity with the many variations of village practices devoted to powerful Goddesses found throughout India. At present these practices have undergone considerable evolution, often under the influence of Shakti puja as brought by Guyanese immigrants starting in the 1970s. For contemporary Hindu Indo-Surinamese, mediumistic possession is highly gendered and ethnicized, associated especially with women, Guyanese, and Afro-Surinamese. Though vehement, Indo-Surinamese disclaimers do not generally represent the complete denial of the reality of spirits or possession, but rather a deep concern with the loss of control over Hindu ethnic honor (*ijjat, aadar*) and respectability (*netheid*). This conflict of competing uncertainties, between apprehension over hidden assaults by ghosts and sorcerers, and the fear of loss of personal and ethnic respect, is characteristic of the warring doubts that plague Hindu Surinamese.

More than 10,000 Guyanese—the overwhelming majority of whom are of South Asian ancestry—live in Suriname, making them the country’s largest contemporary immigrant population (Suriname Census 2010). Owing to their shared origins in Northern India, Guyanese and Surinamese Hindus are practically very similar. Guyanese, however, no longer speak a South Asian language, having adopted both Guyanese English Creole (*Creolese*) and more standard registers of English (Edward 1983; Sidnell 2005). This, when combined with their greater poverty, has frequently led Indo-Surinamese to be

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from competing ritual practices performed by women, lower castes, and *dalits*. Accusations of superstition were thus one means of consolidating the hierarchies that these castes sought to enforce, allowing them to present non-Brahminical ritual practices as both outside of and necessarily subordinate to their universal, orthodox (*shastrik*) rituals. In Suriname, it is much the same, though as transposed onto a social context in which claims to orthodox Hindu preeminence are significantly more vulnerable than in India. Though the impoverished indentured Brahmins who arrived in Suriname could count on a degree of deference, they came to emphasize that their authority was a result of their similarity with their fellow Hindus, not their difference.

suspicious towards Indo-Guyanese. Despite this, members of two communities do intermarry and broadly share the ritual practices and rhetorics that constitute encompassment.

Unlike in Suriname, where time expired Indian laborers quickly set themselves up as small holders on former plantation lands, the largest portion of Indo-Guyanese never left the expansive sugar plantations that remain among Guyana's major employers. The continued viability of sugar estates in Guyana meant that much of the country's readily accessible land belonged to first European sugar corporations or, after Guyanese independence, the state. This dependency on the sugar industry kept the mass of Indo-Guyanese laborers among the poorest in Guyana. It also meant that, even though Indo-Guyanese also came to comprise the majority of the nation's small-scale peasant agriculturalists, they disproportionately did so on the margins of large plantations (Smith 1957).<sup>66</sup> Always vulnerable to fluctuations in the sugar market, when Forbes Burnham launched a program of ethnocratic authoritarian autarky, nationalizing many of the plantations in the 1970's, estate laborers were forced to cope with even greater scarcity than during the period of British colonial exploitation (Williams 1991; Smith 1995).

The vast unguarded boarder between Guyana and Suriname has always been open to flows between the two populations. The poverty and repression that led up to and continued after Guyana's independence in 1967, however, drove ever greater numbers of Guyanese to search for economic opportunities elsewhere. Though the United States, Canada, or the UK were the preferred destinations, Suriname's proximity and ease of

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<sup>66</sup> In Suriname, most of the large plantations had gone out of business by the mid-twentieth century. The last sugar plantation, Marienburg in Commewijne, would go be defunct by the early seventies, signaling Suriname's near complete shift to mining and other natural resources.

access made it ideal for Guyanese economic refugees; often as a stepping stone to out migration elsewhere.

The poverty of Guyanese immigrants has meant that they end up competing in the same economic sectors as Maroons, particularly in construction, mining, and timbering. Quite a few others have taken up fishing, work as domestics, or agricultural laborers. This economic precarity, and the perception that Guyanese are more liable to be criminals, has furthered the marginal position of Guyanese within Surinamese society. In both countries, shared histories of colonially orchestrated racialized ethnic competition between people of African and South Asian descent have led to similar ideologies of racism. The dominant racist rhetoric in both places asserts that racial differences have led to stark divergences in ethnic contributions to national development. Thus, the most common denunciation of ethnic others in Suriname and Guyana alike is that they are lazy, greedy, and “racialist”—interested only in monopolizing resources for their own ethnicity. Ethnic others are presented as having failed to “develop” the nation towards European standards often, it is implied, intentionally at the expense of more qualified or deserving ethnic others (Williams 1991; Jackson 2012).

In Suriname, Indo-Guyanese occupy a peculiar place in terms of these ideologies. While Indo-Guyanese poverty concurrently threatens Indo-Surinamese claims to ethnic and religious exceptionalism, because it can be, through the figure of Forbes Burnham, identified as the result of autocratic rule by an Afro-Guyanese president, it also serves to justify Hindustani racism. Linguistic issues additionally encourage these suspicions about the place of Indo-Guyanese within the ethnic logics of Surinamese coastal society. As an English creole, Guyanese Creolese is closely related to Sranan, and thus indexical of

Afro-Surinamese ethnic identity. This facilitates Guyanese immigrants in rapidly acquiring Sranan, but likewise associates them with supposedly threatening Afro-Surinamese. In this and other ways, Hindu Guyanese find themselves in an odd position as regards rhetorics of ethnic struggle that they in fact otherwise share with Indo-Surinamese.

One means Indo-Surinamese have found to retain the perception of their particular distinction *vis-à-vis* Indo-Guyanese is to emphasize Guyanese religious alterity, dismissing them as simultaneously superstitious *and* practitioners of dangerous magic. Importantly, these accusations have a basis in the different public prominence accorded Shakti or Kali Mai Puja in Surinamese and Guyanese Hinduism. Though in many respects opaque, the reason for this pronounced difference of ritual emphasis is significant for understanding the political logics of ethnicization in each country, and for appreciating the role this plays in circumscribing the variable influence of oracular possession among the different ethnic collectives this dissertation addresses.

Shakti or Kali Mai puja is therapeutic devotion to Kali—generally conceived as the wrathful aspect of Shiva’s consort Parvati and an incarnation of the collective energy (*shakti*) of the gods—and other deities through oracular possession and sacrifice. These deities are derived from both the “Sanskritic” pantheon of Sanatan Dharm, and Southern Indian village rituals. Of these deities, Shakti oracles most frequently embody the popular South Indian gods like Sanganni Baba, Bhairo Baba, and Kateri Ma largely unknown to Surinamese Hindus, but also the major pan-Indian deities like Shiva and Durga. Regardless of their heterodoxy, Shakti practitioners now consistently perceive these

deities as—simultaneously—forms of the orthodox Puranic deities *and* emanations of the ultimately non-dualistic divine propounded by Vedantic theologies.

Though the Shakti tradition's origins are frequently attributed to the sizeable South Indian (*Madrasi*) presence among Guyanese indentured workers, as practiced in the Caribbean, Shakti ritual is rather a fusion of practices from throughout India (Fuller 1992; McNeal 2011). These rituals of oracular possession and sacrifice were transported to Guyanese plantations, where they were eventually established in temples through grants of plantation land (Bassier 1984; Younger 2010). As elsewhere in the Caribbean, oracular rituals were initially only performed once a year, generally by descendants of the mainly Tamil speaking ritual specialists (*pusari, pujari*) who brought the ritual with them (Sulty and Nagapin 1989; Younger 2010). Even as people capable of fulfilling these roles declined with the decease of the first generations of Indian migrants, the proprietary nature of these oracular rites required the presence of a recognized medium from an established Madrassi lineage and a qualified translator.

In Guyana, at least, this began to change in the 1960s. Under the particular influence of Jamsie Naidoo, the head *pujari/guru* of the temple at plantation Albion in Berbice, the deities began to speak in English (Singer, Araneta, and Naidoo 1969; Stephanides and Singh 2000). Along with therapeutic collaboration between Naidoo's temple and Guyana's only Psychiatric hospital (facilitated by the American psychoanalytic anthropologist Philip Singer), this change precipitated a wave of innovation and explosive growth for Shakti practices (Singer and Araneta 1967; Bassier 1984).

In spite of the anthropologist Chandra Jayawardena's (1966) prediction of the cult's imminent disappearance, Shakti ritual has proliferated, spreading beyond Guyana to Trinidad and the larger Indo-Caribbean diaspora, including Suriname (Guinee 1992; MacNeal 2011). Some of this success appears to be a direct result of Naidoo's ritual reforms. Shakti ritual is preeminently a "cult of affliction" (Turner 1968). People become Shakti mediums and devotees after having been healed by Shakti rituals. The linguistic democratization of Shakti ritual empowered people from outside established Madrassi pujari families to become oracles and establish their own temples. Though still recognizably "Indian", Shakti's therapeutic commitments allowed practitioners to present their activities as primarily therapeutic. In this way, Shakti ritual could operate outside the ethnic/religious boundaries that typically constrain Guyanese Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam.

It is precisely as healers and oracles that Kali Mai practitioners distinguish themselves from other Hindu Surinamese ritualists. As one Indo-Surinamese supplicant at a Shakti temple told me: "Here I can talk to the gods directly" (*Hiyan ham deota se direkt bol sake hai*).<sup>67</sup> Shakti ritualism cures people by inviting them into sustained ritual relations with the deities, teaching devotees to perceive divine presence in the details of everyday life. In Shakti ritual, Guyanese people of all races and both genders directly

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<sup>67</sup> In Suriname, possession by Kali or other Goddesses was practiced semi-publically into the 1950s in direct continuity with the many variations of village practices devoted to powerful Goddesses found throughout India. At present Indo-Surinamese mediumship has continued largely through the work of individual mediums. Given their shared origins and social contexts, it is unsurprising that Indo-Surinamese traditions of mediumship target the same kinds of "spiritual" afflictions as addressed by Shakti ritual. Many of the currently practicing Indo-Surinamese mediums previously attended Guyanese Shakti temples, where their mediumistic propensities were encouraged. Surinamese Hindu mediums, however, tend to become independent therapists who, in the manner of Afro-Surinamese oracular-healers or Brahmin priests, almost always consult privately. Indeed, due to considerable apprehension over threats to their respectability, Indo-Surinamese appear more comfortable with such private consultations than with the semi-public interviews favored in Guyanese congregational Shakti temples.

confront and embody the “spiritual” origins of their misfortunes and convert them into affirming ritual relations with personal yet universal deities. If Shakti devotion is observed with the appropriate intensity, it is said to lead sincere devotees to the grace of embodying the gods in routine oracular mediumship. Elected by the self-evident necessity of suffering, Shakti mediums can rapidly move from passively possessed supplicants to leaders of their own temples. Though this is more difficult for women who, whatever their attainments as oracles, are largely expected to retain subordinate roles, Shakti mediumship offers many people (and especially young men) the opportunity to access ritual and social power that they would otherwise be denied.

Unlike in Guyana and Trinidad (or Canada and the United States for that matter) where Shakti rituals are practiced in expansive public temple complexes, reinvigorated Shakti puja has not enjoyed a Surinamese renaissance. No matter how significant their followings, all such practitioners are overshadowed by Sanatan Dharm orthodoxy. Though an appreciable number of Shakti oracular healers catering to a mixed Surinamese and Guyanese Hindu clientele can be found around Paramaribo, they remain mainly individual practitioners consulting from their homes. Shakti oracles are, however, popular enough to attract substantial numbers of mainly Indo-Guyanese and Surinamese looking for ritual solutions for a variety of misfortunes.

For Hindu Surinamese in particular, Shakti Puja’s combination of the familiar and the strange can make Shakti mediums particularly efficacious oracles, infusing recognizable exhortations to greater devotional piety with the uncanny effects of ethnic difference. . Guyanese ritual specialists can therefore skirt some of the distrust that crops



up between Hindus and ritual specialists from other ethnic traditions.<sup>68</sup> Shakti oracles' position just outside many of the limiting conventions of Brahminical Hinduism endows them with potentially more potent—and more dangerous—ritual power. In this way, the same facets of Guyanese difference that expose them to Indo-Surinamese derision, can in this way also serve to position them as ideal intermediaries, unsullied by perceptions of pandit self-interest. Whether Indo-Surinamese or Guyanese, many Shakti practitioners describe the availability of divine “manifestation” as a counterbalance to widely condemned *pandit* greed and arrogance.

Given its sources in and continued communication with Guyana, Surinamese variations of Shakti Puja are largely in keeping with Guyanese conventions. During my two years of research in Suriname, I counted only five small Shakti temples that fully adhered to the ritual conventions of Guyanese Shakti Puja. Of these, an Indo-Surinamese Hindu man presided over only one. All the others were run and largely attended by Guyanese migrants, but with a steady stream of apprehensive Indo-Surinamese patients. The relative inconspicuousness of these ritual centers is in keeping with the shadowed place of non-Brahminical Hindu ritual practices at the margins of public Surinamese Hinduism. While in certain regions of Guyana Shakti temples compete with Christian churches as the most ubiquitous religious buildings, in Suriname these temples are almost completely hidden, if not concealed, blending into the many other small household puja shrines that dot the landscape of urban Suriname.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> That most Shakti mediums speak Creolese when “manifestin” acts with pregnant ambiguity, frustrating Indo-Surinamese access but also increasing the transcendental distance between the manifesting deity and human patients.

<sup>69</sup> From what I can work out, Guyanese style Shakti temples all have their origins in one temple built by a Guyanese sugar cane worker near what was then the last remaining Surinamese sugar plantation, Marienberg, in Commewijne district, in the 1970s. This temple was apparently popular, attracting large

Shakti oracles promise direct communication with the gods about human problems like sickness, marital discord, and financial problems. Shakti rituals uses divine power (*shakti*) in conjunction with regimens of sustained ritual devotion and the ritual cleansing of bodies and property to exorcise sorcery, ghosts, and demons and restore human wellbeing.<sup>70</sup> *Shakti* is held by Shakti devotees to imbue the world with a volatile fecundity which they use to explain ritual transformations that the term otherwise leaves cloaked in divine inscrutability.<sup>71</sup> Shakti devotees described possession and healing as a “tiny piece” of the deities’ *shakti* power expressing itself through human bodies. For many practitioners in Suriname and Guyana, it is the deities’ *shakti* manifesting in mediums that causes the explosive tension, the ecstatic dancing, and epiphanies of divine knowledge performed in Shakti ritual.

The basic practice of Shakti ritual is the initiation of an extended relation of asymmetrical devotional exchange (do devotion) between deities and human supplicants. These devotions and the elaborate proscriptions they entail are designed to force the devotee to recognize the deities’ control over all facets of their personal existence. Most

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numbers of Indo-Surinamese supplicants. It continued to be avidly attended until the sudden death of the chief oracle in the 1990s. Already before the Marienberg oracle’s death, some of his assistant pujaris broke away to found their own temples, but always in their own homes. It was with the more senior of these pujaris’ with whom I did most of my own fieldwork, a Guyanese man in his late 40s I will refer to as Guru Shivshaktidasa.

<sup>70</sup> As will be dealt with in Chapter 7, one source of fruitful intersection between Guyanese Shakti Puja and Indo-Surinamese tradition is a shared ritual focus on the vulnerability of Hindu households’ lands and homes. This is best expressed in the common Indo-Surinamese practice of making offerings to Amerindian spirits who are understood to continue to inhabit the land. These match similar Guyanese practices propitiating Dih Baba (the land’s tutelary deity), “Dutchman” and other “Landmaster” spirits (Singer, Araneta, and Naidoo 1969; Williams 1990). These rituals generally consist of yearly sacrifices in both Suriname and Guyana. Indo-Surinamese are reluctant to talk about these practices, but equally adamant about their necessity, declaring that such offerings ensured the collective wellbeing of the family residing on the land, and safe guard its prosperity in the coming year.

<sup>71</sup> The broad range of Hindu mythology both accentuates and blurs *shakti* into an ambiguous term for divine power that conflates grandeur, generation, efficacy and enlivening energy. As numerous myths in the Puranic literature indicate, *shakti* is held to be the “the motivating and creative force of an otherwise inactive, passive male deity” (Dimmit and Van Buitenen 1978: 224).

Shakti practitioners take up these devotions after consulting with a possessed oracle over misfortunes, whether sickness, marital discord, or unemployment. During these consultations, a possessing (manifestin') deity usually "bathes" the patient, sweeping them with a branch of the Neem tree (*azadirachta indica*), anointing them with sacred ash (*bibhut*), and dousing them with "dye" or "*manjatani*" water (a mixture of consecrated ingredients that is used to cool the oracle while the deity is "*manifestin*" to ensure their body is not consumed by the deity's boiling energy).



Figure 4 Painting of Sanganni Baba

At all the Shakti temples at which I worked, personal devotions were assigned for fixed periods, generally from nine to sixteen weeks. During these periods, devotees were expected to undertake scrupulous ritual purity, abstaining (*hold 'em fast*) from "rank"

(meat, fish, and sexual intercourse). They would also be instructed to set up shrines in their homes to make offerings, and come to “church” (the Kali temple) once or twice a week to do puja for the deities’ images (*murti*). On days when deities would “*stand up*” (possess oracles) at a temple, these devotions would culminate with the devotee being fed the food they had prepared and offered by the manifesting deity to whom it had been dedicated. Consecrated by the deities’ *shakti*, this feeding allowed devotees to physically incorporate the deity’s *shakti*, which, along with the purifying washing and chanting of mantras, allowed the deity to physically pervade and encompass devotees’ everyday actions (see Guinee 1992 and McNeal 2011 for comparisons with Trinidad).

Devotees explained the efficacy of their devotional practices by saying that all the life energy of humans is derived from the deities. In receiving this power from them, humans had to reciprocate, giving back the time and money they earned through ritual devotion so as to subjugate their desires to the deities’ own ends. Shakti devotees would ask, rhetorically, how it feels when, after you help someone, that person fails to acknowledge your contribution. It was the same, devotees said, for the deities whose complete control over human life had to be acknowledged through strenuous acts of renunciatory care.

## **Conclusion**

Congregational Shakti Puja of the sort practiced in Guyana intersects with the cultural politics of Surinamese Hinduism in convoluted ways. On the one hand, Shakti Puja’s focus on oracular possession is ill at ease with attempts to present Hinduism as a respectable ‘orthodoxy’ on par with Christianity. On the other, Shakti practices resolve many of the impasses that Brahminical orthodoxy presents for its emphatically egalitarian

non-Brahmin devotees. By integrating orthodox ritual devotion into practices of direct communication with the major Hindu deities available to all devotees, Shakti thus attempts a reconciliation of Brahminical ritual authority with pervasive egalitarian sentiments among lay Hindus. Such a compromise, however, only serves to introduce further tensions between discourses of Hindu exceptionalism and universalism. While Shakti Puja's ecstatic ecumenicalism supports claims championed by Sanatan Dharm ideologues that Hinduism is the all-encompassing "eternal" religion of humanity, it also undermines Sanatan Dharm *pandits* insistence about the importance of the particular and inviolable *hereditary* character of Hindu ethnic distinction. This discordance makes it nearly impossible to normalize Shakti puja and related traditions of Hindu possession in contemporary Suriname. Whatever degree to which Shakti exercises the imagination of Indo-Surinamese, what power Shakti ritual has thus always remains premised on all the ways it fails to encompass or be encompassed by Sanatan orthodoxy.

Though Surinamese fears may imbue their practices with a certain allure, Guyanese and non-Guyanese Shakti practitioners struggle to contest consistent negative stereotypes that Hindustanis share with other Surinamese.<sup>72</sup> Shakti devotees increasingly seek to replace orthodox condemnations with a heightened rhetoric of devotion that presents divine possession as the unassailable outcome of spiritual encompassment, the fruit of the sincerity of their pious labors.

Shakti practitioners in Suriname exert themselves in making these general rhetorics of encompassment explicit in ritual, and proudly subscribe to Sanatanist rhetoric

about Hinduism's relevance for the "whole universe" (*sab sansaar, heel heelal*).<sup>73</sup> Unlike Sanatan Dharm practice, Shakti actively integrates the icons of Christianity and Islam into ritual spaces and actively ministers to supplicants from all ethnicities in their house temples.<sup>74</sup> More than any iconographic or liturgical incorporation, however, the populist possibility of divine possession is what allows devotees to performatively embody these forms of encompassment as an expression of the primal power of the Hindu tradition.<sup>75</sup>

Precisely because of the vibrancy with which Shakti oracles perform knowledge that firmly positions supplicants within a Hindu cosmos, Shakti ritual holds a manifest allure to many Surinamese for whom the respectability of Sanatan Dharm infringes on its ability to encompass all facets of the diversity with which they are daily faced.

However peripheral, Shakti Puja thus preserves its presence in coastal Suriname, influencing a not insignificant number of peoples' lives (though its muffled social position makes it difficult to assess its broader impact in Suriname more generally).

Whatever its marginality, as I will show in chapter 5, Shakti practices are broadly representative of the style of communicating relations I have termed encompassment.

While it may remain disproportionately feared, Shakti ritual decisively summarizes many of the paradigmatic concerns of diasporic Guianese Hindu communities, and

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<sup>73</sup> Despite some Shakti oracles' rhetoric of resistance to pandit hegemony, due to Brahminical criticism, Surinamese Shakti practitioners have mainly abandoned the "life-work" (animal sacrifice) that is still an important element of more conservative "Madrassi" oriented Shakti temples in Guyana (though not without considerable controversy).

<sup>74</sup> At the main temple where I did my research, there were two regular Afro-Surinamese devotees, both of whom stressed their continued allegiance to Afro-Surinamese ritual forms. There were also a number of Indo-Guyanese Muslims and Christians who acted as divine mediums.

<sup>75</sup> This corresponds to the earlier mentioned, and rather conspicuous, absence of Hindu divine possession from Surinamese public life. As described previously, it appears that the marginality of Hindu possession is critically connected to the centrality of ethnic/racial/religious difference in defining contemporary Surinamese Hinduism.

demonstrates how they create knowledge of the moral relations they return to for social and cosmological coherence.

## Chapter 4

### Ndyuka Possession and the Performance of Coalition

As dealt with in chapter 2, the Ndyuka conception of the person as a coalition—a relational assemblage of multiple, inherited agencies—is one way to counter intractable doubts about social life and persevere with cooperation in the face of pessimism about others. As an ethics of relatedness, Ndyuka coalition represents a partial solution to the contradiction between a widespread distrust of human nature and an overwhelming responsibility towards family. As with *kuutu* council sessions and carry oracles, the authoritatively possessed Ndyuka medium epitomizes one resolution to this impasse. Each of these communicative genres comprises an *epistemic performance* that objectifies the knowledge that ordinary humans lack full awareness of their relations with kin and spirits and provide an account of how these relations matter.

This makes public enactments of human-spirit relations particularly important for understanding how coalition becomes a broadly shared Ndyuka relational sensibility. This chapter describes two of the sub-genres of performance that support Ndyuka oracular healing as an authoritative source of coalitional knowledge. First, I analyze the performances that transform an Ndyuka medium into a convincingly possessed oracle. Second, I describe the ritual creation and application of *obiya*, the spirit-medicine complex that has a vital role in all domains of “traditional” Ndyuka social life. I argue that how oracular rituals poetically integrate multiple forms of materiality—shrines, ritual



objects, language, gestures, and music—in interactions creates the context that compels ritual participants to accept themselves as coalitions.

### **The Material Infrastructure of Spirit Transformation**

Ndyuka of both sexes and all ages can become mediums, though age and gender significantly impact the kinds of spirit identities that any person can claim. For an Ndyuka medium to legitimately become their spirit involves the mobilization of a diverse array of communicative materials from language through gesture to dress. Each of these semiotic modes exploits some degree of semiotic indeterminacy to convey that 1) a spirit is speaking, and 2) that what the spirit says is accurate *because* they are a spirit. The lamination of these many modalities is what enables relations of coalition to exist. This depends on how a medium's transformation performance establishes an implicitly shared "frame" (Bateson 1972 [2000]; Goffman 1974): a shared context for interpretation in which, even if co-participants do not know what is happening, they know how to ask for an explanation.

Of the materials establishing such a frame, an Ndyuka oracular medium's shrine room comprises the biggest aggregate "object." The shrine is a "space-time envelope" (Silverstein 2004), an oracular consultation's physical and temporal container. Shrines delimit space and section time to regulate access and situate participants. In the Ndyuka homeland in the interior, shrines tend to consist of separate structures called "god" (*gadu*) or "*obiya*" houses (*osu*). Without access to sufficient land, and worried about peoples' ritual purity, Ndyuka mediums have not reproduced traditional shrines in the city. Though a number of Ndyuka oracular mediums resided in camps just outside Paramaribo, most of those I worked with did so from shrine rooms in their homes. Da Mangwa (the

medium whose possession performance I describe in the next section) for instance, built his shrine in the front room of the tiny concrete house in a government housing project that he shared with a large number of his grandchildren, while Da Sabun and Ma Taanga built theirs as a separate room behind their urban home.



Figure 5 An Ndyuka altar (*obiya tafaa*)

Since shrines are normally quite small, they can only accommodate a few patients at a time. Because Surinamese from all ethnicities typically consult with oracles in groups, the shrine room constrains how many people may participate at a time. It also forces participants in an oracular consultation into close physical and proximity, making them clearly audible to one another. A large corner altar dominates Ndyuka or other Afro-Surinamese shrine rooms. In my experience, during consultations oracular mediums sit next to or in front of their altar or altars. Patients are made to sit on benches that orient them to the medium (whom a client has often never seen before) and their altar. This forces patients to assume positions in the room relative to a medium's own spatial orientation and description of it, which helps compound the perspectival asymmetry of oracular interactions.

Ndyuka altars are assemblages composed from a bewildering variety of objects that texture the space of a shrine with pronounced indecipherability. Patients are only dimly aware of the purpose of the many bound, wrapped, or otherwise obscured everyday objects like bottles, sticks, or dolls that populate shrines. Oracular mediums are often unwilling to divulge the names and nature of these objects, aside from hinting that they have some important use.

The cluttered collocation of so many objects on the altar creates a contrast between the specificity of each object and its position within a crowd of other similarly obscure artifacts. While certain things like flags and carry oracles are immediately identifiable to most Ndyuka, other wrapped and bundled objects bear witness to histories and operations that they can only vaguely guess at, making sure their contents remain unsettlingly concealed. However familiar a patient might be with Ndyuka mediumship, the

idiosyncrasies of Ndyuka mediums' spirits render items in their shrines challengingly specific. Instead of identifiable things, patients are confronted with a mob of indeterminate objects whose power is only dimly grasped or outright unknown.

The visual overload of shrines and altars contextualizes mediums' transformations during possession to present coalition as necessary and natural. Indeterminate palimpsests, altars absorb things like bottles and statues, trapping observers in a welter of indecipherability. Through practices of "accumulation and containment" (Nooter 1993; MacGaffey 2001: 145) these become instruments of invisible powers that their formal characteristics as often-everyday objects would otherwise belie. As MacGaffey notes: "...containment gives the impression that something may be hidden inside, accumulation adds obscurity to make secrecy evident (2001:145)." These two aesthetic techniques incubate the uncertainty that establishes the forceful affinity between wrapped objects like bottles and mediums' possessed bodies. The form of both is a container whose power is in the secrets contained beneath an inscrutable surface. As described later, Ndyuka ritual healing empties both bottles and bodies to replace their contents with spirit prescribed recipes of relatedness. Just as when a medium puts on their spirit's clothes, a bound bottle divests it of its quotidian implications and transforms it into a cypher for hidden potencies.

All of these elements are a part of the visual "stickiness" that ensnares observers, making them passive before the relations an oracular spirit describes (MacGaffey 2001). A medium's position next to or in front of their altar makes them part of an "entrapping" visual field (see Gell 1998 for other examples). This enables an altar's gnostic materiality to underline a parallel between its own mysterious assembly and a medium's spirit's

agency. Just as the authority of a medium's possession derives from the communication of otherwise impossible hidden knowledge, the concealing materiality of Ndyuka altars provides visible evidence of human befuddlement before spirit power.

This brings us to other elements of a medium's possession paraphernalia. Before "yelling" (*bali*) as their spirit, mediums don accessories that indicate the imminence of possession. As described above, mediums usually begin seated on their spirit's stool (*winti bangi*). Along with staffs (*tiki*), stools and uniforms serve as invaluable insignia of traditional Ndyuka authority. Staffs and stools testify to the continuous transmission of authority to alleviate doubts about a medium's spirit's identity and intentions. Ndyuka titleholders are "enstooled" (Price 2007) with these objects originally given by the Dutch colonial state to mark their succession to offices like that of chief (*kabiten*) or crier (*basiya*). Ndyuka ideologies of legitimacy hold that titleholders and mediums similarly derive authority from either the embodiment of a possessing spirit or a predecessors' governing power (*tii makiti*).<sup>76</sup> A medium's numerous staffs, stools, daggers, hats and other headgear thus serve to validate their spirit's collective recognition and guarantee the transitivity of its power between generations.

In addition to the stools and staffs, a mediums' transformation performance involves many other worn accouterments. The most visible of these objects are braided bands/chords (*tetei, tapu baka*), metal rings (*bui*), and clothes (*winti koosi*). After a spirit has come to fully occupy the medium they also often apply arrestingly ethereal white *pemba* (kaolin) that imbues the characteristically dark skin of most Ndyuka with an uncanny aura.

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<sup>76</sup> This is made explicit through the parallel ways mediums and title-holders are buried.

Depending on their identity, spirits smoke cigars and drink specific kinds of beverages to mark them as members of a known class of spirit like Ampuku or Papa. Such extensive paraphernalia produce “a visible modification of the body through which [the person] relates...to the world beyond [their] body (Munn 1973: 103; cited in Bell 2014). In the case of braided chords and metal rings, these directly appropriate the visual vocabulary of “accumulation and containment” through tying and constricting. The term *bui* makes this starkly evident. It refers to arresting or binding someone and is derived from the Dutch word for the manacles (*boeien*) used to shackle slaves. Braided chords and metal rings repeat the constraining visual tropes of other ritually bound objects like covered bottles to draw attention to the boundaries of the human body and control. Icons of control, these implements serve as visual testament of the troubling extent to which particular people are dependent coalitions composed from coercive relations with beings of greater power. In conjunction with human bodies, these objects focus attention on the uncertain borders that separate people and call attention to mediums’ own subordination to possessing spirits.<sup>77</sup>

In Ndyuka oracular mediumship, the body is thus described as an assembled container animated by a spirit or spirits. It is the spirit’s ‘heaviness’ (*ibi*) that is said to be responsible for the pain expressed by the medium when becoming possessed. Further, the parallel between mediums and patients established by the preparation of their bodies through washing, binding, and dressing, mirrors that used to empower carry oracles. In both cases we find an idiom of composition in which a spirit temporarily unites multiple parts into a coalitional whole.

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<sup>77</sup> Such allusions or appropriations of the technologies of slavery are common throughout Afro-Atlantic ritual traditions (Maty 2007).

## **Da Mangwa's Transformation Performance: Kinesic, Paralinguistic, and Linguistic Modalities of Making Human/Spirit Coalition**

Now that I have described the material contexts of Ndyuka oracular transformation performances, I present and analyze the transcript of one such event, and outline its embodied linguistic, paralinguistic, and kinesic modes. I argue that the poetic integration of these communicative modalities enables knowledge of human and spirit coalition to emerge from Ndyuka possession performances. Each moment of the gathering unity of a spirit's identity forcefully communicates coalition through successive stages of transformation: 1) the retreat of the medium's subjectivity, 2) the body's suffusion by the spirit, and finally, 3) the spirit's complete control of the body, thoughts, and action. Each step in this sequence is communicated by a different aggregation of communicative modalities to imply discrete yet interdependent states. I describe these different modes and their performative combination to show how the gestalt each generates affords the Ndyuka ontology of spirit and human coalition.

The subsequent transcript was made at the home of Da Mangwa, an Ndyuka oracular medium from the Cottica river region of northeastern Suriname in November 2012. I reproduce the beginning of an séance at his household shrine for Da Lanti Winti (Father Government Spirit), the powerful Ampuku forest spirit Da Mangwa inherited after prolonged illness from his deceased grandfather. In the portion presented here, Da Mangwa's granddaughter Luisa has been mediating her spirit, the ghost (*koosama*) of a 19<sup>th</sup> century drowning victim, for her uncle—Da Mangwa's eldest living son.

Such ghosts are most often the victims of violent and lonely deaths, particularly by runaway slaves who died despondent in the forest. They frequently possess people out of loneliness. The ghost has been speaking about the continued illness of Da Mangwa's

wife, Ma Be (from which she would die in June 2014). The room was small and completely dominated by the shrine's altar (*obiya tafaa*), which rose from floor to ceiling in a dramatic spray of wild grass, kaolin encrusted flags, fabric wrapped bottles, ceramic dogs and sundry other obscure objects. Luisa sat possessed on a low stool at the end of the altar closest to the door into the house's single narrow hall. On the other side of the altar, Da Mangwa sat, back against the wall, on his spirit stool (*winti bangi*). Da Mangwa had placed a braided, padlocked cord (*obiya tetei, tapu baka*) around one shoulder, and a voluminous, radiant golden batik cloth over the other, and wore a tightly tied handkerchief around his brow. Eyes shut, he huddled into his corner. Aware of his limited power compared to Da Lanti Winti, Luisa's ghost pleaded in his elongated manner of speaking for the more senior spirit to come and speak through Da Mangwa to remedy Ma Be's "problem/curse" (*nowtu, fuuka*):

Ghost	To Da Mangwa	Taata wi e luku yu eteee, fu yu sa kon taki anga wi pikinsoooo, yu a mu mandiiiiiiii. Kon taki anga wi pikinsoooo, kon taki anga wi pikinsoooo. Wi e begi yu anga lesipekiiiiiii. Kon taki anga wi pikinsoooo. Hmmmmmm, wi e luku yuuuuuuu!	Father, we are still looking to you, to come and speak with us soooooe, don't be offendeed. Come and speak with us soooooe (repeats IX). We pray to you respectfullyyyyyy. Come and speak with us some. Hmmmmmm, We are expecting youuuuuuu.
Da Mangwa	Becoming Da Lanti Winti	hn.....hmm hn.....mmmmmmhn... hnhn...uhueh.uhu...hmmm...uhoh ...aahhuh...huo...uhi....huoo...h mm...hn...hn...huwuo...hmmm.h nn...hn..huoh....mh...hm...nhmm muhwuo...hmmmm...huaaa...eeha a...uuuuhh ...ooooyaaaaiihnnn... nhmmm hn hn hn hnhuo.... huo hn haaaaaiii hoo hmmmmmh mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm mmmm, hmmmmhn heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee hnnn hnnn heoeoeoe hn hnhn swamba swamba huh u hu hnnnnnnueueueueueueueueueu uuKisumba fu dinango hu hu hu... hnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn	Unintelligible vocalizations... (Though all of this he remains doubled up, holding his head with his eyes closed as he grimaces and winces. His body shakes and he appears to be experiencing severe pain) . . . . . Kisumba of dinango (or of who is going (Saramaka)). .



	<p>nnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnueueueueue ueueuuu, tefun taa malongo. Mi Kisingwa fu Samba he he he huu hu hnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnueueueueue uuu Swambe zu, swanga za. Kunun belu kunun belu kunun belu Siamba. Kisi doo mayombe kisi doo manan gugu. Mi Tosu Tosu Mgbemë... mi Tosu fu Ngasa. Mi Yange fu Daingo. Mi Kwananumba, mi Kwananumba, mi Kwananunba Keke fu Dwaini sumbaa. Mi yeebu yebu taani yebu yebu kaa ginimbo he he he he. Kiki tyohoo ba na yoobe kibito ba na gugu. Fu dada Haan Tanu fu Haantanu fu na gwensendu yagasa dokweenu tyali malongo. He he he he he he he...Makunba mayamba makumba mago...</p>	<p>tefun taa (was?) malongo. I am Kisingwa of Samba... . Swambe zu, swanga za. Kunun belu (matriline?) kunun belu kunun belu Siamba. Caught, arrive at mayombe (an Obiya), caught, arrive manan gugu. I am Tosu Tosu Mgbemë... I am Tosu of Ngasa. I am Yange of Daingo. I am Kwananumba, I am Kwananumba, I am Kwananumba Keke of Dwaini sumbaa. I yeebu (help?) yebu taani yebu kaa ginimbo he he he he. Kiki ba is yoobe kibito be na gugu. Fo Father Haan Tanu of Haantanu for is gwensendu yagasa doweenu (appears to be related to ritual paraphernalia) sad malongo. Unintelligible...</p>
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Because of his central position in the room, Da Mangwa’s movements demanded attention, enforcing the silence of the audience members who sat on the benches at his side and in front of him. Everyone in the room—six of his grandchildren, two of his sons, and me—remained seated as he transitioned from human to spirit. Only after he bounded up and beckoned the audience to follow him, did they join him in dancing and singing, after which they directly resumed their seats. Da Lanti Winti remained the energetic center of the tiny room throughout the consultation, his wide arms outlining dramatic gestures as he drank greedily and emitted peels of boisterous laughter.

The preceding transcript represents only the initial stages of the process by which spirits come to vocal agency. This particular transformation performance continued for another ten minutes before Da Lanti Winti declared himself completely present, hurdling to his feet with a song in Ampuku language (*Ampuku Luango*). From the moment of Luisa’s ghost’s invitation, Da Mangwa’s spirit became an active and distinct ritual co-participant. The transcript is sufficient to show how the spirit’s incarnation transforms the medium’s body to make it an index of spirit difference. This requires an initiating

liminality in which Da Mangwa's body is neither human or spirit. Analyzing the poetics of this transformation demonstrates that Ndyuka coalitional sensibilities at least partially arise from the process of transforming un-articulated pain into authoritative speech in ritual possession. In this way, transformation performances re-enact a spirit's ontogeny, showing how they have come to appear *through* a particular Ndyuka person to demonstrate their coalition with a kin group. Da Lanti Winti is the culmination of the family's power, their refuge in crisis, and the source of the knowledge that decides collective action. Such influence is only possible due to how Da Mangwa's possession performance orchestrates multiple verbal and non-verbal channels to communicate the spirit's emergence as control over the gathered family.<sup>78</sup>

### **Kinesic Modalities of the Performance of Coalition**

There is no null set of spirit communication. Any event that may be attributed to a spirit is already a sign of spirit intent and thus a relation. In the same way bird songs are heard as uncomprehended language, so are the motions of carry oracles, the patterns of spilled beer, and the markings on the organs of sacrificial chickens. The same Ndyuka language ideologies that interpret animal sounds as language also attest that linguistic sense is part of the structure of reality. The world is accordingly drowning in messages

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<sup>78</sup> Spirit transformation performances add a decisive layer of paralinguistic and kinesic action like gestures, facial expressions, and vocalizations to a shrine's already extensive material presentation of human and spirit coalition. In the transcript, we observe a moment of what Keane has called "semiotic transduction"—an enactment of the power "...that can be obtained by the very act of transforming something from one semiotic modality to another" (2013: 2). While Keane describes actual physical transformations through the material destruction of the written word, in Da Mangwa's possession performances we see how the different semiotic properties of embodied communication are combined to transduce mediumistic performance into an affordance for coalition. This transformation conjoins variably unintelligible kinesic, paralinguistic, and linguistic signs to enact a first ruptured and then re-constituted coalitional identity. The cumulative impression of these multiple modes is that the medium's subjectivity is overwhelmed in a hurricane of external sensation to be recreated as a completely different being resident in the human body.

demanding interpretation. Even dramatic grunts and hyperventilation are approached as potential communications about social relations.<sup>79</sup>

The spirit transformations of Ndyuka oracular mediums like Da Mangwa perform a broad range of frequently erratic bodily movements. Mediums grimace, shudder, hit their heads on the wall, wail inconsolably or laugh frantically. Wincing, trembling, and arms flailing—gestures and expressions habitually construed as automatic responses to physical pain—alternate with emotive movements like stomping (*bate*), leaping (*dyompo*), and singing (*singi*). Once possessed, mediums change their physical position and posture, rapidly shifting from sitting to standing, doubled up to dancing. Their faces flash from vulnerable contortions to beaming smiles or confident stares. These kinesic elements amplify the stakes of transformation performances, increasing the audiences' sense of physical uncertainty and intrinsic difference between themselves, the mediums, and the spirit or spirits.

Mediums call attention to their abrupt transitions from apparently automatic actions to purposeful gestures and expressions. These kinesic counterpoints impart dramatic tension to the process of spirit transformation. Grimaces, contortions, closing and opening the eyes, gaze direction and orientation, arm and hand movements, sudden contrasts in physical position and subjective condition—these are the kinesic components that compel Ndyuka participants in oracular rituals to recognize themselves as sharing their bodies in coalition with spirits.

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<sup>79</sup> These expectations are further confirmed by Suriname's linguistic multiplicity, in which each ethnic group is understood to have their own unique language. This expectation is such that even speakers of what is in effect one single eastern Maroon language expend great effort to distinguish how they speak as an emphatic ethnic marker. Ideologically, Ndyuka do not speak the same language as the Aluku or the Paamaka even though these are ninety nine percent mutually intelligible.

The body—its integration and animation—is the problem to which a relational sensibility of coalition responds. Mediumship makes this problem existentially acute. For mediums, the body is simultaneously the source of spirit transformations’ efficacy and its doubtfulness. Ndyuka commonsense routinely expects personal identity to be “continuous” (Lambek 2013). Radical departures from these expectations can as easily result in accusations of fraud (*konku, politiki*) or madness (*law*) as in recognition of possession. Because the major physical features of the medium’s personality, their face, their age, their height, their girth, remain unaltered in possession, transformation performances work to maximize the impression of essential discontinuity between human and spirit while reconciling their co-occurrence in the same body.<sup>80</sup>

After Louisa’s ghost addressed him, Da Mangwa initiated his spirit’s appearance by diminishing his physical presence in the shrine room. Covered by his voluminous cape with only his face and feet visible, Da Mangwa’s retracted to half of his two-meter frame. Unlike a theater curtain, Da Mangwa’s cloak did not completely separate his audience from his actions. Hiding made his impending change more noticeable even as he became less observable. His back turned to his altar, Da Mangwa sat hunched low on his consecrated stool, crossed arms resting on his knees. In this position he became visually continuous with the many cloth concealed items assembled on the altar that served as the backdrop of his transformation. Da Mangwa’s self-concealment and revelation increased the visual parallel between his own cloak and amulet adorned body and the dense mass of

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<sup>80</sup> Mediums’ possession performances direct their audiences’ attentions to the affective and energetic components of a medium’s human character that distinguish them from their spirits. Even for many Ndyuka, who are very fond of saying that other people never can be “trusted” (*fiitow*), the kinesic variations that play across another’s face and body are still regularly interpreted as accurate demonstrations of character. By enacting an elementary discontinuity between body and subjectivity, possession performances disrupt inductions about others based on appearance. The performance of mediumship widens the basic uncertainty between “twitch” and a “wink” (Geertz 1973:6). Since kinesic responses like grimaces, eye movements, and gestures are construed as the most telling signs of another persons’ state of mind, possession performances’ dramatic disruptions of emotional inference heighten the impression of mediums’ essential transformations from human to spirit.

covered objects that filled his altar, furthering his conversion into a “sticky” assemblage of “accumulation and containment.”

This parallel heightened the excitement when, at the moment of full possession, Da Mangwa tossed back his cloak to reveal the amulets that crisscrossed his neck and back to perform the enigmatic control these objects betoken. Spirits’ ability to bind, tie down, or ensnare is the hidden source of their power to create coalitions. Ndyuka talismans of this sort are braided, studded with concealed packets of magical medicines (*obiya*) and made with knowledge exclusive to spirits. When animated in mediumistic performances, these objects encourage the perception of discontinuity and transformation from human to spirit. Reserved for the spirit, the golden cloak was an icon of Da Lanti Winti’s essential difference. In performance, the cloak became a dynamic screen that demarcated dramatic moments of transformation. The knotted amulets created a barrier pregnant with possible but impenetrable significance between the audience and the surface of Da Mangwa’s body, showing that Da Mangwa was both bound off and tied together through his spirit’s power.

Concealing everything but his face, Da Mangwa drew attention to the grimaces and twitches which next contorted it. This accentuated the intensity of the painful vocalizations with which he announced the onset of his possession. As will be discussed further in chapter 6, pain in its many forms is a first sign of spirit belonging, of the need to ritually engage the spirit as a ‘co-presence’ (Beliso de Jesús 2014) to force spirits to make clear the nature of their relationship with the human they are afflicting. Through pain and the pervasive anxiety of ruined social relations, spirits announce themselves to a medium’s community as their physical grip on the medium’s body. Da Mangwa

continued with such pained expressions through the initial moments of his transformation, but as his cries resolved into words and phrases, these kinesic facial signs of distress gave way to collected expressions of determined energy and enthusiasm. In this way, the transient pain on Da Mangwa's face re-enacts the suffering that coaxed him to first accept his mediumship. It establishes a parallel of affliction that invites similarly stricken patients to identify with the suffering medium and accept spirits as the cause of suffering.

Suffering is why mediums cannot choose to be possessed, but are instead chosen. Because of this, Ndyuka mediumship and healing represent 'cults of affliction' as described by Turner (1968) and Janzen (1992). Complete in their lineally assembled multiplicity, Ndyuka people often look upon full possession with trepidation because of its associations with the pain of misfortune. Da Sabun tells of frequent injuries that prevented him from working to support his large family, of his house burning down, of long spells of compounded bad luck. Ma Taanga tells of unrelenting sickness or family quarrels, and Da Mangwa describes the onset of his mediumship for Da Lanti Winti as a series of persistent ordeals, like being thrown into snake-infested swamps and furious deliriums.<sup>81</sup>

Da Mangwa's body becomes a kinesic commotion of signs of abject discomfort through facial contortions, and bodily contractions, shivers, and shakes. First, inarticulate pain is performed with a flourish of grimaces and winces in a sort of seizure. Doubling

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<sup>81</sup> Even when subdued by a medium's long practice, entry into possession reiterates audible and visible histories of the suffering that led to mediumship. Such suffering indicates how a spirit's difference is symbiotic, even parasitic on the medium's body. However dramatic the transformation, the medium's body remains the only visible platform for the spirit's identity. The movement from involuntary reflexes of pain that cross a medium's still human face to the gathered expressions of their spirit's energetic determination and self confidence provide a testament of the power of spirits to explain the transient phases of human emotion. This also indicates that even involuntary expressions and the sensations they index can have their origin in the agency of unseen others.

up, Da Mangwa physically folds in on himself as he presents his hopeless vulnerability—the diminished autonomy produced by severe pain. His wailing vocalizations then gather and slowly develop into definite yet unknown names and places. Finally, he expresses himself in a wholly developed, though otherworldly, spirit language that resists his audiences' understanding.

With the first phrases of partially comprehensible exclamations of identity (*I am Tosu Tosu Mgbemë...*), Da Lanti Winti stamped Da Mangwa's feet (*bate*) on the ground and then leaped upright, shaking his maracas (*sekeseke*) as he exploded in song. Jumping up, throwing back his cloak, and energetically stamping his feet, are typical signals of spirit arrival. Such transitions in activity and emotional intensity re-enforce the diminishment of a medium's human personality to enable spirits' outsized antics to compellingly commandeer human bodies.

When a spirit arrives their sudden springing or wild laughing shatters the atmosphere previously generated by a medium's quiet chanting and then easily observed physical discomfort. From a passive patient of another's action, the medium is transformed into a commanding, uncanny figure of immense vitality. Though many of these characteristics are weakened in more sustained oracular consultations, all transformation performances cultivate this edgy potential. In more aggressive possessions, the audience members have to avoid a medium's sudden lunges or flailing arms. Other kinds of Ndyuka spirits, like Kumanti war spirits, perform their presence in their mediums' bodies with extraordinary displays of invulnerability, dancing on broken bottles and in fire, handling red-hot metal, slashing themselves with machetes and climbing thorn-studded trees. People might scream as a possessed medium rushes at

them, or bounds off in a spontaneous fit of hyperventilating passion. Abrupt shifts of the quality of movement and energy make mediums' bodies index spirits' greater capacities for intervening in the material world. In this way, spirits effortlessly eschew human social expectations, injecting the otherwise carefully controlled space of the séance with dramatic unpredictability. This heightens the sense of intrinsic difference between spirits and their human hosts and provides warrant for their sometimes-extravagant epistemic claims.

Like most Ndyuka mediumship, Da Mangwa's spirit only became completely present when he opened Da Mangwa's eyes as his own. Almost all Ndyuka transformation performances call attention to a medium's open or closed eyes. The centrality of gaze direction in structuring face-to-face interaction makes what mediums do with their eyes of particular importance (Enfield 2013; Wirtz 2007).

Mediums begin their transformations with their eyes closed. This creates an equivocal state of maximum physical opacity. Replaced by an abiding uncertainty, the predictive inferences eye movements so often offer are foreclosed. Closed eyes index the mingled indeterminacy of consciousness in sleep and, when combined with wincing and moaning, the ways pain turns personal subjectivity inward to partially wall it off from others' comprehension. Closing the eyes raises questions of interpretation: has the medium lost consciousness? Are they in pain? Since mediums keep their eyes shut throughout the initial surrendering of their subjectivity, suddenly opening them proclaims a drastic change of state. It draws the spirit out into the audience to perform a medium's complete eclipsing by their spirit. The spirit, in turn, uses her or his wide-open eyes to confront the audience with a disconcertingly unexpected explosion of energy. This roots



a spirit in the perspective of their medium while emphasizing that spirit's difference from their human medium.

In this way, Ndyuka spirits harness the kinesic modalities of communication to maximize the impression of ontological discontinuity. These kinesic elements heighten the powerful disjuncture between the medium and their spirit, *and* spirits and their human audiences. The unpredictable indeterminacy of a medium's sudden actions strengthens the gestalt sense of the spirit as an intervening agent essentially different from, yet in physical coalition with, their medium. Introducing an unpredictable threshold into these performances recalibrates many of the otherwise powerful rhetorical effects produced by a medium's pained surrender to their spirit. The same emotive shudders, grimaces, and moans, are transduced into the commanding voice of a spirit with complete control over human bodies.

### **Paralinguistic Modalities of Possession Performance**

Da Mangwa's spirit builds from the affective and energetic potency of kinesic and paralinguistic communication to a fully agentive voice in spirit language. In this way, the causal force of spirit language and agency are combined. Painful groans are revealed as a symptom of in-dwelling spirit agency just waiting its chance to gain mature linguistic expression. Mediums regularly tell stories of unknowingly resisting their spirits, and the immense relief after ritual mediation decisively sanctions it to speak by 'breaking' (*booko*) the spirit's 'tongue' (*tongo*). In re-performing this in possession, mediums demonstrate the primacy of the asymmetrical relation of human to spirit, member to lineage, and knowledge to ignorance in defining Ndyuka lives.

As previously mentioned, Ndyuka does not have a word that corresponds to the English term possession. Ndyuka emphasis on human subjective multiplicity implies that possession is, in some sense, the default state of existence with variable intensities of expression. Spirits “cry out” or “moan” (*bali*) from “the head” (*ede*) of the human ‘horses’ (*asi*) whom they ‘catch’ (*kisi*). Burping, moaning, wailing, and other reactive, affect lading paralinguistic expressions prime the eclipse of mediums by their spirits. However expressed, a mediums’ transformation performance marks human-spirit coalition as involving physical pain and loss of motor control in ways that depict the separateness of human ego from its corporal form, illustrating Ndyuka conceptions of soul and life force. Almost all the Ndyuka I spoke with declared that life is endowed by invisible, self-determining, and conscious vital souls (*yeye*). Ndyuka possession performances draw on the ruptures of life and death, sleeping and waking, to objectify these souls’ effects and volitions within human bodies.

*Bali*, the Ndyuka word expressing spirit possession, refers to strong paralinguistic expressions of emotion, like anger, vocalizations of pain, and the cries of animals. This breadth of reference highlights how the Ndyuka term integrates connotations of overpowering emotion or pain with associations of essential difference. Semantically, the word *bali* unites disparate kinds of phenomenon into descriptions of both reaction and the relation of difference, and the patiency that reaction implies. To yell is to register the effect of something on you, to create a sense of passive vulnerability before someone or something else. When an animal is described as “crying,” it means something similar to

the English: an animal or a person is reactively responding to something like violation, pain, or fear.<sup>82</sup>

Painful vocalizations help re-articulate the orientation of the medium's identity, providing powerful signs that the medium's body is beyond their human agency. This is evident in the above transcript as Da Mangwa's inarticulate moaning of a relatively standardized series of groans and "vocables" (Briggs 1996: 198): "*Hn.....hmmhn.... mmmmmhn... hnhn...uhueh...uhu....hmmm...uhoh.*" To quote Briggs' discussion of Warao healing, such "...voice qualities provide acoustic evidence for the status of the sounds as sonic embodiments...audible traces of the participation of the spirits" (Briggs: 199). These expressive actions are quasi-conventionalized "response cries" (Goffman 1983), regularly associated with specific classes of spirits. For example ghosts of the violently killed generally gurgle up in their mediums as growing sobs and plaintive howls that soon expand to provoke Ndyuka audiences to collective grief.

This is one way that Ndyuka possession performances use affective vocatives to establish "phatic" (Jakobson 1960) contact with their audience. Emotive cries and grimaces push observers to accept the frame break between the medium's initial personality and its replacement in the same body. This division entails conclusions, forcing the audience to infer some essential meaning from what they see.

Accordingly, paralinguistic "nonsense" vocalizations like those that initiate Da Mangwa's spirit's arrival and other paralinguistic and kinesic elements, play a critical role in structuring the "implicit denotation" that mediumistic performances create (Briggs

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<sup>82</sup> Though Ndyuka attribute language to animals, they also freely admit that humans do not understand these languages (though stories are told about older people who knew the language of birds).

1996).<sup>83</sup> When Da Mangwa begins to moan, it is unclear who is doing the moaning. The audience is presented with a disconcerting screen of unspecified experience positioned between the medium and their spirit. The qualities of the vocalizations indicate pain or discomfort without stipulating what kind. This invites sympathy while holding any explicit inference at bay. Slowly, this inchoate stream of expression begins to congeal into fragmentary phonemes, then definite words in Ampuku Luango. This movement between degrees of comprehensibility marks a transition from the self-estrangement of pain to the idiosyncratic certainty of a coherent spirit identity.

### **Linguistic Modalities of Coalitional Performance**

Spirit languages, like spirit talk, combine incomprehensibility as an icon of spirit difference with patient expectations of accessible meaning (Schieffelin 1985, 1996). If a patient understands a spirit too well, they might fail to distinguish the medium from their spirit. If a spirit is completely incomprehensible, they will be unable to intervene in patients' lives (at least without submitting to a third party). Both possibilities destroy the effect of coalition. While there are many contexts in which spirits may appear and be silent or only speak in impenetrable registers of spirit language, for spirits to come into their own as stable social actors they must blend an immediately understandable voice with palpable alterity. Combining sense and nonsense discursively positions spirits in the liminal social space that makes their epistemic claims compelling (Briggs 1996; Wirtz 2007).

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<sup>83</sup> Demarcating these boundaries attempts to resolve an abiding problem raised by the multiplicity of coalitional personhood. Instead of the volatile coalition urged upon patients, a medium's spirit seeks to remedy the evasiveness of multiplicity by assuming a unique identity even as so doing recapitulates the problem by speaking through another's body.

In the above transcript, coalition is initiated when Luisa's ghost addresses the initially un-possessed Da Mangwa as his spirit. Almost no time passes between the ghost's invocation and the beginning of Da Mangwa's wailing. When Da Lanti Winti starts to "possess" (*bali a tapu*) his medium, he then commences his transformation chant (*nyanfalu*). In situations where one spirit does not invoke another, the medium will generally sing to themselves. A mostly unintelligible (to the audience) chant sung for a few bars like "*Abato abato, akongo a miti ayaya. A bunu sa bunu nsai abunkata ooo*" is frequently enough to initiate possession.

Such songs start out as the medium singing a spirit's song to the spirit and then pivots to become the spirit singing the song to their audience. Thus, even in the absence of a dialogue, it is necessary to preserve dialogism. Though the chant can be loud or soft, it creates a sonic haze accompanied by expressions of discomfort that loosens the impression of a medium's self-control as their strengthening spirit displaces them.<sup>84</sup> That this is audibly performed directs the audiences' attention to the details of the performance, "keying" (Goffman 1974) them to the changes unfolding before them.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> This depends on the manifest dissonance between Da Mangwa's unaltered bodily form and the spirit's transformed voice. While voices may be marked off by the use of spirit languages, odd locutions, and fervid emotions, with the exception of paralinguistic elements like volume, tone, and pitch the basic phonological qualities of a medium's voice remain unchanged. The medium continues to sound like themselves. The voice of a spirit is less an alteration of fundamental features of a medium's speaking voice than of the code and emotion spirits enunciate. Indeed, even these features keeping the medium and their spirit's identities separate tend to erode, particularly when the medium is attempting to expand their influence.

<sup>85</sup> Ndyuka transformation performances enact that the "I" of the spirit is not the "I" of the medium. In occupying the same body, the spatial orientation of the medium and their spirit remains identical. In a spirit's use of personal pronouns like "I" (*mi*) or "you" (*yu* or *i*) and spatial or temporal adverbs like here or now, the deictic positioning of the medium and their addressees remain unaltered. Performing effective displacement/replacement of the medium's human ego is pivotal to the spirits appearing unimpeded by human spatiotemporal boundaries allowing them to exist coalitionally within and beyond their human hosts. This is crucial for the spirit to be granted a specific identity. All of this equally depends on a performative inversion of important components of "production format" as approached by Goffman (1981). Though it is apparent that the body of the medium is "animating" the spirit, the effect is the opposite—that the spirit is in fact using the medium's body. This reversal takes advantage of the same manipulation of a speaker's identity, making them merely a mediator to whom only minimal responsibility for their message or other actions can be ascribed. The intensification of such a routine "footing" (1981) in interaction is central to possession's efficacy.

Ndyuka spirits use a variety of different “languages” to communicate their identities.<sup>86</sup> Spirit languages like Ampuku barrage listeners with mysterious names and baffling words. Once the spirit achieves identifiable speech as an Ampuku, he remains—at least ideologically—unintelligible to those uninitiated in its use.

As with many spirits, Da Lanti Winti most first forcefully demonstrate that he speaks Ampuku, before, to better engage his human audience, switching to speak distorted but intelligible Saramaka.

How possession performances embody or contradict regnant language ideologies directly shapes perceptions of coalition as in-dwelling difference. Spirit languages are efficacious because of their “interdiscursive” (Silverstein 2005) relation with colloquial Ndyuka. Pragmatically, spirit languages like Loango, Papa, or Kumanti, are registers of Ndyuka. Such strong syntactical affinities permit Ndyuka listeners to better appreciate the uncanny phonological and lexical differences of spirit languages. Ndyuka spirit languages are what might be called *xenolects*—highly emblematic codes that use linguistic differences to project spirits’ essential otherness. They do so to demarcate spirits as different from humans in ways familiar to, but not wholly intelligible for, Ndyuka listeners. Ndyuka listeners focus on those elements of the code most redolent of differences between kinds of people, kinds of spirits, and the past and present. In this

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<sup>86</sup> As the linguist Robert Borges’ work (2014) on Kumanti, a related (or even competing) Ndyuka ritual language has shown that, from a linguistic standpoint, the language consists primarily of Ndyuka syntax but employing a contrasting phonology and lexicon. According to Borges the major differences between Ndyuka and Kumanti “include several additional phonemes and expanded phonotactic possibilities, nominal predication, use of honorifics for non-human referents, occasional OV word order, and the lack (from Ndyuka perspective) of a location word in locative constructions (2014: 62).” This indicates that it is the phonemic and semantic properties that are most apparent to speakers and hearers. Price (2008) and Hurault (1982) have traced a substantial number of these words to diverse West and West Central African languages (Akuapim Twi, Eve, Kikongo, Fanti, Ga, etc.). Borges concludes that the majority of the remaining etymological traceable Kumanti words are from diverse Surinamese sources, particularly Saamaka and Sranan, of which a substantial number are “anachronisms”, “lexemes attested in 18<sup>th</sup> century Sranan but no longer used today (2014: 62).”

way, spirit languages act to foreground the symbiotic and intergenerational presence of spirits in human lives.<sup>87</sup>

Based on available discourses about what languages are and how they function, such indexical cross-pollination between human and spirit language permits co-participating patients to infer different communicative possibilities from possession events (Irvine 1982). As spirits are subject to a heightened sense of uncertainty, their ultimate recognition depends on the impeccable iconization of their claims. Perceptions that a medium is unable to communicate in the right spirit language can decisively undermine their declarations of authority.

Da Mangwa provided a good example of this. After we attended an séance giving by a young Kwinti neighbor, I asked Da Mangwa what he thought of the medium's spirit. He replied that the spirit was "no good" (*á be bun*), because he was "*mokisi*" (mixed). Da Mangwa said that the Kwinti medium had promiscuously combined Kumanti, the language of powerful African war spirits, with Yooka, the language of ancestral ghosts.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Following Irvine, Wirtz (2007; 2014a; 2014b) helpfully argues that ritual unintelligibility is not *a priori* recognizable to participants. Due to countervailing linguistic ideologies, people within the same performance may interpret a given instance of possession in dissimilar ways (Irvine 1982). According to her account of Santería mediumship, unintelligibility must be created with the help of a medium's ritual co-participants. Wirtz shows how devotees ascribe unintelligibility to Afro-Cuban deities in ways that reinforce ritual hierarchies. By speaking a ritual register that is meta-discursively accounted unintelligible, possessing deities position more senior ritual practitioners to act as translators for less knowledgeable junior supplicants. Following Werbner (1973), Wirtz ascribes much of the efficacy of Santería ritual speech to the "superabundance of meaning" generated by deities' ambiguous language and its glossing by un-possessed others. She suggests that this is productive of the distancing that serves for practitioners as "proof" of divine presence. Precisely through speaking in ways that exceed or evade everyday sense, gods position themselves at the apex of a hierarchy of meaning where everyday human speech is revealed as subordinate and presumptuous. Even when what a deity says may be fully intelligible to their human interlocutor, supplicants disavow their understanding in acts of submission to the deity and the ritual hierarchy through which they make themselves understood. Wirtz's analysis demonstrates that ritual unintelligibility is not simply a functional matter of denying knowledge to shore up authority. Instead, she argues that the audience participates in framing unintelligibility. Audience members actively embrace indeterminate messages to construe the meaning of words and phrases in ways that more accurately address their problems. The interpretive work enjoined by unintelligibility helps instill interdependency between listeners. Spirit unintelligibility is thus a semiotic asset for the growth and integration of ritual communities even as it encourages suspicion (Wirtz 2005, 2007; see also Schieffelin 1985, 1996).

<sup>88</sup> Multiple Ndyuka people remarked to me that like people, animals also possess their own language (*tongo, taal*).<sup>88</sup> People would point to bird song or monkey cries as sure evidence that animals spoke to one another in the same way as human beings. These differences are iconic in respect to a code and indexical in terms of different sets, contrasting birds to monkeys, snakes to fishes. These differences also correspond to those that exist between types of people. In

An Ampuku spirit, he said, would never have done that. Da Mangwa explained that spirits should only speak either their own languages or those fitting for their audiences. Da Mangwa gave Javanese and a Hindustanis as an example. You knew that a person was a genuine member of a population because they speak their language “purely” (*kiin*), and he expected the same from mediums. Da Mangwa went on to declare that an Ampuku spirit would never have spoken as the Kwinti medium did, and disparaged the medium’s spirit for helping his “horse” seduce women (as the Kwinti man was currently doing with Da Mangwa’s granddaughter). In this instance, Da Mangwa multiply conflates linguistic and ontological difference. A spirit, as a member of a distinct “nation” (*nasi*), must fluently perform correct linguistic identity in order to demonstrate any essential alterity.<sup>89</sup>

Because they expect a natural language, many Ndyuka participants in oracular rituals are predisposed by Ndyuka language ideologies to attempt to interpret spirit talk. Linguistic continuities between Suriname’s many human and spirit languages invite hearers into the ritual speech but exclude the average listener from complete comprehension. Spirit languages’ “co-efficient of weirdness” (Malinowski 1935) regulates “discourse accessibility” (Perrino 2007) to create active divisions among ritual participants, both between medium and audience, and among which listeners can claim ritual knowledge.

Depending on participants’ gender, age, and social position, supposed comprehensibility invites variable responses. Older participants or ritual specialists might

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this way, Ndyuka possession performances take advantage of the affordances of Ndyuka language ideology to perform radical transformation, recruiting assumptions about language and essence to imply that humans are dependent coalitions of distinct kinds of agentive beings.

<sup>89</sup> I would suggest that this evaluation is only heightened by the position of Dutch as the Surinamese sole official language. In as much people tend to think through colonial descriptions of ethnicity that take language as one of its constituent features, the fact that people almost always participate in Dutch defined formal contexts in politics, at the office, or in schools as ethnics, Dutch usage calls attention to a presupposed ethnic essentialism as much as it serves to transcend it.



reason through analogy with other esoteric languages and from familiar patterns of everyday language use. Younger participants or those lacking claims to esoteric knowledge may disavow the possibility of knowing, deferring any interpretation to more senior members of a consulting party.

Accordingly, spirit languages' commonalities with everyday speech then, are another affordance for both spirit intimacy and difference.<sup>90</sup> Unlike a completely unfamiliar code, spirit languages clearly convey a definite history of language use, but one that is indexical of differences in generational, gendered, or lineal expertise. Thus, language serves as the preeminent marker of natural difference between beings and degrees of efficacious agency.

### **Giving Spirits Voice in Coalition: Teline and Spirit Identity**

The pragmatic sorting of identities describe above is a critical component of the social process by which coalition is made legible in the lives of Ndyuka persons and kin groups. Ndyuka oracular rituals work to make people and lineages ever aware that they contain relations with distinct human and spirit others. They do so by granting spirits voices through which they can express themselves as effective causes in the materials of social life. Though Da Mangwa is completely transformed into Da Lanti Winti by the end of the excerpt presented above, language use remains vital for stabilizing his voice as a distinct agent.

In Da Mangwa's transformation invocation, Luisa's address helps key Da Lanti Winti's appearance. While possessed, she and Da Mangwa sit in his shrine room on the low stools associated with ancestors and spirits on opposite sides of the visually

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<sup>90</sup> These distinctions in access to ritual power are specifically "ontologized" (Espirito Santo 2015), given in terms of the active co-presence of other classes of spirit agents in peoples' everyday life.



upon taking full possession of their medium. As in exclamations like: “I am Kwananumba, I am Kwananumba, I am Kwananumba Keke of Dwaini Sumbaa”, the *telinen* of a spirit explains exactly who they are, but with names and titles mainly unrecognizable to Ndyuka audiences. Mediums and their spirits perform their identities through these lists of names and titles. Lists of names complement similar genealogies invoked by mediums during the libations that begin oracular consultations. Invocations sequentially invoke all the major deities of Ndyuka territory along with the speaker’s ancestors and teachers.

A medium must narrate themselves as the right kind of confluence of past relations within an expansive hierarchy that includes the great gods of the Ndyuka territory and the creator God (*Masaa Gadu*). Genealogical recitations triangulate the spirit in relation to the medium and their ascendant relations with their ancestors. As both singular persons and lineal collectivities own and are owned by spirits, for a medium to claim knowledge is to reiterate its ancestral sources. Genealogy is a warrant for the spirit’s appearance, a proclamation that the spirit has been imparted to the medium through legitimate relations with the past.<sup>91</sup> When emitted from the mouth of a medium next to their shrine in front of an audience, this list of names poetically positions the

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<sup>91</sup> Ndyuka genealogies provide proof that a spirit must manifest in a particular medium, demonstrating that human bodies are preeminently expressions of the ancestral relations that conferred a spirit on a medium’s lineage. At the same time, by communicating that the medium simply occupies a genealogical position in a line of transmission, such lists of occult identities further contrast spirits and mediums, trans-generational spirit power to human relations of descent. This difference between a spirit and their medium is made explicit in the spirit’s *telinen*. In listing his names, places of residence and origin, Da Lanti Winti positions himself as a summation of diverse, and largely unknown identities and capacities. Instead of a hereditary recipient of ancestrally transmitted power, a spirit announces its identity through a largely opaque assortment of names and titles. If a medium like Da Mangwa has to perform his specific identity as a passive transmitter of lineal authority and expertise, his spirit contrarily proclaims autonomous ownership of many identities and proprietary powers. In doing so, spirits incorporate a full array of powers and titles, each of which contributes to their claims of spirit identity and extended agency and knowledge.

medium as a legitimate intermediary, even as it denies their audience the precise meaning of these titles.

Recitations of *telingen* locate mediums and spirits comparatively within their respective chronotopes—“the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships” as they unfold in social action (Bakhtin 1981: 84). This “cross chronotope alignment” (Perrino 2007) helps translate the spirit into the here and now while also implying an essential spatial and temporal distance between them and the present occupied by the medium and their fellow humans.

Places like “*Dwaini Sumbaa*” or “*Daingo*” are not locations known to humans, but indeterminate places in the spirit’s invisible world that indicate spirit’s general immortality and efficacy. To quote the Ampuku spirit of another Ndyuka oracle I worked with:

*Everything I help. That is how I am here, for the whole world all around. I am helping humanity. I help humanity, but humanity does not help me. I know why. The help for humans that is available, when I take possession (lit. cry out in in the head), when there in the head, I say I have not come to complain (or slander). I do not come to drink, but come with my mouth with words for the world. Then my words are the world’s words. But I am not God. God is the elder (or ancestor) for all things in the world. God is the elder of the spirits. But the power... which God gives spirits, he didn’t give blood, absolutely never! Because, do you know why? Spirits do not go to Adyaniba (the land of the dead). But living people go to Adyaniba. Then you are not stronger than me. If I wanted, when I leave here... then I will count, before I get to five I will have arrived at Akwaadensanu River. I go with the wind. But you go on foot. With boats. With cars. Those things. I fly like a butterfly.<sup>92</sup>*

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<sup>92</sup> “Ala sondi mi ta yebeti (yeepi). Fa mi de aki, fu hii goonliba lontu. Mi ta yeepi libisembe. Mi ta yeepi libisembe, ma libisembe ná e yeepi mi. Mi sabi fu andi hède. A yeepi fu libisembe di a abi, di mi bali kon a hède, te a de hède, mi taki mi á kon fu kuutu. Mi á kon fu bebe, ma kon ku mi buka ku mi woto a goonliba. Da mi woto goonliba woto (taki). Ma mi ná Santa. A Santa a gaanwan fu tuu sondi a goonliba. Santa a gaanwan fu winti. Ma a kakiti... di Santa gi winti, á gi buulu eng, keti keti bahingo. Bika i sabi fu on san hède? Winti a ta go Adyaniba. Ma libisembe ta go Adyaniba. Da yu á taanga fu mi. Efu mi wani, te mi komoto aki... da mi teli doo wan feifi, da mi doo na Akwaadensanu liba. Mi ta waka kun wentu. Ma yu ta waka ku futu. Waka ku boto. Waka ku oto, den sondi dati. Ma mi e sei kuma babe.”

Such mysterious locales as Adyaniba or Dwaini Sumbaa locate spirits in a geography of belonging that subsumes the more limited verities of human knowledge. In this way, fully situated identities emerge from a medium's transformation performances. *Telinen* enable spirits to be both internal to and outside of Ndyuka bodies and history. They provide an alternative description of the world that shows the shallowness of human knowledge of the identities that rule the world. Practices of naming beyond human knowledge open up a chasm between the spirits who invisibly span these realities and the prosaic limits of ordinary, bounded human existence in the visible world: "Then my words are the world's words."

The cloud of esoteric names and claims that surround spirits like Da Lanti Winti or Da Boonmila double the distance between spirit speaker and human hearer while concurrently condensing it into the space of a medium's body. This the spirit fills through description of what the world is really like as they, and not humans, see it. The spirit's perspective is conveyed by this superior vantage point, an elsewhere that for humans is both nowhere and everywhere. Spirits can thus exist in a state of limited transcendence of the deictic conventions that imprison humans in one kind of here and now.

This spirit perspective both necessitates and enables coalition by permitting spirits to occupy and exceed human awareness. Cross chronotope coordination in a spirit's speech helps convey what must be the case if this specific combination of words, gestures, and objects is what it claims to be. In accepting this frame, a patient equally accepts the spirit as the agent whose presence explains this complex assemblage and their ability to talk sensibly about unknown or hidden times and places. In this way, the

intelligibility of continuous identities is exposed as contingent on these other relations with these present but concealed locations.

Taken together, difficulties in understanding spirits afford coalition by producing a particular distribution of authority and concern within a spirit's audience. Dissonances in comprehensibility make the meanings of oracular messages consciously participatory, while pushing the establishment of clear hierarchies of knowledge among co-participants. This is how older people and more experienced mediums come to most actively integrate spirit actions into a single script about the need for collective action for their accompanying family groups.

Though, in most oracular consultations, the spirit occupies an apical position in the knowledge hierarchy the ritual creates, it is assisted in this by its' human co-participants. In the consultation that followed the above excerpted transcript, Da Mangwa's sons took the lead, deciding what Da Lanti Winti's more ambiguous communications meant for their mother's health. When Da Lanti Winti poured out part of a large bottle (*dyogo*) of Parbo beer, the whole family gathered around to interpret the pattern it made, while Da Lanti Winti cryptically laughed. After much conjecturing among all the participants, Ba Kwasi, Da Mangwa's eldest son, affirmed the consensus that the beer indicated that a Papa boa constrictor spirit was the cause of Ma Be's illness. This was confirmed the next day, when, on visiting her in the hospital she became possessed by a Papa spirit. In this way, spirit transformation performances prime the enactments of the internal and external coalitions they almost inevitable urge.

My research suggests that the coalitional creation of knowledge—and thus personal agency—like that communicated by oracular mediumship—remains axiomatic

in contemporary Ndyuka life. As depicted above, many Ndyuka restlessly search for the knowledge that will make them decisive actors capable of specifying the moral terms of their relations. Though particular gold miners or skilled gardeners can lay claim to special domains of knowledge, the potency of more general social knowledge—like that concerning the collective past or the others’ hidden motives—is derived from its origins just outside unaided human understanding. To invoke a frequent Ndyuka usage, such knowledge “comes” (*kon*), arriving from invisible resources intimate to and beyond the person who marshals it. This dependency on knowledge as preeminently a manifestation of relations of difference between human and spirit, old and young, matriline and patriline, imparts Ndyuka agency its particular volatile multiplicity. Personal action needs to be continually shown to express collectively relevant ethical ends. In such a world, however impressive the ramparts of hidden knowledge conferred by a person’s alliances with the unseen, claims to knowledge are continually subjected to doubts about their moral legitimacy. Ndyuka people continually struggle to position themselves as the appropriate kind of coalitional agent, both self-controlled and completely passive before more resolutely moral sources of authority derived from the ancestral past.

As the personification of earlier acts of healing, Ndyuka oracular mediums are key arbiters of the impasses of coalition. They create dramatic evidence for coalition by causing it to concurrently appear in their own bodies and those of others. These performances make spirits into the active presences needed to imply the natural limitations of human knowledge and awareness that obscure coalitional consciousness. This is achieved by first re-describing un-possessed ritual participants as vulnerable, volatile human-spirit coalitions, and then changing the composition of their coalition

through medicinal washings and offerings. Ndyuka oracular interactions are thus a critical context for instituting participants' fully compound identities. In practice, oracular performances enable the emergence of the correct composition of knowledge from the multiple purposes of mediums, clients, and spirits, and the numerous historical relations that account for their fusion. This chapter explores how Ndyuka oracular possession performances of spirit agency create an implicit relational sensibility of coalition from the volatile impasse of autonomy and interdependence that constitutes each Ndyuka person.

Spirits act as the ambivalent enforcers of this contradiction and thus Ndyuka coalitional sensibilities. Just as collaborations between parliamentary political parties redefine their identities and goals, spirits continually alter how Ndyuka people are able to conceive of the nature of personhood and self-interest. Spirits create a steady background of invisible volition with which Ndyuka people must continually negotiate. Coalition develops with Ndyuka attempts to integrate spirits' superior knowledge and power—the essence of their uncertainty—into projects of personal and collective self-making such as kinds of therapy I now turn to address.

### **Obiya and the Performance of Coalition**

The central aim in Ndyuka oracular ritual is to heal afflicted people by providing therapeutic rituals that alter the coalitions from which persons are assembled. They do so by making the medicines (*obiya*) that transform their patients' own coalitional compositions. *Obiya* is quite possibly the master concept that enables Ndyuka to achieve coalition and infuse its sensibility into the conduct of their everyday lives.<sup>93</sup> Most Ndyuka

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<sup>93</sup> The word *obiya* (more usually written *obeah*) is of uncertain provenance but found throughout the Dutch and Anglophone Caribbean. Unlike in Suriname where—whatever the inroads made by Christian condemnations—*obiya* is often understood as something positive, in the English speaking Caribbean,



say that God (*Masaa Gadu*) created *obiya*, making it a general principle that pervades the world.<sup>94</sup>

For Ndyuka, *obiya* signifies both spirits and a generic class of medicinal therapy. *Obiya* can be a simple herbal preparation, or it can be an elaborate cult of possession. In either case, *obiya* alters the composition of human agency to heal, extending the capacity for effective action by fusing people with the potent qualities of spirits and a diverse pharmacopeia of semiotically dense ingredients (Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering 2004; Price 2007). The multifaceted richness of *obiya*'s semiotic form(s) is critical for appreciating how Ndyuka come to perceive coalition in and through the human body. Rituals “make” (*meke*) *obiya* through combining materials like herbs, clay, alcohol, and tools with many overlapping rules (*weiti*), prohibitions (*kina*), spirit languages (*winti tongo*), songs (*singi*), dances (*dansi*), and prayers (*begi*) in performance. In keeping with Ndyuka ideas about the body as a field of relations, ritual washing (*wasi obiya*) is a major means of *obiya* production and application.

In what follows, I describe a typical *obiya* healing session as performed by Da Sabun and Ma Taanga, the Ndyuka husband and wife oracles with whom I most closely

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including Guyana, *obeah* is synonymous with witchcraft and superstition—still the limit of alterity for the politics of defining “respectable” religion (Handler and Bilby 2001; Paton 2009; Khan 2013; Crosson 2015; Rocklin 2015).

<sup>94</sup> Ndyuka represent knowledge of *obiya* as shared by animals such as jaguars (*bubu; felidae*) and peccaries (*pingo; tayassu pecari*), as well as humans. Quite a few of my Ndyuka friends nonchalantly told me they had stumbled across animals making or washing in *obiya* during hunting trips. “First time” (*fositen*) sacred histories often relate children being captured by animals like harpy eagles (*ngonini; harpia harpya*) so that they may be treated and taught a particular *obiya*. Another story that compellingly illustrates the complex ways the practice and concept of *obiya* actuates and embodies Ndyuka coalitional sensibilities concerns Tata Ogi's kinship with the Dyu clan. After the ancestors of all the Ndyuka clans first entered the Tapanahoni region, Tata Ogi came to them to demand a wife. While all the other clans refused, the Dyu proudly offered one of their young women (often associated with Ma Susana, perhaps the greatest Ndyuka ancestress, thought to have used her powers to kill Boni, leader of the rival Aluku Maroon nation in 1793). From this union issued all the Dyu clan's great *obiya*. Therefore, the Dyu claim Tata Ogi as an affine (*swagi*) and their proprietary *obiya* as matrilineal relatives.

collaborated. Early one morning in May 2013, my field assistant John and I went to meet Da Sabun and Ma Tranga at their home in Paramaribo. After a short wait, the patient (henceforward Ba Makus) finally showed up with the requisite ritual ingredients. He was in his late 20's and already a supervisor at a corporate goldmine. Atypically for forest treatments, Ba Makus came alone, his parents and siblings having all become Pentecostals.

The week before, Ba Makus had consulted Ma Taanga's possessing Amerindian (*Ingi*) spirit, Pa Kodyo, about his general sense of malaise. Though Ba Makus attributed his problems to co-worker resentment of his recent promotion, Pa Kodyo informed him that he was actually suffering from a "family problem"—a *bakuu* demon inflicted on him by a near relative's greed. Ndyuka Christians are habitually suspected by their unconverted family of having converted to evade immoral contracts with *bakuu*. When abandoned by their Christian owners, these *bakuu* persecuted their unconverted kin with renewed ferocity. Appropriately, Pa Kodyo stipulated that Ba Makus needed to "wash in the forest" (*wasi a busi*), undertake an expensive ritual cleansing to exorcise and recompose the coalition of spirit relations that determined his wellbeing.<sup>95</sup>

The ritual washing was conducted at a forest clearing by an old sluice gate on the Suriname River outside the town of Paranam, a 45-minute drive from Da Sabun and Ma Taanga's home. This particular place was popular with oracular healers from Paramaribo and bore signs of heavy ritual use. Cloth flags hung limply from the foliage amidst large

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<sup>95</sup> Though a patient might assemble the ingredients prescribed by an oracle to wash at home, the medium and their possessing spirit generally needed to perform the ritual themselves to imbue the *obiya* with the appropriate efficacy/capacity (*makiti*). If an oracle did not live in a forest shrine (*obiya kampu*), in more pressing circumstances clients would pay them to take them to the forest to administer the *obiya* (*wasi a busi*) in more powerfully pure surroundings.

piles of ritual refuse like beer bottles heaped under the trunks of fabric girded trees rising from the river's rushing stream of frothing brown water.

The ritual was to make *obiya* to “clean and remove evil influences” (*wasi puu takuu sani*).<sup>96</sup> *Obiya* is the central technology Ndyuka use for “actualizing” (Blier 1995: 101) coalitional relatedness. The term itself is practically untranslatable, but is perhaps best understood, like Kongo *minkisi* (MacGaffey 1988, 2000, 2001) or Fon *bocio* (Blier 1995), as a spirit-medicinal “complex”. Wyatt MacGaffey's (2000: 95) encapsulation of Kongo *minkisi* thus equally describes Ndyuka *obiya* which, “register in a form both concrete and dynamic the characteristic experiences of...life” As with Kongo *minkisi*, Ndyuka *obiya* fulfill all manner of functions, “some related to such lasting features as the climate, the problems of fertility, or the stresses of social competition, others to new diseases or political pressures. This registration was not passive, since the rituals...mediated the same stresses and pressures; indeed, the life process was outlined and guided by them” (MacGaffey 2000: 95).

After we arrived, Da Sabun and Ma Taanga's first act was to put protective chords (*dyemba*) around their shoulders. This was to “close the body” (*tapu a sikin*) from dangerous external influences. Da Sabun followed this by placing a medicine filled ceramic bottle (*kanaki*)<sup>97</sup> at the foot of an *obiya* staff (*obiya tiki*) and a long dagger (*dokwe*) that he drove into the ground in the center of the clearing.

Da Sabun next went to different locations in the clearing and by the stream to “pay” (*pai*) the place's various resident spirits. First he offered the tutelary earth spirit

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<sup>96</sup> There were two main reasons it needs to be conducted in the forest: Firstly, cities are unclean sites of concentrated failure to observe ritual prohibitions (like the confinement of menstruating women). Secondly, as an exorcism, Ba Makus' ritual washing would abandon the afflicting *bakuu* into the undifferentiated forest beyond human settlement.

<sup>97</sup> This is generally a repurposed bottle of *genever*, imported Dutch gin.

(*goonmama*) a spherical lump of white kaolin clay (*pemba*), a bottle of local produced anise flavored alcohol (*switi sopi*), and a “for no reason” egg (*kowownu igi*).<sup>98</sup> This was to persuade the place to “retain the thing [the *bakuu*] we have brought to leave there.” By throwing a parrot’s tail feather (*papakai tei*) inserted in a cowry shell (*papa moni*) and another lump of kaolin into the water, Da Subun paid the resident river spirit (*wataa wawenu*)<sup>99</sup> so that it would “retain the evil and not let it be carried from there by the river.” He then took a remaining kaolin lump, smashed it, and threw into in the forest so that the forest too would restrain the *bakuu* from escaping its confinement.

Next, Da Sabun took two large plastic tubs out of the trunk of my car. These were filled with different herbal recipes he had previously ground in a mortar. On the opposite side of the clearing from where he had prayed, there was a little thicket of undergrowth at the base of some trees. This screened another small clearing containing further flags and ritual remains. There Da Sabun placed the first tub on a blue-black cloth and added crushed garlic (*konofluku*), “*blauw*” (lumps of chalky detergent), an “abandoned egg” (*fegete igi*), and a bottle of beer, and filled it with water he drew from the river in order to make “stench water” (*tingi wataa*).

According to many Ndyuka, “everything has its power” (*ala sani abi en makiti*) for causal action. *Obiya* preparations, however, generally stress botanical components, principally leaves. While Da Sabun did not share the pharmacopeia he used for this particular ritual, like with the Kongo *minkisi* studied by MacGaffey (2000: 83), its components were certainly ordered in terms of a hierarchy of metonymic and metaphorical properties. For example, one plant commonly used in Ndyuka *obiya* is

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<sup>98</sup> This is a regular chicken egg, distinguished from a *fegete igi*, an egg that has been abandoned by the hen that laid it.

<sup>99</sup> Which means money of the Boas Constrictor spirits. The term has its origins from Popo (a slaving port in what is now the Republic of Benin) from which this class of spirits derives its name.

*kankyankama*, an epiphyte that grows high up on the branches of large trees. *Obiyaman* explained that this “put it [the plant] above” (*a tapu*) the problems it was used to treat. Another plant, like *amooman* derived its results from its name, which means “greater than man.” Women are said to use this plant to control their husbands, and that men deployed it against their business or romantic competitors.

These semiotic properties are part of the “capacities” (*kakiti*) with which each plant’s “spirit” (*yeye*) is naturally endowed. To guarantee potency, leaves for different classes of *obiya* must be gathered with ritual procedures that adequately invoke and compensate a plant’s spirit and place of residence.<sup>100</sup> A person making *obiya* must respect certain prohibitions and pick the right leaves in the correct manner and order. *Obiya* could only come together as a coalition of combined force when each stage of its assembly was observed with due respect for the agency and power of all of the elements from which it was composed.

*Obiya* is the efficacy that results when an aggregate becomes a coalition capable of coordinated action. For most of the Ndyuka with whom I spoke, though, every *obiya* recipe would also have one herbal ingredient that would serve as its “boss” (*basi*), the identity of which could only be known by the oracle and spirit who made it. Just as the Ndyuka Paramount chief (*Gaanman*) ties twelve separate clans into a single Ndyuka nation, this master ingredient ensures a productive coalition among a recipe’s component ingredients. That is why *obiya* are concurrently subjects and objects, conscious agents and lists of ingredients, and this is what makes *obiya* capable of changing the similarly aggregate capacities of the human body.

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<sup>100</sup> Ndyuka make a salient distinction between the leaves collected in the village (*kondee, ganda*) and the forest (*busi, gaan busi*). This is not a pure, binary distinction, however, as they also distinguish between varying stages of transition between gardens (which represent an interstitial space) and full forest.

After placing the first plastic tub, Da Sabun cut two fronds from one of the numerous palm varieties that dominate Suriname's rainforests. These he tied together at top and bottom, and then bound to a stick he planted upright in the ground. Da Sabun then lit a *busi kanda* (a candle made from tree sap) and put it next to the palm fronds. Walking back to the staff shrine he had earlier erected, he poured it a libation from a shallow calabash bowl while reciting a prayer. As with all Ndyuka prayers, this followed a strict hierarchy descending from the semi-otiose creator (*Masaa Gadu*). Such prayers perform the logic of coalition by reciting a list of all the possible agencies whose power is needed to complete the ritual action being performed. Da Sabun's incantatory prayer invoked the major Ndyuka deities Sweli Gadu, Tata Ogii, and Agedeonsu, and then all the *obiya* that are "carried on the head" or which "proclaim themselves through people" (*bali a sama mofu*). Following this, he again asked the river to "hold the ugly elements that will be left without stripping what is good from a living person", followed by the patient's lineage ancestors (*bee gaanwan*) whom he requested to "stand behind and in front" (*tampu a baka, tampu a fesi*) of Ba Makus.<sup>101</sup> Da Sabun concluded the prayer with entreaties to his and Ma Taanga's spirits, Da Asaigoontapu and Pa Kodyo, and then all the spirits of Ba Makus's "house" (*osu*) his immediate extended family) that they must make him "believe" (*biibi*) because everyone else had abandoned them for "church."

As stated above, many Ndyuka obiyaman see speech as critical for activating the power of *obiya*. The words imbue the aggregate with collective purpose, performing its cohesion into a unified agency. Consequently, Da Sabun (or his spirit) declaimed the goal of every section of the rite as he undertook it. Once finished with the libation oration, Da

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<sup>101</sup> This is a standard trope of Ndyuka prayers one which succinctly expresses both living people's position within a lineage.

Sabun and Ma Taanga's identities were licensed by this cosmic genealogy to blur with their spirits. Though they did not undertake full transformation performances, the spirits signaled their presence through the words in spirit language that Da Sabun and Ma Taanga would utter sporadically throughout the rest of the ritual.

After concluding the libation, Da Sabun instructed Ba Makus to stand on the blue-black cloth. He then began the "washing" by sprinkling kaolin dust on Ba Makus' head and shoulders, hands and feet. Dug from riverbeds, brilliantly snowy kaolin clay concentrates whiteness' jarring otherness while symbolizing water's role as a transition zone between humans and the invisible world of spirits. Da Sabun stirred the resulting "stench water" in the tub, saying: "how the green leaves stink, so must [Ba Makus's] body and skin smell foul." Da Sabun then took a rooster Ba Makus had brought and poured the stench water down its throat. Da Sabun immersed the rooster in the bath, and washed Ba Makus with the potion that seeped from the struggling animal's sopping plumage. While he did so, Da Sabun announced that this was to "remove the spoken malice" (*puu mofu*) from Ba Makus "for good, so that evil will abandon him." Da Sabun next intoned that "the bird must change places with the boy [Ba Makus], absorb all the evil that was afflicting him, and make the bad [the *bakuu*] accept the life of the bird so that Ba Makus may continue to live." The rooster's life would substitute for Ba Makus. The bird would be infused with the *bakuu* and the afflicting relation it incarnated so that these could be safely disposed of in the surrounding forest.<sup>102</sup> Over the next few minutes, Da Sabun continued to wash Ba Makus in this way, similarly transferring all the other possible varieties of human and spirit that could be harming him to the sacrificial rooster.

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<sup>102</sup> "A foo mu kange ede anga a boi, meke eng teke ogii pisi, meke a teke a libi sei fu a foo, gi a boi fu a sa libi, meke a boi teke a libi pisi fu a foo, tyai go anga eng, ma a dede se fu a foo, mu teke a ogii pisi fu a boi, den sani di be buya eng, tyai go anga eng, go fika a busi."

After completing this inventory of enemies, Da Sabun hit, first, Ba Makus, and then a neighboring tree, three times with the rooster to remove the “heaviness” (*ibi*) caused by the afflicting spirit(s). Heaviness is a key trope in Ndyuka (and Shakti) healing. The goal of ritual washing is to make patients feel “light” (*feke, lekiti*), removing the spirit and the relation it indexes, returning patients to satisfactory controls over their bodies and social actions (see Munn 1987 for a similar discussion in Melanesia). It is meant to convey the dual sensation of being constrained by an unseen spirit living in and on the body and the exhausting fears produced by the negative relations that incited the spirit’s malignant presence.

Da Sabun next placed the rooster on Ba Makus’s head and broke its neck to ensure that they would “swap roles” (*kangi ede*). He repeated this three times, while his Ampuku spirit declared: “when he [Ba Makus] changes, permit everything to be for good.” Handing Ba Makus the dead chicken to hold, Da Sabun broke the “abandoned” egg over Ba Makus’s head, rubbed it over his entire body, and then washed it off with the last of the remaining “stench water.” As he did so Da Sabun remarked: “when the evil that is in his skin smells this, it will have to flee.” Then Da Sabun instructed Ba Makus to drop the dead rooster insouciantly on the ground at his feet. Following this, Da Sabun pulled apart the two palm fronds to form an opening. Ba Makus was told to act as though he was stepping, first with one foot then the other, through the passage three times, and then to actually do so.<sup>103</sup>

Picking up the dead bird, Da Sabun performed haruspicy—reading its entrails to see if its “stones” (*siton*) (I could not identify the organ) were white, helpfully clarifying the ritual’s success because, “if the *obiya* hadn’t worked, then the innards would be

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<sup>103</sup> Da Sabun called this “separating the forest” (*paati a busi*).



completely black.” He then sprinkled the chicken’s innards with more kaolin so that they would “stay white” (*tan weti*) so that the evil would not return. Da Sabun wrapped the dead rooster in the black cloth on which Ba Makus had stood while being washed and dumped the load at the foot of a nearby tree, exclaiming “*mangwenu!*” as he did so. According to Da Sabun, whether a spirit or something else, the *mangwenu* is the disposal site for negative influences purged by *obiya*.<sup>104</sup> Pouring an entire bottle of 90 proof Marienberg rum over the bundle, Da Sabun instructed the affliction to remain there (*fu a ogii a fika de*).

The second half of the ritual then commenced. If the first washing expelled the afflicting spirit, the second marshaled collective spirit power to recompose Ba Makus’ body, tying him back together in a new assemblage of collective agency. Da Sabun led Ba Makus over to a wooden shipping pallet, which had been left in the clearing for precisely this purpose. On it, Ma Taanga had placed the second large tub of leaves on overlapping lengths of white and red fabric. Da Sabun instructed Ba Makus to sit down on the pallet. As he poured “sweet” (*switi*) water from the second *obiya* mixture over Ba Makus, Da Sabun declaimed: “The *obiya* needs to help make this little brother (*biya*) believe; his mother and father now go to church and no longer wash with leaves, and leaves are not even permitted in his yard.”

After Ba Makus was thoroughly doused with the second mixture, Da Sabun fished out, first a bottle of anise-flavored alcohol, and then a bottle of stout, submerged in the mixture. Alcohol of many varieties is a vital part of Ndyuka rituals. Like leaves, these are associated with the liquids’ different qualities, sweet or bitter, pleasingly fragrant or abrasively strong, and each class of spirit has its own preferred drink. And alcohol gets

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<sup>104</sup> “*A peesi pe a tyai ogii go poti, efu a wan wenti ofu wan sani.*”

people drunk, a sure sign of its transformative potency. Because of this, alcohol is almost always included in *obiya* formulas. Half on the ground and the rest over Ba Makus, Da Sabun poured first one bottle, then the other as libations to the Ampuku spirits. Da Sabun next did the same with a large bottle (*dyogo*) of Parbo, Suriname's national beer, as a libation for Sweli Gadu to "endow him [Ba Makus] with potency, separating the good from the bad."

All the Ndyuka rituals I observed identically employed alcohol and other liquids. The protean qualities of liquids seem to make it a perfect intermediary, disappearing into bodies or absorbed into to the earth. This creates equivalence between the surfaces of bodies and places, portraying both as simultaneously conscious subjects *and* passive objects. The discrete qualities of different kinds of alcohol enable people to conduct transforming relations across these surfaces to establish shared fields of coalitional force between humans, spirits, and their composite parts.

To further establish this coalition, Da Sabun called Ma Taanga to wash Ba Makus. Sousing him with draughts from a large calabash, Ma Taanga proclaimed: "Compel this boy to believe, so that he won't lose the money he invested in this work, to make all of the *obiya* stay with him, so that the evil that was there with him won't come back. He must become completely clean, without any trouble."<sup>105</sup> Da Sabun then resumed washing Ba Makus until none of the *obiya* water remained, instructing John and I to also wash our faces and hands before it was gone.

Next, Da Sabun made two small tares in the red and white cloths' corners declaring: "Separate the boy from those things that they have cleansed and removed from

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<sup>105</sup> "Meke a boi si biibi, fu meke den moni á lasi fu du a sani ya, a mu fende den baka, a mu meke ala den obiya tampu gi, meke a ogii di be waka anga eng fika eng. A mu kon kiin kele kele kele, sondee wan buya."

him!” He had Ba Makus take hold and walk with the torn fabric, shredding long strips from both. As he did so, Da Sabun explained to me that, because the evil spirit had been wrenched from Ba Makus’ body and left on the blue cloth with the rooster, he had to make sure that neither his soul (*akaa*) nor tutelary earth spirit (*bun gadu*) had been inadvertently removed. If so, these would be retained in the fabric Ba Makus tore away, allowing them to re-incorporated into his body when the ritual was done.

Cloth acts in Ndyuka ritual as an analog for other dynamic surfaces such as the body and the ground. Like alcohol, cloth serves as a symbol of spirit identity and possesses distinct and fundamentally malleable qualities. As described above in cloth’s role in altars and transformation performances, as a pure surface, cloth enables concealment, a vital facet of common Ndyuka perceptions that it is the invisible imminence of spirits that most accounts for their power. This makes cloth, like alcohol, an ideal “transducer” (Keane 2012) of effective relations between humans and spirits.

While Da Sabun bundled up the left over leaves from the *obiya* bath with the remaining portions of fabric, Ma Taanga braided a cord (*tetei*) from strips of white and red fabric Ba Makus had torn. She instructed him to put this around his neck and not take it off. By putting this on, Ba Makus came to complement Ma Taanga and Ba Sabun, being tied with equivalently charged protective plaits. In this way, Ba Makus was recomposed like his healers, a newly minted aggregate of his specific human/spirit coalition. The ritual’s remnant leaves were tightly compacted and thrown in the bush at the edge of the clearing on what Da Sabun called “*a dyiko*.” Grabbing another full bottle of white rum, Da Sabun emptied its contents over this second bundle. This was to “close”

(*tapu*) the *dyiko*, making sure that it would “hold the residual evil.”<sup>106</sup>

To resolve the ritual, Da Sabun and Ma Taanga washed Ba Makus a final time from a little calabash containing the last measure of medicated water. Da Sabun poured another libation on his shrine of staffs and daggers. Then, in a dramatic last act, Da Sabun vigorously shook a large bottle of Parbo beer and sprayed its frothing contents all over Ba Makus. This was a typical last act in the *obiya* washings I attended. Unlike hard liquor Ndyuka of both sexes and of all ages drink beer. When shared from a large bottle, beer is a vital vehicle of sociality, a sign of abundance and shared pleasure. Spraying a bottle of beer creates an additional impression of wellbeing, propitiating the body’s spirits with an energetic performance of the healing spirits generative facility. Ba Makus then got dressed and I drove everyone home.

Each element of the making and application of the *obiya*, from its opening libation, to Ba Makus’ final spraying with beer, is a process of separation and recombination, as made famous by Victor Turner’s (1966) readings of Van Gennep. Whatever else can be said about the ritual’s structure and process, I want to emphasize the parallel dynamics of assembling body and *obiya*. As “accumulation and containment” *obiya* is the concentrated logic of coalition. Even if hierarchically ordered, the combination of disparate elements does not dissolve into a single whole, but serves to accent the collective power endowed by the tension between the qualities of the different elements. When this mixture is applied to a patient with the singular purpose of ritual, patients like Ba Makus are transformed, unwanted relations stripped away and new, more powerful one’s instituted within the coalitional matrix of the body. Practically, in everyday social life, these ritual redefinitions endorse patients’ avoidance of those

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<sup>106</sup> “a dyiko seefi oli a ogii de.”

people—most often kin—identified as responsible for their problems. Such shunning allows those treated by *obiya* to use its prohibitions to sever their relations with close kin or neighbors to whom they would otherwise be obligated.

The above ceremony succinctly compresses the relation between *obiya*, human embodiment, and the power of coalition. Washing *obiya* is one of the ritual apogees of Ndyuka coalition, performing the human multiplicity by making Ba Makus' embodied self enact powerlessness before the relations that sustain him.<sup>107</sup> He can thus exchange perspectives with Da Sabun and Ma Taanga who heal by giving themselves over to their own relations with their lineally mediated possessing spirits. Ndyuka *obiya* rites perform knowledge of relations by performing coalition as an existential state impending in any aggregate of relations. Ba Makus' treatment reveals how Ndyuka ritual acts on the body as a field of relations, a historically contingent intersection of lineage and place. It depicts the body is hazardously open to invisible influences from within and without. Without the aid of more powerful spirits, humans like Ba Makus, are unable to know the relations they embody or how to recompose themselves to maximize their potential to flourish. As seen above, by enacting these relations, Ndyuka oracles objectify the human body's origins in coalition and their own power to transform these relations.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored how the multi-modal poetics of Ndyuka oracular healing performatively urge ritual co-participants to reimagine themselves as human-spirit coalitions. Spirit authority rests on their ability to transform the indeterminacy

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<sup>107</sup> The analog of surface, place, and body are at every step mediated by the materiality of the *obiya*'s plant matter, bottles of liquor, animals, and cloth. This is potently demarcated by the patient's passivity during his treatment, which, through punctuated possession at the most critical moments, Da Sabun himself performs.

intrinsic to human communication into indexes of the many coalitions of relations that saturate Ndyuka society. The goal of Ndyuka ritual possession and *obiya* therapy is to reveal that oracles and patients are dependent multiplicities whose constituent relations can only be known from the superhuman authority of spirits.

In the context of coalition, this knowledge is never simply an objective fact waiting for a generic person, but rather an attainment conferred on a person's lineally mediated relations by normally invisible beings. Knowledge is thus not only a sum total of information but also the relationships that guarantee its effective acknowledgement by others. For many Ndyuka, then, all collectively relevant knowledge is accordingly revelatory. As my discussion of possession and *obiya* has shown, the ritual performances that create this knowledge must communicate the same marvelous dialectic of necessary concealment and exposure that makes revelation compellingly authoritative. There is no separating Ndyuka knowledge from how it emerges from specific relational matrices or the agents enlivened by these overlapping fields of intersubjective synchronization and resistance. Whether as a public lecture in a traditional council meeting (*kuutu*), the pronouncements of a pan-Ndyuka carry (*tyai a ede*) oracle, or the face-to-face revelations of an urban oracular medium (*bonuman/lukuman*), any act of communicating knowledge must be a performance of the coalitions that ensure it.

## **Chapter 5: The Performance of Hindu Rhetorical Encompassment**

In the previous chapter I described how Ndyuka oracular practices compose a relational sensibility of coalition through the poetic integration of multiple semiotic materials in performance. I argued that conceptions of agency are pragmatically linked to communicative forms and the models of subjectivity these structure. In the next two chapters, I explore the semiotic infrastructure of Guianese Hindu oracular performance. If Ndyuka oracular performances entail coalition, I contend that Hindu oracles demand a relational sensibility of encompassment.

With rhetorical encompassment I denote the communicative strategies for incorporating multiple forms of difference—and ethnic/religious diversity particularly—into a unitary, hierarchical, Hindu conceptual framework. In my terms, encompassment at once expresses: 1) a defined metaphysical and moral logic of relations, i.e. which relations exist and their relative importance as elements of a conceptual system; 2) how this logic is enacted by oracles, pandits, and devotees; and 3) the ways this rhetoric persuades Hindu audiences.<sup>108</sup> In what follows I focus on the rhetoric of encompassment in performance; how discourse, its performance, time, and space are performatively woven together to support the ideological and existential encompassment of human agency by Hindu gods and values. I present two examples, first of pandits' sermons

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<sup>108</sup> In this sense, encompassment encapsulates the intersection of what people do—pragmatics, and what they say about what they do—metapragmatics. Both are performative but enjoin different, co-dependent phenomenologies of participation (Wirtz 2005).

(*prachaar, katha*), and then a consultation with a Shakti oracle. I analyze the first to describe some of the ways ideologies of encompassment are performed within the Hindu community. I detail the second to explore how other apparently dissimilar genres of ritual speech also participate in the logic of encompassment. I survey the affinities and distinctions between these genres to show that an interpretive structure creative of encompassment is built into the rhetoric of both kinds of performance, even as it produces two very different models of relational authority.

### **Rhetorical Encompassment in Pandit Sermons**

Rhetoric is the “goal directed and sometimes goal achieving occasions of language use” (Silverstein 1979: 204) involving “phenomenologies, ideologies, and aesthetics of “strategic language use” (Bate 2009: 28 citing Silverstein 1979: 204), an important subset of “how language functions” (Bate 2009). It is the sum of “those devices or strategies, which, effectively employed, make a “good speech” and a “good speaker...” (Friedrich and Redfield 1979: 412 cited in Bate 2009: 49). What it means to be “goal directed” and a “good speaker” are unsettled questions even within the same general social context. Language strategies are molded by the wider ideological field in which they participate by basic notions of who can speak, to whom, and how.

Linguistic anthropology has made clear the empirical questionability of classically “western” rhetorical conventions that presume an “autonomous and durable self who intends to persuade someone of something denotatively” (Bate 2014: 541). In post-colonial Suriname and Guyana, one glaring problem faced by ritual rhetoric is the ready availability of these “western” linguistic ideologies in fraught opposition to strong claims by practitioners to disinterested sacred speech.



When I was in Suriname and Guyana, claims about religious experience were often implicitly declarations about ethnic distinction, and talk about religion was tantamount to performing ethnic consciousness. The Hindus I worked with selectively strove to interpret their actions as *essentially* Hindu, to see how they lived as an expression of the innate goodness of Hindu identity. My Surinamese Hindu informants often referred to the negative consequences of abandoning Hinduism in terms of “honor” (*ijjat*). To convert was to risk losing responsible self-awareness that one was a Hindu, the harmful results of which were apparent in converts’ poverty. To be a Hindu, particularly a Sanatan Dharm Hindu, is to interpret the self as essentially constrained by membership in an ethnic community and to accept the natural benefits of that destiny (*kismet*).<sup>109</sup>

This sense of ethnic honor was intensified by endemic concerns about the influence of self-evaluation on personal wellbeing. The self (*aapan*, or *srefi* in Sranan, also glossed as *jiw* or *atma*, also life or soul) was approached as the vital principal of personality and as an independent entity affected by personal evaluations. As people spoke about it, the self was the innermost essence of all living beings, the subject of moral action and guarantor of the continuity of personal identity overtime and between lives. In being this kind of objective essence, however, the self was objectified as a separate entity easily victimized by the self-regard of the person to whom it endowed life.

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<sup>109</sup> The fragility of this assurance, however, is exposed by peoples’ fear about the talk of others. The line between gossip (*nindara*, *batiaai*, *talk name*, *talk story*), slander (*badnaam kare*), and sorcery (*ojha*) is ill defined, and talk about others often slips into suspicions of malfeasance. Whether or not sorcery is employed, others’ talk runs the risk of degrading self-regard to cause suffering. The extent of these fears was apparent in how passionately Guyanese and Surinamese people of all ethnicities broadcast their disregard for others’ talk about them. In everyday conversation, popular music, and Facebook posts, people proclaim their impregnability to what people say, even as they constantly monitor those around them for affronts to personal dignity like “eye-pass” (Jayawardena 1962; Sidnell 2000; Williams 1991). Religious and ethnic identities can offer one defense against the perfidy of others’ talk. The authority of tradition can assure people of their moral rectitude and self worth as representatives of distinct, revealed ethical communities independent of human evaluations.

For example, the members of the Surinamese Hindu family I lived with advised me that a person should neither boast about, nor criticize her or his self. Either extreme of self-interpretation can make a person vulnerable to sickness and even death. These concerns were frequent among all the Hindus I worked with. They correlated to an ethos that shrewd self-awareness and respect of one's personal capacity and moral duty was needed at all times—an ethos that sometimes jarred discordantly with an equally common fatalism about personal "fate" (*kismet*).

Rhetorical encompassment seeks to convey precisely this sense of the priority of tradition and the forms of revelation that sustain it. Convolved concerns around ethnic/racial/religious self-regard thus color and constrain the ways ritual can encompass peoples' lives. To be a Guyanese or Surinamese Hindu is to accept the truth of Hindu practices and doctrines in "the meaningful patterning of events" (Hays 1982), as a recognition that this defines one as a Hindu. Hindu identity encompasses personal action to justify self-respect against the suspicions and antagonisms of others, Hindu and non-Hindu alike. While the essentialist discourses that prevail in post-colonial Suriname and Guyana leave Hindus no choice but to offer interpretations of Surinamese society marked as narrowly Hindu, they can at least describe themselves as a credit to a shared ethnic-religious interest. The fidelity of these social and cosmological interpretations to *pandit* doxa nonetheless varies in relation to peoples' perceptions of the impact of *pandit* authority on the egalitarian sense of self-worth created by such a shared sense of immutable Hindu identity.

Alleged self-interest in the pursuit of internal hierarchies within the Hindu community haunts how ritual speech is performed. People who make authoritative claims

about the sacredness of their message continually struggle with an egalitarian imperative that urges Hindu audiences' to be suspicious (Jayawardena 1963,1968; Williams 1991). Authoritative "religious" language attempts to overcome this impasse by encompassing its audiences in pervading truths. Pandits perform encompassment through the rhetorical organization of talk, particularly strategies of *addressivity*, the "quality of being directed to someone" Bakhtin (1986:95, quoted in Lempert 2011:192). Pandits and oracles work to make their words indexes of the limits of their audiences' existential self-understanding, to impart that only their words are sufficient for Hindus to know themselves in appropriately Hindu ways. Pandit efficacy and authority are accordingly endowed by how pandits position themselves to speak to Hindus *as* Hindus, the ways in which what pandits say becomes paradigmatic of an otherwise elusive Hindu essence.

In my observations of Surinamese and Guyanese Sanatan Dharm Hinduism, notions of inherited pandit ritual authority appreciably inflected Hindu ritual speech. Intergenerational authority is seen to make pandits natural speakers adept at persuasion. This same skill and its associations with hereditary deference, however, also expose pandits to egalitarian suspicions from their fellow Hindus. Pandit distinction is judged to be questionable, avaricious, and self-interested, a sentiment best expressed by the Guyanese saying that "pandits are bandits" (see also Khan 2004; van der Burg and van der Veer 1986; Veer and Vertovec 1991; Vertovec 1992; Williams 1991).

Given frequent accusations of pandit arrogance and exploitation, pandit discourse is always subject to doubt. Pandits must work hard to convince their communities of their worthiness to speak for and about the Hindu community as a whole. To be believed, they need to affirm Hindu doctrine and strengthen the rectitude of Hindu self-perception. If

Hindu people—and particularly adult men—invoke the “common knowledge” that validates their membership in an “exclusive community” of equals (Sidnell 2000:77), pandits must perform *uncommon* knowledge to validate their claims to genuine extra-human authority (see also Khan 2004).

Pandit rhetorical encompassment uses the authority of textual revelation to try and impress conventional arguments about Hindu doctrine and difference. As one pandit said, “The concept of Hinduism is not about believing but about becoming.” The effectiveness of this rhetoric is derived from the circulation of long standing Bhakti devotional themes as they merged with Hindu apologetic tropes and strategies of address that arose in the



Figure 6: Pandit Sermonizing

19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>110</sup> In Suriname and Guyana, rhetorical encompassment is above all a method derived from pandit homiletics and exegesis, whose conventions of argument are now thoroughly embedded in daily talk. These tropes, and the techniques of their communication, help convene a Hindu ethnic-religious community and provide the moral and cosmological justifications that legitimate its separate existence (Keane 2008: S114).

In Suriname and Guyana, Sanatan Dharm pandit rhetoric is the paradigm of Hindu public speech. Its stylistic conventions and propositions are familiar to nearly all Hindus. Though far from alone in a crowded Hindu public sphere, as the largest and oldest Hindu organization recognized by the state, the Sanatan Dharm Maha Sabha wields considerable authority (Bakker 1999; van der Burg and van der Veer 1986). Sanatan Dharm pandits use their control over accreditation to delimit Hindu ritual and stipulate doctrine. The highly conventionalized nature of Sanatan Dharm ritual liturgy and oratory intensifies pandit claims to being the sole legitimate proprietors of the orthodoxy of the “eternal religion”.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> The origins of the rhetorical conventions of contemporary Guianese pandit discourse are vague, but appear to stem from 19<sup>th</sup> century attempts by South Asian ritual traditions to refute aggressive Christian missionary polemics (Balagangadhara 1994; Bate 2005; Dalmia 1997; Yelle 2013) Though, through the work of Bernard Bate, we have a reasonably good understanding of how this happened in Tamil speaking areas, this history is less clear in other regions of South Asia. Bate directly traces the genealogy of Tamil public oratory to the adoption of Protestant practices by Hindu apologists (Bate 2005). Indigenous South Asian ethno-metapragmatics had little space for post-reformation European conceits of language as a transparent denotational tool (Bauman and Briggs 2003). Before the advent of public oratory in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most South Asian traditions of speaking approached knowledge and the linguistic code in which it was expressed as unitary. Knowledge of one presupposed the right to access the other. A sacred language like Sanskrit offered a grammar of reality the use of which actively created the universe. Linguistic knowledge was the exclusive attribute of specific social groups. Caste, gender, and other axiomatic identities were largely defined by the linguistically coded knowledge practices different populations could legitimately access. Language was primarily conceived through the variable efficacy of its uses across multiple graded codes and registers that directly indexed speakers’ identity as a member of a predefined social category. Such linguistic ideologies were a basic semiotic material for building the elaborate hierarchies that structured pan-south Asian political formations.

<sup>111</sup> The exclusivity of Sanatan Dharm claims to orthopraxy is especially important to Shakti practitioners. Sanatan Dharm’s public predominance as the guardians of respectable Hinduism has left a mark on the communicative practices and ideologies of the wider Hindu community, even those who actively contest it. Unlike in Guyana, where hereditary Kali Mai practitioners *sometimes* enthusiastically embrace the

As the only significant public venue that prioritizes South Asian language use, listening to pandit sermons is perhaps the most basic performance of belonging to the Hindu community.

Because of this, Surinamese and Guyanese Hindus increasingly expect pandits to exemplify mastery over both ritual procedure and its explanation. As Khan (2004) says about pandits in Trinidad, they must “make it simple, and yet convey the idea that the material is complex” (171). Pandits work to position themselves as embodiments of the eternal, universal authority of Hinduism as a “proper” religion in creative spectacles that mix oratory and song with classical Brahminical rituals of fire sacrifice (*havan*) and image worship (*puja*). Pandits must grace their audiences with their wisdom and eloquence, making their sermons into expressions of the collective consciousness of the Hindu assemblies they address, and embodying the ethos of Bhakti through public demonstrations of oratorical and hermeneutic skill.<sup>112</sup>

This individuated professionalization places special emphasis on meaning. As one Guyanese pandit told me, Sanatan Dharm Hindus see the pandit as a person “who has knowledge, imparts knowledge, and wants to dispense that knowledge.” Knowledge (*gyan, djan*) distinguishes those with the right to interpret sacred material. Pandits must convince their communities of their self-discipline, show them that they have brought “[the] mind under control.” These facets are displayed in ritual performance through the

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distinction between Hinduism—meaning Sanatan Dharm—and Madrassi “churches”, in Suriname, Shakti devotees are vehement about the intrinsically Hindu character of their practices. Thus, even when Shakti practitioners expressly reject pandit authority, they are eager to stress that their practices complement and fulfill Sanatan Dharm orthodoxy.

<sup>112</sup> Like Christian ministers, pandits are increasingly distinguished not by descent but by vocation performed through the thoroughness of their theological word and deed.

pandit's ability to cultivate the appropriate gravitas, discipline, and humility that Hindu ritual demands (Khan 2004: 182).

Contemporary Surinamese and Guyanese pandits represent their audience as the natural beneficiaries of their sermons. As a Guyanese pandit said to me, "I feel that what I am doing, I'm doing for the community. They need the knowledge. They need the transformation." Pandits cultivate an interactive rhetoric of metaphysical inclusion where Hindus are invited to participate in a universal doctrine capable of licensing their ethnic difference. In pandit discourse, rhetorical encompassment refers to the pragmatic ways pandits persuade Hindu audiences of their authority as approved speakers of "eternal" (*sanatan*) truths. It also refers to the codified metaphysical doctrines pandits wield while seeking to explain their role as speakers. Pandits address Hindu publics to encourage them to recognize themselves and their personal value in a pandit's words. In urging the audience to self-reflexive understanding of themselves as essentially Hindu, Hindu audiences are supposed to correspondingly accept pandits as natural speakers of transcendent truths worthy of addressing the Hindu community (see also Khan 2004; Eisenlohr 2006).

### **Location and Perspective in Pandit Oratory**

The congregational form assumed by Hindu temples in the Caribbean has helped make preaching central to the vocation of pandit. Pandit oratory takes place in private homes, Hindu temples, public events, and on television. Pandits address their audiences to encompass them in the doctrines of Hindu identity and make them into exemplars of Hindu ethnic essence. Pandits seek to use a direct, hortatory style that braids together storytelling, Hindi devotional songs (*bhajan, kirtan*), and theological exegesis. Moving

seamlessly between these expressive modes, pandits often play the harmonium to accompany songs, which they sing with the audience, or use to create an evocative background drone to contrast the lay audiences' collective singing with the pandit's (primarily) monological sermons.

Pandit authority is “voiced” through strategic register and code shifts (Eisenlohr 2006:113). Quoting Hindi and Sanskrit texts establishes interpretive authority as derived from hermeneutic ability. Because of their social position as expert insiders whose knowledge paradoxically holds them apart from other Hindus, pandits speak to “encompass their contrary”—to instill the value of their teachings in the audience of non-Brahmin Hindus who support them.

Due to the centrality of household observance in Surinamese Hinduism, generally only the most devout routinely go to hear pandit sermons. In some form or another pandit sermonizing now accompanies every Sanatan Dharm ritual event. The majority of people only listen to pandits during special events like annual large temple celebrations and private birthday offerings of *yagna (jag)* or *jhandi* at the homes of family and friends. Even at small-scale domestic rites involving only a few family members, however, pandits are sure to offer scriptural explanations to their ritual patrons.

Whatever the occasion, in well-attended events the pandit addresses the audience from a raised dais next to the divine images (*murti*)<sup>113</sup> that are the focus of Guianese Hindu temples. The pandit faces the audience, which listens from pews or chairs (and sometimes on the floor). In temples where divine images are large enough to be clearly visible to the audience, the pandit's gaze is continuous with that expressed by the deities'

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<sup>113</sup> These may be the full-scale stone or concrete idols of temples, or the small mass-produced images found in peoples' homes. Whatever the event, the pandit brings an image of his own preferred deity of veneration (*istadevata*), which he will also install in close proximity to himself (see Babb 1975).



prominent open eyes. The pandit sits at the end of the row of images, speaking for the gods the statues physically incarnate.

As the pandit narrates stories of divine action, the sculpted gods look on with tranquil detachment. While directly lecturing the audience, the pandit refers to the gods in the third person.<sup>114</sup> This pronoun usage maps the distinction between divine agency as witnessed in the great devotional epics like the Ramayana, and contemporary human dependence on that past. Pandits exhort Hindu audiences to devotion by animating the revelations contained in the Hindu sacred texts, translating them into edifying stories with easily understood lessons.

In this ways, Sanatan Dharm Hindu rituals are characterized by a hierarchical reciprocity of perspective, where each of the primary ritual actors are worshipped in turn, starting with the gods, and then moving to the pandit and the ritual sponsors. How ritual space is arranged to facilitate this hierarchy is a vital element of pandit rhetoric. Pandits are placed at the transition point that unites devotions to deities and devotions to ritual senior humans.

The pandit speaks from the standpoint of the divine images so as to include the audience in the deeds and powers of the gods. The pandit shares the perspective of the gods, relaying the actions of the impassive deities that stand next to him. Pandits' voices emanate from a divine viewpoint and yet are carefully distinguished from that viewpoint. The co-extensive perspective of the pandit and the divine images endow them with a unity of purpose capable of encompassing the audience. The pandit speaks for the gods so as to elevate them beyond his words. The pandit animates the power of the gods by

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<sup>114</sup> In Sarnami, this is in the distal third person pronoun (*u*). More often pandits use the deity's proper name: Ram, Sieuw, Radha, etc.

signaling their transcendence of ritual context and representations, even as he joins with them in a continuity of presence. Present as images, distant as agents, the pandit places himself as the sole mediator of this discrepancy between living gods of mute material indifference, and their power as the universe's organizing purpose.

### **Translation as Mediation and Encompassment**

Though Hindus are regarded as Hindus regardless of their knowledge of Hinduism, pandits performatively validate orthodoxy by providing arguments for the enduring importance of Hindu practices for diasporic residents of pluralistic post-colonies. In an ideological field in which “external politics...remain largely ethnic and internal politics largely religious” (van der Burg and Van der Veer 1986: 521), pandits are uniquely positioned to address the position of Hindus vis-à-vis the ethnically and religiously plural nations where they reside.

Sanatan Dharm Hinduism in Suriname and Guyana represents the confluence of disparate South Asian discourses of revelation and European language ideologies rooted in the Protestant Reformation. Ancient ideologies that conflated a person or community's social standing with access to the Vedas have been superseded by ideas of the universality of Hindu sacred texts, principally the “myths” *Puranas* and “epics” (*itihas*). The main role of Sanatan Dharm pandits is to relate and explain this enormous cannon of revelation to the majority of Hindus who generally cannot read Hindi, let alone Sanskrit. When I asked why what pandits said was true, Hindus routinely responded because they “read it from books” (*pustak se parhe hai*).

During sermons, pandits dramatically translate between linguistic codes—Hindi and Sanskrit—and registers—between abstruse theological concepts and everyday

language. As a strategy, pandit oratorical translation directs the audience to pandits' position as mediators between revelation and the Hindu audience for whom it is revealed. This is why formal preaching (*prachaar*) begins with Sanskrit mantras like: “*Guru Vishnu, Guru Devyo Mahashvera, Guru saksha Parabrahma*”, a creedal statement of the *Trimurti*, the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Whenever possible, phrases from scripture like the Bhagavad Gita or the Puranas are spoken in Hindi or Sanskrit and then glossed in Sarnami or Dutch.<sup>115</sup> In this way, Sanatan Dharm liturgy strives to preserve Hinduism's association with “purer” (*safaa*) forms of linguistic difference. Performing translation positions pandits as intermediaries between the power of the divine and the Hindu audience pandits' address. Quoting these texts in the original concurrently indexes the sacredness of the words, their distance from the lay audience, and a pandit's merits as a mediator of ritual knowledge, while offering the audience vicarious participation in the stories of divine power which pandits narrate. Citation, translation, and explanation render pandits authoritative because these techniques include *and* exclude their audience as ratified recipients of sacred truths. Although they cannot understand them, pandits represent the languages they translate in rituals as belonging to the average Hindu because these codes epitomize Hindu truth, while still demonstrating dependence on pandit mediation.

In the face of ubiquitous egalitarian sentiments, it is essential that pandits preserve their privileged position of ritual mediation. Stoked by Arya Samaj opposition, one frequent charge is that it is not pandits but texts that are truthful. People, particularly adult males, ask why it is necessary to have pandits if they have access to all the same

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<sup>115</sup> Another important way this is done is by excluding Sarnami. Pandits work to purge their language of any sign of Afro-Surinamese register preferring to Dutch or “Hindiized” (Eisenlohr 2006: 204). Sarnami.

texts in Dutch or English. Because of these criticisms, pandits cannot now merely recite their text. They need to uphold the language itself as sacred. They do this in performance, interweaving theatrical readings of the texts with didactic expostulation and music. To retain their authority, most pandits perform to connect with their Hindu audiences as equals while preserving their station as rightful mediators admirably interpreting divine knowledge.<sup>116</sup>

Pandit translational authority is often augmented by etymological interpretation. During the first Nauratri (nine night celebration for the Goddess held in March/April) I was in Suriname, a local temple put on an elaborate celebration lasting the length of the holiday. The temple's committee had paid for a well-known Surinamese pandit living in the Netherlands to preside over the event. Every evening the pandit would give a sermon with sitar and harmonium accompaniment about the glory of the goddess.

One of these sermons focused on an etymology for *mala*, a word that refers to both Hindu prayer beads and the flower garlands with which people adorn images of the deities. The pandit derived this interpretation from the elision of the Hindi Sarnami words *ma* (mother) and *la* (the imperative form of to bring (*laawe*)) to mean, "Mother (the Goddess) brings." He explained that, as the universe's fecund source, everything comes from the Goddess. This etymology fused the power of the Goddess to the fruits of active devotion (*bhakti*) and finds a point of continuity between liturgical Hindi and colloquial Sarnami. The Goddesses' power is present in everyday words known to the congregation, but like pandit authority, is just beyond the understanding of most lay Hindus. In

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<sup>116</sup> This relation is triadic, the pandit serving as a mediator between humans and gods. The pandit wields greater authority because of his task of broadcasting and explaining revelation, but is equally human and subordinate before the gods and their revelation.

subordinating quotidian meanings to theological propositions, the pandit performatively encompassed his audience, transforming them into a public defined by a shared need for theological explanation.

After first introducing this etymological formula, and then again prior to concluding his sermon, the pandit asked his audience to collectively repeat his interpretation to him. This call and response format was common in pandit sermons. Such forms of direct address encompass Hindu audiences. This kind of addressivity makes listeners members of a unified Hindu community who share universal values of the nature of God and human duty. Answering the pandit with his own truths, the audience collectively ratifies the pandit's authority by indicating the internalization of his message as one fulfillment of their duties as Hindus.

Here is a brief illustration of the effectiveness of this rhetorical strategy. I attended the above sermon with the extended family of my Surinamese Hindu hosts. On returning home, we were met by my hostess's brother. Excitedly, his children repeated to him the "true" meaning of *mala* that they had learned from the pandit. Seeking confirmation, he asked his sister and her husband if this was correct. They both responded enthusiastically, answering that this was indeed the word's true meaning as they had just learned it from the pandit.

Pandit sermons perform revelatory knowledge to make orthodox Hindu truths repeatable and sacrosanct (see Keane 2007 on creeds). This way of encompassing quotidian meaning posits the naturalness of Hindu collective difference. Pandits attempt to make their audiences interpretatively dependent on them for the knowledge, rites, and duties that confer Hindu identity. Pandit sermons broadcast the rhetorical tropes that

make Hindu audiences aware of what it means to be a Hindu. When performed, these rhetorical figures aim to embed Hindu audiences' consciousnesses with ready made proofs that Hindu identity is sufficient evidence for the encompassing theological truths pandits' propound (see Eisenlohr 2006 on Mauritius).

### **The “Eternal Religion”, Metaphysics, and the Rhetorical Performance of Encompassment**

That pandit led Hinduism has adopted “Eternal Religion” (*Sanatan Dharm*) as their religion's official name makes clear “orthodox” Hindu's preoccupation with the originating ancientness of Hindu practices. In India and the diaspora, many orthodox Hindus stress the factuality of the great epics (*itihas*) like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and promote their inconceivable antiquity. Such arguments are the result of the active interface between 19<sup>th</sup> century European orientalist's discovery of Sanskrit antiquity and burgeoning Indian defenses of what was increasingly coming to be perceived as a unified Hindu “religion” (Trautmann 2004; van der Veer 2001, 2015).

From this polemical cross-pollination a new consensus arose among Hindi speaking defenders of Hindu “tradition” (Dalmia 1997). For Hindu apologists, Hinduism was the universe's aboriginal ritual and theological foundation (Prakash 2003). While orthodox Hindu reformers attempted to validate Hinduism through appeals to mutual Indian and European obsessions with the purity of the ancient, they also sought to ensure that their version of contemporary Brahminical practices was viewed as the dominant exemplar of this continuity. This was grounded in upper class/caste Indian attempts to make Hinduism accord with Protestant Christian insistence on monotheism and

iconoclasm (Trautman 2004).<sup>117</sup> As all these varied traditions emphasized that the many Hindu gods were merely forms of one single divine truth, Hindu reformers argued that Hinduism best expressed the essential truth that encompassed all world religions. However instrumental Hindus were in working out these apologetics, it was European insistence that Hinduism needed a doctrinal core that facilitated the resulting influence of these theological argument (King 1999; Lorenzen 1999; van der Veer 2001). Thus, as Hinduism was made a discrete and exclusive object in need of defense, it also became more universal, a transcendent entity uniquely capable of peeling away the delusions of its colonial maligners.

During my fieldwork, I frequently heard Surinamese and Guyanese Hindus state their “belief in all religions” (*sab dharm biswas kare*), that who is worship in every religion are “all one God” (Khan 2004). Rejecting religious distinctions, the Sanatan Dharm Hindus I knew often appealed to abstractions like “love” (*prem*) as the supreme truth of all religions. Such discourses are frequently direct responses to doctrinal disagreements between Suriname’s main recognized religions, and especially aggressive Christian proselytization and Muslim derision. In true Gandhian fashion, Sanatan Dharm Hindus point to their tolerance as a testament to their religion’s exemplary virtue, resounding evidence of Hindu ethical superiority. These justifications highlight the anxieties that define contemporary Surinamese Hinduism, and underscore the contradiction between Hinduism as a post-colonial, ethnically specific “genetic” religion,

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<sup>117</sup> As with contemporary Guianese Hindus, 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian orthodox Hindu reformers like Swami Vivekananda repurposed diverse strains of monistic Vedantic thought into a theology of encompassment that exposed Hinduism’s essential monotheism.

and the universal claims Hindus need to make to be included in European definitions of “world” religions (see also Khan 2004 and Willford 2006).<sup>118</sup>

Hindu concerns that members of other religions do not regard them as properly monotheistic make these tensions acutely observable. Protestant Christian hegemony during the colonial period made monotheism the preeminent warrant for religious respectability.<sup>119</sup> Despite the energy of orthodox Hindu apologetics, their commitment to Brahminical authority and image worship is still subject to considerable condemnation by members of both reformist sects and other religions in both Suriname and Guyana. The theology of encompassment sublimates these attacks, transforming the visible difference of Sanatan Dharm ritual into a metaphysical warrant for the transcendent character of Hindu exceptionalism. Shivshaktidasa, the “Guru” of the main Sakti temple in which I worked, explained this theology by saying that both the spiritual and material worlds are comprised of the *Paramatma*—God, the world or over soul—and *atma*, the individual souls of all living things. The individual *atma* are “sparks” from God’s encompassing being. For Shivshaktidasa, as for many other Sanatan Dharm Hindus, the true purpose of life was the quest for final re-absorption into God’s original, blissful unity. Here is how one Guyanese Pandit explained the theology of encompassment at a Ram *jag/yagna*

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<sup>118</sup> As my Hindu neighbors explained to me, though they revere Jesus and Muhammad, Christians and Muslims refuse to recognize Hindu gods. Nevertheless, when Hindus marry Muslims or Christians they are expected to convert, but not vice versa. This complaint shows the shortcomings of Hindu rhetorics of encompassment as a response to other religions’ declarations of absolute truth. Hindu devotions can cogently encompass diversity while rejecting competing doctrines’ declarations of exclusivity, but the performance of this incorporation only works to call attention to the subservience of the practices within an overtly Hindu semantic matrix. Hindu universalism only works as an apologetic within a religious field that supposes the manifest clarity of religious difference and exclusivity. Pluralism always implies natural categories of identity in need of reconciliation.

<sup>119</sup> This is especially so in Guyana, where Indo-Guyanese agricultural laborers remained impoverished intense dependents on piecemeal plantation labor, Sanatan Dharm Hinduism was exposed to ridicule as the religion of the backwards and ignorant. While this association has weakened, it retains its condemnatory force, particularly in the face of continued Christian attacks.



(devotional service for Rama) in Paramaribo (I have kept this in the English of the original):

*Pandit: One God, but has many names... and forms. God, Bhagwan, is one. But why does he have so many murtis (images) on the altar? Remember, I told you on the first night? Bhagwan has made a promise to all of us, whenever there is necessity of idols, when my devotees are in suffering, I will take some form throughout the world, to protect my devotees. On many occasions, the Lord fulfilled that promise. That is why many forms is taken, and many names. And he is come into the world. What Sai Baba say? God is like raw gold. Pure raw gold, eh? Everybody like gold?*

*Audience: Yeah!*

*Pandit: If you take raw gold to the goldsmith, and you ask him to make something with this gold that you will put on for the (dance?). Automatically, as the form of the gold change... it takes a name, when it gets into your ears it become what?*

*Audience: Earring!*

*Pandit: If the gold get around the wrist, we call it a band or bangle. If it gets around the neck, we call it a what? (To the audience) Can't hear you! It's a chain, right. The form of the gold changes, it take different names, but still, it remain as...*

*Audience: Gold.*

*Pandit: God is like that. Born in various forms. Many forms, manifestations he takes.*

The above excerpt exemplifies the theology of encompassment's central trope of unity in multiplicity as it is expressed in sermons and everyday conversation. Its metaphorical force is performed through multiple analogies that illustrate how the same essential substance can acquire diverse names and identities. Gold, like God, is primal substance. The pandit's analogy conflates gold's value with its capacity to assume many forms. This metaphor uses a token/type distinction to create a hierarchy of causal determination in which the substantial noun gold enjoys causal priority over formal nouns like ring or necklace. In this way, gold as material substance encompasses its many possible instantiations. What appear to be diverse kinds of jewelry are simply expressions of one substance and its power to assume multiple forms. Gold becomes jewelry to display a family's value and God becomes gods to assist human needs. The pandit then further extended this analogy's metaphysical meaning:

Pandit: *You know it's [God] like a screen of a computer. You have so many items, and every item have so many information... Isn't that true?*

Audience: *Yes!*

Pandit: *Yeah it is. And you know the men that were making, the scientists, they were, uh... starting off to make computers, they wanted to omit, not add in, that is the word used, the mouse from the computer. To the computer. They didn't want to put that mouse into the computer. But you think the computer can function without a mouse? Hmm? It's difficult. I know where's that mouse, it lies at the feet of the computer, because he so small. Knowledge, inspiration, so these duties are like many items on the screen of a computer. You click to Ganapathi, you will be able to, uh, learn how to control the senses and so. To discipline the senses. You click on Saraswati Devi, divine goddess of inspiration, understanding, education. You click the idol of her, Devi, how I must work assiduously to be victorious in my life. Click on the idol of virtue, and you will learn how to be peaceful, and come to the (fountain of prayer?). So many information you have! And pray to God in so many different form and manifestation. Please repeat for me. God is?*

Audience: *One.*

Pandit: *But he have many names. You cannot use the computer without the mouse. Because the mouse belong to Ganapathi.*

As can be seen, here the pandit enlarges the trope of divine encompassment to provide metaphysical warrant for the absorption of many kinds of difference into Hindu cosmology. The simultaneous difference and continuity between computer applications, hardware, and software, transforms the computer into an icon of Hindu devotional practices.

The pandit puns on the dual meaning of mouse as both a computer's handheld interface tool and a small mammal. In Sanatan Dharm Hinduism, the mouse or the rat is the "vehicle" (*vahana*) of the Elephant headed god Ganesh (here called Ganapathi). The conventions for representing Hindu deities employ an iconography that enables the depiction of deities as particular identities possessing multiple attributes and capacities. These diverse symbols generally include a deity's animal vehicle and symbols of efficacious action like weapons, tools, adornments, and paradigmatic gestures, which serve to focus a god's discrete personality and powers. The pandit connects the mouse "at

the feet of the computer” to images of Ganesh and Saraswati—the two deities most commonly worshiped for academic and economic success. Though the pandit begins the computer analogy to illustrate the simultaneity of divine unity and diversity, he quickly shifts to using this metaphysical conceit to encompass computers’ utilitarian form. Icons on a desktop not only convey the pandit’s theological conceit, but allow the computer to become a literal manifestation of Hindu iconographic conventions, with the mouse as the computer’s “vehicle”—associated with the performance of perfect devotion—prostrate at its feet.

This recursive troping permits the pandit to explain an abstruse theological point and imply that the premier symbol of “Western” technological dominance is a Hindu “idol”. This encompassment of “modern” science by a perennial tradition of the ancient past was a dominant theme of Sanatan Dharm doctrine (Bharati 1970). The pandit makes sure to reconcile what the colonial powers that governed India, Guyana, and Suriname defined as opposites—Hinduism and development. The pandit’s theology performs encompassment by making the simile into an icon of Hindu truth. This truth is manifested in spite of the reluctance of Euro-American computer scientists who initially resist the tacitly devotional configuration of monitor and mouse but are forced by destiny to accept it. Assimilating digital technology to the form of Hindu sacred images, the pandit shows the dependence of the one on the other, gesturing from metaphorical figure towards causal homology.

These idioms represent a pragmatic solution to the ideological quandaries of post-colonial religious diversity in plural, secular states. They also express metaphysical and theological concerns heightened by widespread anti-Hindu sentiment. Rhetorical

encompassment combines the moral language of state sanctioned state pluralism with the theological conventions of popular Hinduism. Hindus seek to find ways to incorporate a jumble of important and often acrimonious differences into a demonstration of Hindu primacy, if not supremacy. This is a vexed yet daily operation that depends on harmonizing state sanctioned injunctions to inter-ethnic religious harmony with commitments to Hindu exceptionalism. Talking to both Guyanese and Surinamese Hindus, one finds discourses of the greatest tolerance mixed with sometimes-vitriolic racism. As a species of the paradoxes of post-colonial egalitarian hierarchy, this is the regnant tension of contemporary Hindu discourse, a central inconsistency clouding the effectiveness of Hindu rhetorical encompassment.

### **The Performance of Shakti Oracular Encompassment**

If pandits explain God, Shakti oracles are God. Both Sanatan Dharm and Shakti ritual addressivity work to rhetorically encompass their audiences and transform their “interpretive stance” (Wirtz 2005) to accord with the claims made by their addressers about them. Both traditions of rhetorical-performance strive to persuade Hindus and non-Hindus alike that paradigmatically Hindu forms of ritual surrender are identical with self-fulfillment and human destiny. Though Shakti devotees enthusiastically embrace the model of Hindu meaning put forward by pandit discourse, Shakti ritual—and especially oracular possession—undermines many of the rhetorical and performative conventions that produce pandit religious authority. Instead of celebrating pedigree and doctrinal consistency, Shakti puja performs encompassment by directly confronting devotees with the gods. While Shakti ritual equally depends on Sanatan Dharm’s devotional doctrine, it works to instill it by redefining meaning, injecting it as divine agency into the viscera of

devotees' lives. Explanations are not needed, only the immediate intensity of encounter with a divine being to demonstrate the many unrecognized ways humans depend on divine agency.

In what follows, I present and analyze a transcript that exemplifies many of the basic elements of Shakti oracular consultations as I witnessed them. Limiting analysis to the relatively binary dialogue of the transcript provides a wealth of details to trace how Shakti oracles rhetorically encompass clients and imply otherwise un-witnessed divine agency.

Consultations take the form of a dialogue between a “manifesting” oracle and a devotee or devotees, with the oracle frequently aided by an assistant who may also act as an interpreter. In this instance, I am the inquiring devotee. While my position as a nonplussed and out of place white academic may misrepresent certain elements of the interaction, it equally serves to expose the basic organization and epistemic structure of Shakti epistemic performances as I routinely observed them.

The consultation began with me waiting outside a green concrete temple in front of a substantial middle class home surrounded by a thicket of flags drooping on bamboo poles in the humid mid morning air. One or two other inquirers with questions for the deities waited with me. As at all Shakti shrines, supplicants wait their turn to be called before the oracle. The wait is basic to the broader configuration of the oracular event. No more than 3 or 4 people—normally a family group of some kind—regularly consult an oracle at a time. With the exception of a hunched Indo-Guyanese man staring fixedly at his silent cell phone, all my fellow supplicants were Indo-Surinamese.

One by one, each group of supplicants was called through the temple's swinging Dutch doors to sit on the floor and talk with Vinod, the temple's presiding Guyanese pujari. Vinod had been brought to Suriname by the pujari of a more established temple to assist him with mediumship. After working together for a year, they soon quarreled over the appropriateness of charging people money to talk with the deities—something generally frowned upon by Shakti temples but very common among independent mediums. As a result of their argument, Vinod broke with the other temple to do private consulting work (“*bottom house work*”). By working in greater conformity with the model of private practice preferred by Indo-Surinamese, Vinod soon developed his own, largely Indo-Surinamese, following. His current temple, and more or less permanent residence in the house adjoining it, was the fruit of this private for profit practice.<sup>120</sup>

After being summoned into the temple, I found Vinod accompanied by an Indo-Surinamese assistant pujari who translated the English spoken by Vinod's deities into colloquial Sarnami or Dutch for Indo-Surinamese clients. Both men were dressed in their ritual outfits of a yellow tee shirt and dhoti. Vinod sat with his eyes tightly closed at the center of the temple's floor surrounded by statues of the deities of various heights. The largest of these images was Sanganni Baba—the black skinned mustachioed musclemann ocean “master” and protector of Ganga Ma—whom Vinod was particularly fond of manifesting.

Already manifesting a deity when I entered, like a frantic metronome, he rocked back and forth. Vinod and the assistant pujari were ringed with ritual paraphernalia: half a dozen odd drinking glasses; a bottle of rum; a bed of *neem* leaves on which burned a

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<sup>120</sup> Legally it belonged to devotees now resident in the Netherlands.

bundle of cigarettes; an aluminum tray containing small bowls of ritual powders (sacred ash (*bibhut*), vermilion (*sindur*), and turmeric (*chandan*)); a burning candle; and what appeared to be two dozen turmeric ringed eggs; and twenty or so rolled paper containers piled into an orderly pyramid.<sup>121</sup>

Directed by the other pujari, I took my place on the floor opposite of the “vibrating” Vinod. As soon as his assistant informed me that this was Sanganni Baba, the deity launched into a series of interrogatory declarations.<sup>122</sup> At the point in my fieldwork when I recorded the above interaction, I was attending Shakti consultations weekly and thoroughly experienced with its conventions. Despite this, I was incapable of effectively answering the oracle’s questions other than with baffled affirmations:

Sanganni Baba:	<i>Bacre</i> , my blessing be with you	Note: <i>Bacre</i> here is ambiguous, seeming to conflate the common Hindi term <i>Bacca</i> (baby) and the Sranan <i>Bakra</i> (white person).
Stuart:	Yes, thank you Baba	
SB:	Whats you have to give and whats reality you have to complete, that upon satisfaction is still complete. Whats happen to your sickness?	
S:	It, it, it is gone?	
SB:	Today a lot that which is, sits, and the bands, but your futures your way. What’s happened with it?	
S:	I, I don’t know Baba?	
SB:	There are lots still be (hof?) waiting for their duty to complete where you have a lot in store.	
S:	Yes, Baba?	
SB:	I can change many things for you.	
S:	Thank you, Baba.	
SB:	Your difficulties and your futures, from since small boy to come in this time, and not yet still, within this many things to complete. You have a lots to do.	
S:	Yes, Baba.	
SB:	What’s so happened to that?	
S:	Uh, I’m not sure Baba?	

<sup>121</sup> These apparently played an important ritual role. While I waited I frequently overheard their shaking during the other consultations.

<sup>122</sup> In translation into Sarnami or Dutch, some of the complex confusion of Sangannit’s statements would be erased. In Guyanese creole, however, most of the semantic indeterminacy is maintained.

SB:	Ups and downs! Ups and downs. Can't clear. Little that is inspired through the universe, that you'd like to see, to participate (participate?) in definitions, it's a (?) category to fulfill.	
S:	Hmmm?	
SB:	But in this time the world, hence you eat, hence you coast through, a lot of things have done. That's why you self spin the right way around. When you want to do things it confuse, a lot of distortures (distortions?), distractions and confusions... you walk with day after day. When you have some things in mind, in plan, what happen to it?	
S:	Frequently it is not realized, Baba?	
SB:	That's it. That what I said, your duty to compromise, it's a way to resurrections, which you look forward for. And when things can done in the right way. What's happen?	
S:	Things don't get done?	
SB:	How farther more you can go?	
S:	You can't go further?	
SB:	That's what said: clear body, it will put you back on your desires to complete, and through your measure it can bring a lot for your future. I see you have a lots of plans. I see a lot of things you like them. But when you want to achieve, to make a step to comfort, futures for the weeks.	
S:	Mmmhmm.	
SB:	Do your works its very important. You cannot see what is inside. But feel it and through it the process of the futures, that tells the rest of your story.	
S:	Yes, Baba.	
SB:	You have a questions to asks?	
S:	No Baba.	
SB:	Let my blessing be with you.	

So the consultation concluded. The assistant pujari instructed me to come back in two days. I would have to do “personal work” which would be assigned and performed by the deity at our next session. As I got up to leave, I was asked, *sotto voce*, to leave a small monetary contribution.

Like the Mayan Shamans studied by Williams Hanks (2013) Shakti oracles achieve ritual control by preventing intersubjective symmetry between them and their supplicants. With its confusing syntax, garbled vocabulary, and unrelenting indeterminacy of reference, my consultation with Sanganni exemplifies how Shakti oracles' rhetorically generate perplexity to encompass supplicants with epistemic



uncertainty. Like Socratic questioning, Vinod's Sanganni's indeterminate communications cultivate a stance of "ironic" distance to imperfectly align speaker and statement, sense and reference. As in the other consultations I overheard or witnessed, Sanganni addressed me so that it appears he does not need to question me and that he already knows everything I could possibly say. The vagueness of his statements, their probing certainty and opaque delivery, become critical evidence for Sanganni's implied omniscience, an elusive certainty that connected all possible problems back to the premise of the consultation: that I am speaking to a god capable of telling me what it is otherwise impossible for me to know.

In the remainder of this chapter I offer an analysis of the above transcript. I argue that Shakti oracular performance uses epistemic asymmetries in ritual consultations to create the impression that supplicants are ontologically encompassed by the oracular deities' agency.

### **The Context of Shakti Encompassment**

Oracles work to remake reference in relation to context, redefining the circumstances of supplicants' daily lives in light of the epistemological rupture between appearance and reality that oracular messages work to communicate.<sup>123</sup> Thus, in analyzing my interaction with Sanganni, we must first consider how Vinod as an oracle was positioned within the temple. Vinod's temple had been built with contributions he had received from grateful clients, many of whom would become regular devotees. It consisted of two rooms: an anteroom/storage room and the shrine room proper fitted out with statues

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<sup>123</sup> They do so by interjecting multiple levels of "noise" into oracular communication disrupts questions of the immediate accuracy of oracular descriptions, "message plus environment" (Bateson 1972).



Figure 7: Kali Mai image in Vinod's temple

(*murti*) of all the major gods. These stood on raised pedestals supported by a plinth that skirted the walls on both sides of the room. The statues of the gods were all garlanded with flowers and surrounded by burning incense and offerings, but were of dramatically different sizes, indicating that temple construction was still in progress.

The temple's ritual space was carefully curated to accentuate the basic asymmetry between the oracle and supplicants/devotees. This is apparent how the temples' form worked to regulate access, with supplicants needing to wait on the bench next to the five or six stairs that led to the shrine room where Vinod consulted. As supplicants were called one by one in to the temple/consulting room, the control exerted by how Vinod and his assistant regulated the temple's space became even more evident. Upon entering the shrine, consultants were directly addressed by the convulsively vibrating oracle and his assistant. Due to the oracle's distorted embodiment of divine power, however, supplicants could only respond, making any answer short of physically attacking the oracle a confirmation of the event's ritual frame as a ritual of mediation. When I visited Vinod on another occasion with a Surinamese friend with wide experience of both Hindu and Afro-Surinamese oracles, I was struck by the vulnerable uncertainty she similarly showed during the consultation. This hesitant bafflement appeared to be the most common response to Shakti oracles, and I saw many of Vinod's clients emerge from his séances visibly affected.

### **Perplexity, Repair, and Encompassment**

To create this perplexity Shakti oracular performances exploit rudimentary features of the organization of talk in interaction. As conversational analysts have theorized, conversations are organized into "turns at talk" defined by "conditional

relevance” (Sidnell 2010). When a speaker says something, the addressee assesses it in terms of its situational relevance, the degree to which it aligns to the expected conventions of the interaction. In daily conversation, people frequently face “problems of hearing, speaking, and understanding” (Sidnell 2010: 110). In normal conversation, co-participants rely on “repair” — “an organized set of practices through which participants...are able to address and potentially resolve such problems” (2010: 110). Repair is structured<sup>124</sup> to attempt to remedy the source of misunderstanding. This can be either “self-initiated” by the speaker or “other-initiated” by another participant.<sup>125</sup>

Shakti oracles seek to creatively distort the impulse to repair and other context dependent understandings to subtly transform the phenomenology of communication. Repair enables greater intersubjective attunement between co-participants in an unfolding communicative event, reflexively smoothing out the appearance of a shared framework for participation and interpretation (2010: 111). Shakti oracles, however, warp supplicants’ expectations of conversational repair in ways that destabilize and engulf how their supplicants understand what is happening during oracular interactions. By showing that basic rules of mutual intelligibility do not apply to oracular speech, Shakti oracles similarly redefine their supplicants’ expectations about which kinds of knowledge can be conveyed through talk. This is how manifesting Shakti oracles use supplicant miscomprehension to transduce differences in understanding into asymmetries between humans and gods.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Repair initiation and repair outcome.

<sup>125</sup> Difficulties in understanding are frequent, particularly when “the hearer does not recognize a particular word used, does not know who or what is being talked about, or cannot parse the grammatical structure of an utterance” (Sidnell 2010: 111).

<sup>126</sup> In an expanded, discursive sense, repair can also be applied to the logics of encompassment as employed by contemporary Guianese Hindus. Encompassment allows Hindus to repair the many ordinary

An important reason for this is that Shakti oracles must exert themselves to encompass quotidian Surinamese and Guyanese Hindu ideologies of motivation that conflate the ways people speak to speaker's social identity and value. Because of the presumptions of self-interest that haunt Guianese Hindu ritual speech, oracular communications need to distinguish themselves from other kinds of talk (see Du Bois 1993). As previously discussed, in Suriname and Guyana, egalitarian moral ideologies are supported by an ethic of suspicion that ties self worth to a person's ability to see through others' self-interested motives. Sidnell (2000) has argued that egalitarian sentiment is interactively constructed through the organization of the ways members of Guyanese male peer groups tell stories. Shared knowledge of these stories, of their elements and veracity, decides inclusion into constantly unfolding negotiations of the "boundaries of a community of equals". No matter their age or gender, Shakti oracles must speak to temporarily confound either egalitarian or hierarchical expectations about a medium's un-possessed social status.

This creative distortion begins with the kinesics of an oracle's own body. Shakti oracles nearly always begin a consultation by "vibrating". Like Vinod, many oracles continued to frenetically shake and swing for as long as a deity was manifest with their body. Body position, facial expression, and gesture scaffold interpretation and comprehension in interaction. In the interaction transcribed above, Vinod's bodily orientation at an acute angle facing slightly past the direction of my gaze, eyes firmly shut, with upper body jerking rhythmically back and forth offered my attention only a

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challenges to their self worth as an ethnically particular community. Encompassment is a meta-discursive strategy that enables the reconciliation of hostile criticism of Hinduism and Hindus, a strategy of redress that transforms any tense interaction with the member of another ethnic religious group into a validation of Hindu difference.

blur. In this way, Shakti oracles disrupted the meaning that facial expressions and posture normally conveyed by dramatically replacing them with standardized performances of the loss of control. Like a leaf caught in a great wind, Vinod performed being tossed about by overwhelming divine power. Once a consultation began, the energetic obscuring of an oracle's body by their movement helped ensure that supplicants gave fuller attention to an oracle's correspondingly murky words. This further skirts doubts about oracles' identities and accuracy by forcing supplicants to strain to understand what is being said.

Sanganni set up our dialog by introducing himself not by name (this was whispered to me by the assistant) but by addressing me as "child"—a form of address he used for all supplicants no matter their age—and giving me his blessings. From the moment I took my place in front of him, I was thus positioned as an inferior. Indo-Guyanese and Surinamese sociality emphasizes age and gender as the only completely natural distinctions. Age determines degrees of authority and provides the right to make decisions (Sidnell 2000, 2005). To address a supplicant as a child is to immediately establish a hierarchical disparity between addresser and addressee.

Vinod's Sanganni followed this greeting with an opaque statement about "reality", and "completion". His proclamations were said with a certainty meant to suggest his knowledge arose from a previously established relation between us. However garbled the language that conveyed it, I was immediately located as a recipient of previously known information. Sanganni's statements were sweeping, confusing and, at least initially, always followed by questions demanding uncertain responses: "Today a lot that which is, sits, and the bands, but your futures your way. What's happened with it?" The question is general yet targeted; I was unsure about what was denoted. Reference to

sickness was a foolproof personalization that easily enabled Sanganni to refer to types as tokens (Bascom 1969:68-69; Fortes 1966:419; Lienhardt 1961:68-69; Schieffelin 1985; Turner 1961:18). Nevertheless, as I read many times from the concerned looks of supplicants trying to answer Sanganni's questions, this knowledge frame insinuates uncanny familiarity, forcing addressees to wrack their minds to understand what, precisely, the deity is referencing.

Sanganni's questions invite supplicants to attempt to repair misunderstandings *on his terms*. I was compelled to answer in the hope of additional clarification. By submitting to this framework, supplicants cede authority to the oracle. In the above excerpt from the transcript, this is especially clear when Sanganni appropriates my tentative attempts to work out his meanings by saying, "that's it", or "that's what said." These certain responses amplify the appearance that my knowledge is fully encompassed by his, and that I have in fact fully understood what he has said. This permits Sanganni to further coerce me to reflect on my assumptions about what I know. Like all oracles, he works to epistemically encompass me to put me in my place as an uncomprehending human being.

To index his power, Sanganni makes the most of all-encompassing claims to necessity. When Sanganni says: "Your difficulties and your futures, from since small boy to come in this time, and not yet still, within this many things to complete. You have a lots to do", he was indicating that he has been watching me all along; that who I am has been concealed until the moment of our meeting. He creates the appearance of "simultaneity" to reorder the sequence and meaning of my life (Parkin 1991). With obscure language, Sanganni invokes the blotted facts of my biography to assert my

absolute dependence upon him; my various pains and scattered successes should be seen as evidence that he knows me and has definite plans for how I should live so as to fulfill my ritual “duty” to him. I must undertake the prolonged period of sacrificial devotion and purification that both Shakti and Sanatan Dharm Hinduism prescribe to remedy most misfortunes or uncertainties.

Sanganni is telling me that my own ability to “complete”—fulfill my ritual duty—is contingent upon my “satisfaction” of the gods through what I “give them.” Only after accepting this ritual imperative in practice as an existential principle will I be able to accomplish what I want. My own life—that which I must assume I must indisputably know—is rendered encompassed by the incomprehension Sanganni creates. This imbues him with a more perfect knowledge essentially beyond human epistemic ability. All of my trials, pains, and frustrations were in this way transformed from piecemeal mysteries into fluent signs of my dependence on the gods and my natal duty to ritually acknowledge this debt.

Sanganni’s epistemic management of our consultation’s semiotic infrastructure created a triple parallelism between my attempts to repair my comprehension of what he said, his reformatting of that understanding, and the ritual “duty” he demanded from me. My need for explanation enabled Sanganni to persistently push his redefinition of the problems I thought I had in terms of unacknowledged ritual obligations. My need to repair my understanding of what Sanganni said thus resulted in a challenge to my self-knowledge, my desires, and my agency.



## **Language Ideology and Oracular Rhetorical Encompassment**

In the same way that Shakti oracles' vibrate to inject distracting "noise" into the communicative "channel" of their messages, they also play with language to force supplicants into certain kinds of social and epistemic positions in relation to interrogating deities. As amply attested in the literature, styles of ritual speech influence the distribution and allocation of social responsibility during and after ritual events (Chafe 1993; Du Bois 1986; Keane 1997; Kuipers 1993; Wirtz 2005). The "manifesting" Guyanese Shakti oracles I observed in Suriname generally spoke in registers that affected the "proper" English used in Guyanese government and education. In Guyana and Suriname, English *is* respect, a passport to cosmopolitan successes only found beyond Guyana's isolation and poverty. A dusting of "proper"—as opposed to Creolese—English imbues Shakti oracular language with the authority and added agency of both the Guyanese bureaucracy and English's global reach (Edwards 1983), uniting the major destinations of Guyanese economic migration, Canada, the United States and Great Britain, to India, the source of Hindu tradition.

The undervaluing of Guyanese creole English in the face of "good" English is critical for widespread Guyanese perceptions of their powerlessness (Jayawardena 1962; 1968; Williams 1991; Sidnell 2000; 2005) Since Shakti deities were so often approached about legal turbulence like attaining visa's or resolving court cases, however garbled, oracles' use of standard English aided perceptions of their divine efficacy. Guyanese language ideologies that stress the difference between Guyanese "Creolese" English and standard "official English" make possessing deities' use of registers redolent of official

English highly consequential.<sup>127</sup> While, like Vinod, many Guyanese Shakti oracles in Suriname did speak Creolese, it was normally heavily larded with vocabulary like “definition” and “distorture” rarely used in everyday conversation. Though all but the most recent Guyanese immigrants in Suriname speak Guyanese creole with substantial borrowings from Sranan and Dutch, both these languages were importantly excluded from oracular performances. This is clear in the transcript because Vinod, who was married to a Muslim Surinamese woman and ministered to a mainly Surinamese clientele in a predominantly Indo-Surinamese community, tended to speak Sranan or a heavily Sranan infused Creolese while unpossessed. This linguistic segregation mirrors the exclusion of Sranan from the majority of Surinamese pandit’s public speech, and shows the many complex ways indexes of ethnic, racial, and socio-economic difference shadow Hindu ritual performances.<sup>128</sup>

The above transcript records how Shakti deities emulate “proper” English but render it strange. Oracles often said they “trained up” their deities to speak in English, even if they also spoke other languages. Using words that connoted prestigious verities of English endows manifesting deities with an appropriately officious mien that was also in pregnant tension with the familiar titles of Mother (*Ma*) and Father (*Baba*) with which devotees addressed them. This tension was apparent throughout Shakti oracular interactions, and stoked an unsettling contrast of solicitude and threat that served to

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<sup>127</sup> With its divergent language ideologies and widespread familiarity with prestigious Hindi, I expected Indo Surinamese to be unsettled by divine use of English. When I asked waiting Indo-Surinamese patients if the fact that the gods spoke English rather than Sarnami or Hindi at all troubled them they appeared nonplussed, answering that it was all right because they had an interpreter. In this way, questions of code were minimized in relation to the prospects of more or less direct communication with the gods. Rather than troubling the consulting patients, the markedly different code complemented their broader assumptions about the difficulty humans had in accessing the divine.

<sup>128</sup> In my time in Suriname, I estimate I attended at least thirty pandit sermons. Of these I only encountered a Surinamese pandit speaking Sranan a single time, and he was addressing Guyanese Hindus.

further impress supplicants of their epistemic asymmetry with a medium's deities.<sup>129</sup> In this way, Shakti oracular language combines comforting familiarity with the mercurial vagaries of the unknown and foreign. Such a juxtaposition adds the Hindu deities dramatic appeal as trans-corporeal “big men”, who—like successful Guyanese politicians or businessmen—are capable of managing “small men's” access to the abundance of the world (see Williams 1991: 78-83).

Sanganni's distorted register of “respectable” English highlights the “paradox of interpretability and uninterpretability” (Du Bois 1986: 327) to further transmute conversational repair into existential/social need. Sanganni persistently talks past me to take epistemic advantage of the resulting misalignments. Questioning statements follow one another in ways that lead to vague but looming answers that compound supplicants' uncertainties. Such frustrating dissonances between powerful knowers and their supplicants are deeply redolent of the protracted difficulty of gaining access to even basic goods and rights in the personalistic maze of Surinamese and Guyanese commerce and bureaucracy (Williams 1991).

One Shakti oracle told me that Shakti ritual is about “streamlining” these relations, recognizing that all social possibilities are in fact controlled by capricious yet continuously intervening deities. Shakti oracles' language ritually twists registers of asymmetrical economic access and political authority into evidence of an inevitable ontological distance between oracles' deities and human supplicants. In doing so, oracles also emphasize the way in which all humans—including local big men—are subordinate

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<sup>129</sup> Considering this, we can see how the presence of a translator additionally expands the sense of distance between the oracle and the client, which aids the “spiritual” encompassment of the supplicant. While the above is relatively unmediated because I, as a native English speaker, was the client, most of Vinod's clients were Surinamese Hindustanis who have difficulty following the oracle's convoluted language.

to the deities. Shakti oracles manipulate local language ideologies to communicate that, however unaware, from womb to grave, the deities encompass every person's destiny.

### **Encompassing the Body**

Shakti oracular mediumship achieves the appearance of ontological encompassment through the interactive construction of epistemic asymmetry. In the above transcript, this asymmetry is expressed by the three major topics addressed by Vinod's Sanganni: the body, the future, and ritual obligation. These topics were all pitched to prove that the devotional ritual "work" the god prescribed was the only solution to my problems.

When Sanganni says: "...clear body, it will put you back on your desires to complete, and through your measure it can bring a lot for your future", he means that I must submit to a ritual cleansing administered by the god and undertake a prolonged course of ritual devotion. Such devotions encourage Shakti supplicants to identify their personal possibility with divine agency. Devotion enacts human subordination to deepen devotees' perceptions of the extent of divine control: "your duty to compromise, it's a way to resurrections." For Shakti practitioners, eating meat, drinking alcohol, and living "unclean", accretes on the body the defilements of a world ignorant of divine purposefulness. To cleanse the body is to care for the self as an index of dependence on an otherwise indiscernible "spiritual" order. It paves the way for the ritual work that fulfills human submission before the overwhelming meaning of the divine.<sup>130</sup>

Vinod's Sanganni thus spoke to intensify my perception that both my body and future were unfamiliar, importantly beyond my conscious awareness. In this way,

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<sup>130</sup> This is best exemplified by the oath that oracles take, which alerts people to the fact that a deity legitimately possesses the medium and demonstrates the medium's sufficient purity to host the deity.

Sanganni attempts to force supplicants to confront their lack of control over time and embodiment, the most elementary prerequisites for human subjectivity (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Munn 1986; Ricoeur 1992). In doing so, the deity makes supplicants' wellbeing contingent on their electing to perform a destiny about which they can otherwise have no knowledge. Sanganni's imperious vagueness proclaims this epistemic gap to demonstrate that his uncommon knowledge of my life is proof of his mastery of my future. He urges me to take control by abandoning myself to his encompassing agency.

Caring for the body as an unknown other instills awareness that human agency is significantly illusory. The hubris of self-control is what leads people into the presumptuous ignorance that they really understand themselves or others. Humans cannot "see what is inside," but can come to feel the relations divulged by physical and emotional sensations.

Rather than the intimate seat of human self-awareness, Shakti oracular discourse blows the body open and makes it into a messenger of humans' total encompassment by powers beyond them. In admitting the materiality of the embodied self—its sudden aches, its dull complaints, its mysterious moods—as signs of this dependence, supplicants begin to feel the future as a "process" of devotion—a continuous ritual reminding of human powerlessness. Thus Sanganni urges me to admit that he encompasses the most intimate sources of my self-knowledge. This is how oracles can recast supplicants' apparently subjective, private pains and desires in the same way they alter language, refashioning both bodies and words into indexes of absolute determination by the divine.

For the Shakti practitioners I worked with, the body was an eddy at the confluence of the self, others, and the gods. The body's unpredictability, its unwanted



Figure 8 Possessed Shakti oracle taking her oath

responsiveness to the actions of others was comparable to the deities' spectral control over the world as enacted in oracles' possession performances. This parallel generates an impasse in self-understanding that permits oracular authority. Oracles confound verbal and bodily sense to point to other meanings previously un-intuited by obtuse human minds. This initiates the process through which deities encompass sense and reference to show distressed supplicants the myriad ways they are included in the actions of the deities. Though humans appear to themselves as discrete, self-possessed identities, the gods have already determined our destinies.

Devotions consisting of fasting, ritual bathing, hours of mantra recitation, or gruelingly prepared food offerings physically embody the encompassment of human will by divine purpose. Learning to concede corporeal control to the deities is necessary to redefine the nature of volition and achieve a future in concordance with both Shakti devotees' Hindu ritual obligations. As the most sensitive measure and instrument of Hindu virtue, the "work" of the body stands between personal fulfillment and the ritual means of its accomplishment.<sup>131</sup> The way Sanganni addresses his supplicants recasts their futures as provisional upon how the body is cared. In this way the body can itself become a locus of devotion, and the key sign of human dependence on the divine. Vinod's Sanganni's insistence that the body is preeminently a tool of devotion objectifies its independence from the self, questioning uncritical assumptions that it is identical to self-consciousness. When Sanganni says, "Do your works it's very important. You cannot see what is inside. But feel it and through it the process of the futures, that tells the rest of your story", he demands that I acknowledge the ultimate opacity of my self to myself. He is saying that I, like all supplicants, must learn to read the many indeterminate frailties of body and volition as the evidential shoves that the deities use to make humans submit to ritual discipline. Such discourses make self and embodiment into reciprocally mysterious objects of inquiry, legitimate knowledge of which is only accessible through divine mediation.

If a supplicant submits to their ritual "duty" with appropriate devotional intensity, divine encompassment may come to physical expression through possession, and will in turn become an oracular medium. According to Vinod and other Shakti mediums, all

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<sup>131</sup> As will be discussed in the next chapter, this also re-purposes popular Surinamese and Guyanese notions of work as the moral guarantor of ownership (Williams 1991; Jackson 2012), connecting the aboriginal truth of Hindu ritual to Hindu control over the two countries' politics and resources.

humans possess an innate capacity to “manifest” the gods, but a person must “work” very hard at their devotions to be permitted to do so. Devotees cannot “sport, keep company, no hold 'em fast”—be promiscuous, spend their time drinking with friends instead of fulfilling domestic duties, and fail to keep the three day abstention from meat, sex, and liquor before attending Shakti services. If a person fails to adhere to these standards, the deities will cause them to “fall down” (*faidon*) in their anger, making unobservant devotees ill or even killing them. This is how Shakti rhetoric reveals that any future a supplicant *should* possibly want is contingent on their devotional ability to recognize their derivative dependency, their encompassment by divine will.

Oracular talk about the body attempts to encompass the addressee to establish a causal parallel between the oracle’s performance of divine mediation and the client’s own dependency on the god. This renders obedient supplicants opaque to themselves, assuring them that they can only ever know themselves by oracular proxy.<sup>132</sup> Both possession and divine punishment communicate this. Shakti oracles seek to make the pains that flash through an irresponsible devotee’s body equivalent to the raw ebb and flow of emotion that troubles people out of step with divine volition.<sup>133</sup> In this way, oracles like Vinod push supplicants to propound therapeutic self-doubt, making them doubt the human ability to understand experience. Sanganni uses talk about my body and future to mold

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<sup>132</sup> The same oracular meta-statements that point to the ultimate inability of humans to know the self apart from the divine is also the solution to the problem of how humans can know at all. Genuine knowledge is to be found externally, in oracles. This solution is also the paradox. However transformed their bodies and words, oracles are still all too human. This irrepressible humanity enjoins doubt. The same doubt that is the knife-edge severing supplicants from their self-certainty and affording the divine purchase in their lives equally negates it, reducing divine truths to human lies. The problem is insoluble. This difference between deities and humans separates materially circumscribed humans from the purity of even the most impure god.

<sup>133</sup> Such curative doubt, however, can never be severed from the promise of healing. When Shakti oracles’ supplicants lose hope in not knowing themselves, they go their own ways, to other mediums, other religions, or even abiding cynicism. Doubt encourages faith through uncertainty, but also leads to insurmountable suspicion.



the intimacy of face-to-face dialogue into existential perplexity, and allow the divine agency he claims to rush into the turmoil of my human uncertainty.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have shown the different ways in which orthodox Hindu pandits and Shakti Oracles use encompassing rhetoric in performance. Given that pandits work so fruitfully to expound theology to even the most uninterested audiences, oracles inevitably perform their divinity against the backdrop of pandit authority. Despite real conflict over how it is communicated, the message of Sanatan Dharm pandits and Shakti oracles is much the same: humans are existentially and epistemically dependent on, and even manifestations of, a primordially Hindu divine reality. While pandits strive to relieve collective Hindu doubts about communal identity by providing “proper” interpretations of sacred texts, Shakti oracles disrupt the expectations of face-to-face communication to limit human knowledge, digging into the mystery of self-consciousness to reveal the many ways humans are encompassed by volitions beyond their own. Shakti mediumship thus performs a double motion that practically fulfills divine encompassment of human bodies. Collapsing description and technique, mediumship strives for the “obviation” (Wagner 1978) of incidental details like pain in performances of the automatic and involuntary. In doing so mediums attempt to produce legitimate knowledge as preeminently embedded in the personalities of the deities.

## Chapter 6

### Pain and Suffering and the Awareness of Coalition and Encompassment

In a crowded backyard temple in a working class Paramaribo neighborhood, gongs and the blowing of conchs pierce the deafening static of a recording of ritual drums (*tappu*). An elderly woman stands in a low walled precinct at the center of the room between imposing rows of polychrome images of the gods (*murti*). Suddenly she begins to dance wildly. Loosening her hair, her head swings and she shudders into the distinctive oscillating hop that reveals the onset of a deity's manifestation. Those attending her (including me), all dressed in yellow t-shirts and *dhotis*, scramble to pour consecrated dye water over her, soaking her and intensifying the frantic onrush of divine energy (*shakti*). After a few minutes, her body is claimed and the deity settled. She announces herself and takes a sealing oath by placing a chunk of burning camphor on her tongue. We gather around her to touch her feet and receive a mark of sacred ash (*bibhut*) on our foreheads. In the waiting area just outside the sanctum, supplicants are assembled and anxiously await an invitation to enter. Soon they are summoned. A young woman prostrates before Kali, greets her and is addressed emphatically by the irate goddess:

*You stay away from me! You have problem, you'll be right back, toch (isn't that so)? So how long will you go for now? Until you're ready, what to do? Don't let other one tell you things, that you're not decide. Ok? Sometime what happen with all your pain that you got there (she puts hand on the woman's chest)? You can take it and put it. Tears. Tears you got. You feel like no one in this world for you. But I am the Mother and am here for you! No one didn't know that! They want to tell you what things, what you don't want to do. And what you don't feel like to do! But then who know you! You know you is, who you didn't take and come here. I put it there. You didn't*

*want to listen your own Father (meaning one of the male deities) word! What he said to you? Ok? (Inaudible) Come for all the way for what he tell you. That is nonsense! But he deal with the nonsense, ok? Ok! That is the one there, what you dealing with and what you dealing with. I am the mother for you! Ok! Take care! See that you stand for me and I will take care for it! Leave everything in my hands! And what happened there (points to the arm) she took all and she gone? Take care for it! That is not so! Who is in the pain?*

“Who is in the pain?” Kali’s question is also a description. Pain, in need of explanation, becomes the diagnosis for a dense range of relations, each of which reveals something definitional about suffering, about the experience of loss and desire. The Goddess’s challenge forces the pain into prominence, a sign of the thick implication of being always already encompassed by both social relations and the gods. Trust, friendship, expectation, all is caught in the verbal net that the Goddess throws over the life of the sufferer. The Goddess implores the woman to recognize the knots that tie her to these many others, and to know them for the tangles of unknowing, of disappointment they are. She invites the woman to recognize who and what is basic to whom she can be. Pain initiates, pain lingers, a sign of all these relations. But pain is not merely a sign. Instead, pain invites the woman into a new vision of the world. The goddess supports her while revealing the dark meshes of other’s minds, the moral decay of a universe of illusion. In doing so, pain becomes both the goddess’s power and the faces of the intimate unveiled by betrayal. In making this known, the goddess invites the woman to see her suffering as a failure to recognize her true self as dependent on the goddess. This is an invitation to “stand for” the goddess—to become her medium—and newly submit to her primordial encompassment by divine power.

In the previous chapters I described how coalition and encompassment are differently produced through ritual rhetorical performances. As evident in the above

vignette, Hindu and Ndyuka oracular rituals are critically motivated by pain, suffering, and other misfortunes. In this chapter, I expand on my earlier performative analyses to show how Ndyuka and Hindu oracular healers use patients' misfortunes to communicate their traditions' implicit sense of relatedness. Over the course of oracular interactions, the qualities of physical pain and social suffering are made to communicate that the pain is both an identity and a vital part of the sufferers' embodied self. Beginning as inarticulate sensations, personal pain is ritually transformed into identifiable gods and spirits who expose their hosts as existentially dependent on them. After a short overview of theories of pain in contemporary anthropology, I describe how these discourses dialogically emerge during oracular interactions between possessed mediums and their patients from both Hindu and Ndyuka ritual traditions.

### **Pain and Anthropology**

Since the 1980s, pain has been a key topic of anthropological analysis (Robbins 2013). Anthropologists have sought to redeem representations of 'the other' with the 'suffering subject' (2013), replacing difference with a universal human nature judged real through shared agony. In this view, pain is a transcendental, pre-discursive revelation of common humanity (Fassin and Rechtman 2009). To quote Scarry's influential claim: 'Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned' (1987: 4). For Scarry, pain can be creative, but only because it is 'objectless' (Scarry: 161)—that is, a pure experience of self-alienation that necessitates a profoundly individuated response (see also Daniel 1996; Das 1997; DelVecchio Good, Brodwin, Good and Kleinman 1992; Good 1992; Jackson 2005).

Accordingly, pain testifies to the ‘real’ against the representational conventions of power and authority. However, if pain is essentially ‘unsignifiable’ (Daniel 1996: 138), while it may impart dignity to a unique, individuated sufferer, it does so in a ‘natural’ world where suffering is, if not meaningless, ultimately beyond meaning. Considered like this, pain purifies subjects of the illusions of ideology, returning them to the verities of a ‘deep’ humanity—‘the shared search for our satisfaction... the melioration of our pains’ (Sahlins 1996: 395).

This treatment of pain endows it with what Whitehead (1929) referred to as ‘misplaced concreteness.’ The English word pain—which blithely encompasses everything from hangnails to torture—bestows transcendental unity and individuating immediacy on diverse sensations (Bourke 2014). Scholarly approaches that dwell on pain as a definitively objectless private language paradoxically objectify a narrow, historically contingent articulation of the meanings of pain. As Asad (1993, 2001) has addressed the liberal politics of objectifying pain, this discourse presumes a ‘moral narrative’ in which individual autonomy and self-knowledge are the ends and means of history (Asad 2003; Keane 2007). History becomes the story of the progressive ‘triumph’ over pain (Asad 2003). Though scholars constantly aver their ability to participate in others’ pain, to pursue it as the transcendent real of a ‘rhetoric of mourning’ (Das 2007) risks obscuring pain as an active, ordinary, and historically contingent component of sociality (Bourke 2013; Kleinman, Brodwin, Good, and DelVecchio Good 1992). Approaches that forget that pain has a history inadvertently elide the complex ways pain enables *and* degrades the creation of human collective life.

This paradoxical fixation on an irreducibly physical sense of pain at once universal and completely private reveals a certain sort of liberal, objectivist ethics. For Asad, anthropology should instead attend to the influence of the application and explanation of the nature of pain on diverse practices of human subjectivity and sociality. Following Keane (2003), anthropologists might better understand pain across its sensible diversity as an element of ‘semiotic ideology’—‘the basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world’ (2003: 419). Such a semiotic approach includes the formal, material qualities of pain as active in the shaping of social practices as diverse as child rearing, public oratory, and armed intervention. Like Evans-Pritchard’s (1937: 65-66) example of the boy who stubbed his toe and perceived it as witchcraft, pain is integral to the inferential habits that condition social orders (see also Throop 2010).

The sensible qualities of pain dynamically precipitate signification. As burning, dull, piercing, pulsing, or ear pain, nausea, headache, pain is understood through its sensual properties. The influence these qualities exert depends on the ways participants in a given ‘representational economy’ (Keane 2003) use particular pains to make arguments about questions as diverse as the limit of the group (Merlan and Rumsey 1991), the nature of responsibility (Evans-Pritchard 1937; Kuipers 1993), or the practice of virtue (Throop 2008; 2012).

Although non-linguistic, pain is communicative. The qualities of pain intersect with talk in the practice of everyday interaction to facilitate ever-changing intersubjective calibration between persons in their ongoing social lives. To the extent people share in the discursive evaluation of pain’s qualities, they are capable of mutual understanding as inhabitants of the same, similarly valued reality (Munn 1986). Social formations like

lineages, neighborhoods, and nations are often contingent upon how pain is perceived to act as an identifying sign of their members' essential categorical belonging and mutual interests (Ralph 2013). Pain—and the more general kinds of suffering like sadness and unemployment to which it is almost always assimilated—was elemental to how the Hindus and Ndyuka with whom I worked became aware of being enmeshed in the relational matrixes stipulated by each tradition.

### **Ndyuka Conceptions of Pain and Suffering**

For the Ndyuka people I worked with, the qualities of pain are frequently perceived as existential signs of kin-defined social relations. This way of thinking about pain extends its meanings beyond the semantic range of the English word to encompass a diversity of sufferings. From physical and emotional afflictions like sickness or grief to personal incapacities like chronic unemployment, anything that 'hurts' (*ati*) by causing a loss of control is considered pain. According to many Ndyuka, the object of pain is the integral relation of humans to their families and spirits. The authority of possessed mediums derives from the same existential connection that Ndyuka identify between pain and relatedness. The discourse of pain-as-relation shapes Ndyuka social practices and motivates the political negotiations that continue to inform Ndyuka sociality. For Ndyuka—who can narrate the sufferings of their ancestors during slavery in the first person and present tense—pain is basic to identity. They make expressions of personal pain during sickness or mourning into creative and resolutely collective events that affectively and substantially bind participants. People talk about, compare, and perform pains large and small as definitively common concerns shared by kin and neighbors.

Within this framework, pain is inter-generationally and interpersonally transitive (Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering 2004; Vernon 1992).

Though Ndyuka has a noun for pain (*pen*), it is rarely used. More often, to talk about pain people use verbs like to eat (*nyan*) and to hurt (*ati*), where the sufferer is the object of the feeling. These formulations are often accompanied by idiophones—onomatopoeic sound icons of sensation—like *gudyuu gudyuu* that convey specific qualities of throbbing, shooting, or tingling. Many of these idiophones also refer to the experience of anger. This consonance conveys the common Ndyuka perception that pain, like anger, is reactive, a sign of reciprocal co-participation between conscious agents.

In this context, the experience of persistent, intense pain or protracted anguish easily becomes a message about the self's essential multiplicity. For Ndyuka patients and oracular healers, pain divulges the elementary relational structure of personhood and subjectivity. Through bonds of kinship and contingent feelings of enmity, jealousy, or avarice, relations with others define Ndyuka persons (see Strathern 1988 on Melanesia). Ndyuka bodies physically contain these relations and express them as suffering. As will be shown, how pain feels indicates the relations that matter, rooting them in immediate sensation and the natural categories of social life. Though pain can be divided among many registers—physical, emotional, historical, traumatic, minor, or chronic—when exposed as spirits or another's malice, pain collapses personal and collective histories to confound and transform distinctions (Lambek 1998, 2003). As a sensible articulation of these relations, pain generates understandings of the self as an embodiment of Ndyuka society and history. Ndyuka pain is not derivative of history, but often history itself.



During consultations, mediums interactively blend the character of pain into possession performances to communicate the priority of human and spirit others in their own and in their patients' lives. As the determinacy of ancestry or the anger of disagreement with kin and neighbors, the physical sensation of pain merges with the conduct of sociality. When the character of a patient's pain is performatively integrated with a medium's own pained transformation into a powerful spirit interaction, pain warrants oracles to announce basic truths about patients' personal and communal existence.

Instead of 'destroying' (Scarry 1985: 4) language, in oracular performances pain becomes an invitation to social creativity, an incitement for people to redefine the self anew as a collection of relations. Ndyuka oracular possession performances interactively actuate the discrete sensible properties of pain as a sign of both the medium's and the sufferer's subjective/social multiplicity by revealing the body as an accumulation of relations with human and non-human others. Pain remains pain in the body, but each ache or sting also signals the person as an incarnation of their social interdependencies. In rendering pain a sign of relations, Ndyuka divinatory practices extend the consequences of personal suffering into the conduct and politics of relatedness. When understood as a message about social relations, pain becomes integral to the ways Ndyuka persons recognize their internal multiplicity to recreate themselves as the appropriate kind of coalitional selves.

### **The Questioning**

The following describes one exemplary Ndyuka oracular consultation I witnessed in May 2013. The interaction shows 1) that for many Ndyuka, subjectivity is

commonsensically multiple and significantly composed by spirits, and 2) how relations with spirits are often defined by both bodily pain and the all-pervading quality of kinship.

Da Sabun is a typical contemporary urban Ndyuka *bonuman*. Born in the interior, he moved to Paramaribo after assuming his vocation as a healer to practice for a larger, but still predominantly Ndyuka clientele. While his ‘professionalization’ of oracular practice was a departure from many more intimate, kin-based forms of mediumship that still flourish, the basic dialogical structure of the interaction between oracle and client(s) remains. This is true even when Da Sabun is not possessed and instead uses a variety of other divination objects like “*luku*” (medicated bottles or bells that swing on a chord to indicate yes or no answers) to diagnose clients’ problems.

My field assistant John and I were squeezed on a narrow bench in the corner of the Ndyuka oracular medium Da Sabun’s shrine room. The shrine was behind the long, green clapboard home where Da Sabun lives with his three wives and many children. On the inside, the shrine was an explosion of wrapped bottles, stools, staffs, flags, and additional ritual paraphernalia that pack Da Sabun and his wife Ma Tranga’s twin spirit altars. Outside the shrine a dozen people crowded awaiting consultations.

Ma Tranga, Da Sabun’s third wife, was possessed by one of her three usual spirits, an indigenous man named Da Kodyo. Temporarily using Ma Tranga’s body, Da Kodyo sat on a low stool in front of his altar dressed in the iconic white and red of his class of spirits. Ma Tranga’s shoulders, chest, and hips were slung with a number of knotted cords that bind the spirit to Ma Tranga’s body and tie malevolent influences out. Da Kodyo spoke Sranan with a pronounced indigenous accent and the requisite male posturing. When possessing Ma Tranga, he aggressively chain smoked fat cigars and

liberally dispensed perfume to all who entered. Across from Da Kodyo, Da Sabun sat unpossessed to serve as his assistant.

It was late afternoon, and Da Sabun and Da Kodyo had been seeing patients for upwards of two hours. Having concluded the previous consultation, Da Sabun summoned the next patients inside the shrine. Two young women, Sa Nyoni and her elder sister, Sa Bigisa, came in. After greeting Da Kodyo and receiving the perfume he dribbled into their palms, they took their places on the bench next to John and me. They were Da Sabun's distant cousins from his mother's native village in the interior, but, like Da Sabun, now lived in Paramaribo. Da Sabun quickly asked what was wrong. Vigorously massaging the left side of her head, Sa Nyoni responded that her ear 'hurts' (*nyan*, literally eats).

Seeking greater detail, Da Sabun repeated the question, but before Sa Nyoni could answer, Da Kodyo interrupted her. Addressing Da Sabun, Da Kodyo asked if they have found Sa Nyoni's *nasi* or *nenseki*. Ndyuka commonly describe persons as comprised of varied enlivening spirits (*yeye*), of which the *nasi* is one type. These may be listed as a 'soul' (*akaa*), a partially reincarnated ancestral spirit (*nasi*), and the spirit of the place of the person's birth (*gadu fu a peesi*). None of these accords with the Platonic or Cartesian personal soul as consciousness, and are better conceived as agentive building blocks of the emergent person. Ancestral *nasi* spirits may take up residence in a person at birth or later in their life. A person's *nasi* is generally a close relative, particularly a grandparent, an aunt or uncle, but could also be an animal like a dog and even a fish that has attached itself to the person's lineage. *Nasi* shape a person's physical appearance and personality, suffusing every human with signs such as birthmarks that indicate that person's bodily

continuity with their family's past. When a *nasi*'s identity goes unrecognized by the person and family it inhabits, its search for acknowledgement can cause the person in whom it is expressed to fall sick. For Sa Nyoni to describe herself as being eaten (*nyan*) conveys that she is a passive victim of a persistent other who nevertheless is dependent on the victim. This symbiosis is implicit in the concept of *nasi*. *Nasi* spirits demand recognition of the relationships of which they are a part. To ask about a person's *nasi* is consequently a common diagnostic technique during oracular consultations.

Taking up Da Kodyo's cue, Da Sabun asked Sa Nyoni who her *nasi* was. She did not answer. Instead, in a pattern that continued through the rest of the consultation, her older sister spoke for her, using her authority as Sa Nyoni's elder to help her co-construct adequate responses. She said that they didn't know who Sa Nyoni's *nasi* was, and never had had occasion to find out. Da Kodyo then cut in to exclaim that he 'smelled' (*sumere*) that they didn't know the *nasi*'s identity.

Such proclamations portray the basis of Da Kodyo's knowledge as materially differing from those accessible through human senses. His interjection reinforced his previous diagnosis that the pain was a *nasi*, but also points to the spirit's essential physical and perspectival differences from the humans he is with. As a normally invisible spirit, Da Kodyo's senses must work contrarily to those of his human audience. He does not see the relation with the *nasi* but, like a keen hunting dog, sniffs them out. While radically expanding what he can know, this sensorial difference is not a state of unlimited omniscience. In saying that he could 'smell out' Sa Nyoni's relationship with her *nasi*, Da Kodyo also indicated the boundaries of his knowledge. Just as the sense of smell picks up bad odors but does not as easily determine where they originate, so Da Kodyo's

sensorial range is limited to generalities of kind. He cannot provide precise identities; though spirits have expanded capacities for seeing facts normally hidden from humans, they are also strangers, members of a different community of beings whose full comprehension of Ndyuka people is limited.

As an indigenous spirit speaking Sranan, a language he confessed to speak only reluctantly, Da Kodyo flamboyantly highlighted this. Statements about his senses served to underscore his degree of difference from his medium, Ma Tranga. Da Kodyo's ability to skew bodily gender and ethnicity provided warrant for how it was that he knew what he knew. The emergent integration of all these formal qualities within the interaction affirms the spirit's presence. By virtue of simultaneously being and not being Ma Tranga, Da Kodyo achieved additional distance from humans that, in the instability of interaction, allowed his ambiguous comments to become precise descriptions of how the world really is and identify the afflicting agent within the collective comprising Sa Nyoni. As Da Kodyo's interpreter, Da Sabun furthered this distance, even though the sisters undoubtedly understood everything he said.

Da Sabun took Sa Bigisa's uncertainty about her sister's *nasi* as confirmation that Sa Nyoni was afflicted by a *nasi*, and relayed the diagnosis back to her. Before she could respond, Da Sabun asked Da Kodyo which parent Sa Nyoni inherited her *nasi* from. Da Kodyo immediately answered that the *nasi* was from her mother's side.

Though *nasi* may be derived from either the mother's or father's lineage, given the strong matrilineal logic of Ndyuka kinship, they are far more likely to be from the mother's family. The vagueness of the criteria for identifying *nasi* presents what Richard Werbner (1973) called a 'superabundance of understanding.' In societies totally

circumscribed and saturated by kinship, any general indication as to a class of identity results in a cloud of possibilities. Any investigations into the psychological/bodily features shaping a specific Ndyuka person immediately become an exercise in genealogy. The specific qualities of pain therefore participate in the constitution of genealogical immediacy. Mobilized by the medium's epistemic performance, the substantial transitivity of lineage relations become manifest in the physical sensations of the patient's body.

### **Identifying Pain**

Once Da Kodyo confirmed that the *nasi* was from Sa Nyoni's mother's family, all the participants began to explore her kinship ties to the ascendant generations. Though Da Kodyo provided the nosology, Da Sabun and Sa Bigisa quickly took over the analysis. Ndyuka authority is gerontocratic and most often—but not exclusively—male. As the eldest man present (with the exception of Da Kodyo), and as a member of Sa Nyoni's matrilineage, Da Sabun quickly took the investigative lead, asking the sisters to provide names of some possible *nasi* relations. Sa Bigisa first suggested her grandmother, but Da Kodyo interjects with another hint: They were not seeking someone recently deceased, but rather a much older person. This forces Da Sabun to stop and think about his native village. In a flash, it comes to him: 'What! Ma Atoonya? Ma Atoonya suffered from ear problems, right?!' (*Sa! Ma Atoonya? Ma Atoonya be siki a yesi, tok!?*) Suddenly, the pain is an identity with a genealogy the formal qualities of which expose Sa Nyoni as an incarnation of her lineage's collective past. Ma Atoonya is one of her great aunts. The same pain that defined Ma Atoonya's life is now transmuted into a sign of her continuity

in Sa Nyoni. The quality of the pain becomes continuous with the relational identity of the sufferer.

At the instant of discovering the *nasi*, Sa Nyoni exclaimed that the earache was too much for her, but she was ignored in the heat of inquiry. Sa Nyoni's outburst seems to accord with Scarry's assertion that, 'The ceaseless, self-announcing signal of the body in pain, at once so empty and undifferentiated and so full of blaring adversity, contains not only the feeling "my body hurts" but the feeling "my body hurts me"' (1985: 47). The self-alienation Sa Nyoni's pain foists upon her consciousness, however, is not empty. Pain's sensate relational qualities permit diagnosis by providing a character and an identity. Pain's dysphoria implied the embodied intensity and importance of Sa Nyoni's diagnosis as a relational nexus. Rather than confound expression, the varied qualities of Sa Nyoni's pain—its degree, intensity, location—posit a recognizable relation with knowable others. This objectifies pain as an identifiable package of articulate properties, a sign of the relations for which it speaks.

In Ndyuka semiotic ideology, just as the variable qualities of a medium's speech—tone, volume, lexicon, prosody—call attention to the spirit as a particular identity in relation to their medium, so the properties of pain alerts sufferers to the relationships these manifest. Once specified, these semiotic parallels further integrate the qualities of pain into the interactive performance of an oracular consultation. These parallels are blended in the medium's actions, demonstrating that relations between humans and spirits are knowable. This is possible because, just like a birthmark, pain indexes that the materiality of the body is preeminently a manifestation of its constitutive social relations. The body hurts because, as an aggregation of many relations, it exceeds

the sufferers' own self-consciousness. Sa Nyoni's ear pain discloses that she contains and expresses her kinship with Ma Atoonya. The location and quality of the pain is combined with her lineage identity to call attention to Sa Nyoni's as a message of Ma Atoonya's intersubjective presence both within her and *as* her.

Certain that he has identified Sa Nyoni's *nasi*, Da Sabun states that it must be Ma Atoonya. To solve the discomfort, he tells the sisters to go and consult their cousin, and the dead woman's niece, Ma Afiiyodu. From the moment they alighted on the right relationship, Da Kodyo pressed Da Sabun that this was the intervention that must be made. The sisters must go to the dead woman Ma Atoonya's niece who, as her closest living relative, is deemed to have special access. They are to ask her to intervene for them, pouring a libation to recognize and calm Sa Nyoni's troubled *nasi*. To confirm she understands, Sa Bigisa adds that Ma Afiiyodu is her great aunt's child. Having achieved a verdict, Da Sabun directly addresses Sa Nyoni, repeating that she must go and ask her cousin Ma Afiiyodu to pray to her *nasi* to quiet the pain she is causing. Then, for the first time in the course of the interaction, Da Kodyo addressed both women: 'When you meet [Ma Afiiyodu] you must wet her head with beer so that [Ma Atoonya] can sleep though the night and wake up another day. She must intercede for you, got it?'

Da Kodyo communicates that, to heal Sa Nyoni's pain, they must go as a family to ask a distant relation to pour a beer to Ma Atoonya, her dead aunt. But he is telling them that Sa Nyoni's identity overlaps with that of Ma Atoonya, that Ma Atoonya is *also* Sa Nyoni. Though Sa Nyoni has been unaware, the earache is the continuity of Sa Atoonya's identity in Sa Nyoni's body. The intensity of Sa Nyoni's pain is this continuity. Da Kodyo's performance integrates with this message to more clearly



communicate the composite nature of Sa Nyoni and Ma Atoonya's identities. To be healed, Sa Nyoni must acknowledge that she simultaneously is and is not Ma Atoonya. The pain occurs because Sa Nyoni has failed to recognize the extent to which she *is* this relation. Through the pain, Ma Atoonya proclaims she is continuous with Sa Nyoni. In trying to understand the pain, Sa Nyoni is told that she is a different aggregate than who she thought she was. Pain has driven a wedge into Sa Nyoni's self-knowledge. She has been forced to admit that she consciously exists first as an expression of her relation with Ma Atoonya and her lineage.

### **Pain, Interaction, and the Evidence of Coalition**

This vignette elegantly encapsulates the routine ritual processes that enable physical pain to establish subjective multiplicity in Ndyuka oracular divination. The interaction between Da Kodyo, Da Sabun, Sa Bigisa, and Sa Nyoni presents a different approach to human consciousness than that assumed by hegemonic European/North Atlantic traditions. For Ndyuka, pain is a warrant for mediums to assert their authority to define others' subjectivities. As this happens through possession, this can only be achieved as the joint negation of the medium's and their patient's autonomy. Pain, which for most members of the Western philosophical tradition offers testimony to the individuality of the experiencing self, is for Ndyuka unmistakable evidence that Sa Nyoni is not, in fact, such a self. In requesting intercession from Ma Atoonya, Sa Nyoni, and her sister are forced to recognize themselves as composite collectives who exist *because* they are dependent aggregates of kin and spirit relations. To treat her illness, Sa Nyoni must come to acknowledge that she is unaware that Ma Atoonya is already present within her.

Sa Nyoni's responsibility as a patient is to acknowledge and become her passive, derivative nature as a collective, kin-defined, relational multiplicity.

As can be seen from the creation of knowledge about pain between Da Kodyo, Da Sabun, and the two sisters, Ndyuka possession is, like so many human interactions with spirits, a collaborative performance. The powerful result of this connection is to demonstrate that an autonomous thinking/feeling individual is in important ways illusory. To achieve this, Da Kodyo/Ma Tranga build their knowledge from the patchwork fallibility of conversation. As Briggs (1996) and Wirtz (2007) have shown, ambiguity and unintelligibility are key resources in the construction of mediumistic efficacy. Beyond that, as enacted in the above consultation, the 'co-construction of reality' (Schieffelin 1985) between a medium and their audience is not solely conditional on the underdetermined or general character of the information they provide. Spirits like Da Kodyo intervene in the qualities of both bodily pain and social relationships. These combine in interactive performance to make powerful statements about the concealed truth of their patients' existences. The asymmetrical interaction of spirits and humans fuses the physical sensation of Sa Nyoni's pain with unfolding discourses about it. Her ignorance of the pain's identity entails the spirit's ability to provide a description of her personal subjectivity. Such fundamental revelations are possible because this information emerges from carefully controlled interactions between humans and spirits, evidential surfaces and reality's depths.

As they talk together, Da Kodyo assumes a privileged position as a quasi-omniscient author supplying the outlines of his patient's story. Da Kodyo interjects in the flow of the conversation to order the interaction, choosing the 'framing' (Bateson 1972;

Goffman 1974) to establish who may talk, and about what. The two sisters must keep up with Da Kodyo's intermediations, assimilating his certainty to the facts of their lives. In assuming this position, Da Kodyo accomplishes the power of spirits in order to transform everyday conversation into evidence of the preeminence of relations, and thus the reality, that spirits alone can describe. Like all mediums, Da Kodyo/Ma Tranga uses shreds and patches of discourse to construct himself and the audience as shared existences united even in their interior states. Presented with Sa Nyoni's pain, Da Kodyo offers her back herself as a collectivity whose mental/physical conditions are vivid signifiers that she is a kin- and spirit-determined composite self.

For the Ndyuka I knew, possession was not a wild aberration from a more continuous everyday self, but rather a demonstration of the relational premises that describe their existence. Ndyuka oracular possession reveals that, just as a possessed medium like Ma Tranga is defined by their relationship with their possessing spirit to the point of effacing their human personality, so a consulting patient like Sa Nyoni is equally a composite, coalitional embodiment of their own constitutive social relations. As a bullet hole points to the presence of a shooter, so possession and pain reveal the presence of the power of other relations within a person. In interacting with a possessed medium, a patient like Sa Nyoni is reminded of the limitations of their knowledge of these relations, of the extent and intensity to which each 'skin bound' (Palmié 2006) person is accurately described as an index of the coalitional relations that make them up.

### **Hindu Conceptions of Pain and Suffering**

For Shakti practitioners, as for many Ndyuka, pain was socially communicative, one index among others of the suffering caused by insufficient awareness of human

relational dependency. Like Ndyuka possession, Shakti ritual practice as I observed it was a “cult of affliction” (Turner 1968), regularly conceived of as an inherited ritual obligation that connected to contemporary Hindus to ancestral India. Unlike for most Ndyuka, however, the transcendent hierarchies of bhakti devotionism explicitly explained affliction.<sup>134</sup> Deeply marked by modern interpretations of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Surinamese and Guyanese Hindus felt suffering as an impetus for greater recognition of their encompassment by divine power. Rather than isolating the elements of a coalitional self, Shakti ritual enrolled pain to make the “true” self (*aatma, jiw, praan*, soul) a dependent derivation of a more fundamental divine reality about which embodied humans were habitually ignorant.

Hindu, and particularly Shakti, conceptions of suffering comprise an intersection of two superimposed fields of interrelational interdependency. In the first, people are entangled in a diversity of relations with one another, with the land on which they live, and with amoral planetary and divine influences. In the second, a moral devotional hierarchy that advances the ultimate subordination of particular and impure problems like sorcery to more general and purer powers like deities encompasses these relations. While most concerns about suffering focus on peoples’ immediate misfortunes, any specific relation is ritually convertible into an index of the encompassing priority of the cosmic order.<sup>135</sup> In what remains of this chapter, I show how Shakti ritual rhetoric combines

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<sup>134</sup> It is apparent that this emphasis co-exists with discourses of lineally mediated suffering that stress pain as a sign of a family’s corporate obligation to inherited deities, as retained as part of a broadly racializing/ethnicizing focus in Indo-Surinamese and Guyanese Hinduism.

<sup>135</sup> This tension between generic, impersonal context, and vibrant, often violent accounts of sorcery, personal malevolence and vengeful deities, accords with the division of ritual labor between largely hereditary and institutionally approved pandit ritual specialists and inspired mediums. It also replicates critical concerns about correct knowledge and public versus private ritual performance.

these two fields of explanation to make personal pain and suffering speak for divine sovereignty over human life and the devotional logics it enforces.

For the Shakti practitioners with whom I worked, human failure to recognize necessary devotional dependence was the root cause of suffering. The Surinamese and Guyanese Hindus I lived with repeatedly complained about their aches and pains, telling any familiar person present about them. Pain was a fact of life, but, in protracted, chronic instances, also entreated an examination of a person's social-ritual relations. In both Guyanese English and Sarnami, pain was expressed in variety of nouns (*pain, pira*) and transitive and intransitive verbs, often in transitive formulations like “my stomach hurts me” (*mi belly a pain me, ham apne bukh pirwaawe/pira dewe hai*). Lingering or inexplicable pain could be caused by a variety of different relations. Many Hindus were deeply (if reticently) uneasy about the effects of sorcery (*ojha*) and a variety of spirits (*Dutchman, Dih Baba, bhut, pret, winti, bakru*) with whom they shared the land they lived on. “*Grah*”, the pain caused by the ill influences of the planetary deities (*naugraha, navagraha*) of Hindu astrology was another important source of affliction acknowledged with equal gravity by both Shakti practitioners and Sanatan Dharm pandits.<sup>136</sup> Planetary

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<sup>136</sup> Astrology is one of the most general and respected forms of esoteric knowledge and is almost exclusively associated with Brahminical authority. This power is transmitted through access to Hindi or, notionally at least, Sanskrit books. No oracular medium that I met claimed to use these books, or possess this literary predictive power. Instead, they circumvent astrology altogether. They become the gods, specifically Sangani Baba—another form of Shani Deo—to make direct interventions.

Astrology explains pain by reference to the most general celestial conditions. A person's fate is tied to motions of the cosmos. A person is granted their specific trajectory in relation to a time and location of birth. This irreducibly specific fact is triangulated to the planets. A person is described by the converse tug of these interlocked influences. This context conditions her to be some certain kind of person. As Kemper (1980: 744) observes for Sinhala astrology, such an account is irreducibly specific to a discrete person. Astrology ignores most of those other characteristics like sex or status that are otherwise so definitional of person's social identity. While these conditions are sometime held to be a result of a person's karma in previous birth, in Guyana and Suriname, concerns about prior incarnation is relatively unimportant. Astrology, by focusing on the determining qualities of place and time, produces abstract coordinates allowing a person's fate to be plotted on to unceasing planetary motions. This circumstantiality

deities shared the capacity for inflicting punishing sickness with the major deities of the Hindu pantheon with whom they were sometimes identified.

As stern yet compassionate parents, the Hindu deities personify the moral logic of the joint family, the privileged domain of Guianese Hindu life. Humans are expected to yield to the deities just as children and wives are ideally supposed to submit to the decisions of their parents and husbands. Punishment results from the failure to accord with these demands, but its acceptance enables reconciling subordination to the proper hierarchy of encompassing control. Thus, any of the deities could punish humans for violations of ritual purity (such as failing to keep vegetarian before visiting a temple), or to urge them to undertake owed ritual devotions. Indeed, sicknesses like Chicken Pox were sometimes regarded as possessing deities; sufferers were instructed to sleep until the afflicting goddess came in their dreams to tell them what food she expected as an appeasing offering.

Because of the ideological centrality of the immediate joint family in Guianese Hinduism, the afflictions caused by devotional dependency were mainly concerned with kin relations. As for many Ndyuka, Hindus frequently considered interpersonal misfortunes like domestic violence, family dissension, or unemployment, elements of

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partially dissolves descriptions of personal ethical responsibility for both the consultant and anyone accused of harboring malice towards them.

Despite this, astrology does not serve to negate other considerations, even while providing a functional explanation of inauspiciousness. The *grah* are in many respects paradigmatic of the creative ambivalence associated with divinities. In exercising both personal and positional influence, they summarize an intricate description of inexorable determinism while allowing for personalized devotion and divine intervention. The *grah* as the *navgraha* (nine planets) are at once a collective whose influence is only understood cumulatively, and a collection of discrete beings to be worshipped. In *Shakti Puja* as practiced in Guyana and Suriname, this devotion centers specifically on Shani Deo, and his father, Surya Bhagvan, the sun. In Shivshaktidasa's mandir, *navgraha* were present as small brass *murti* placed together under the larger concrete statues that were the daily objects of devotion. They were acknowledged only in passing, or for particular complaints. Shani Deo, due to his merger with Sangani Baba, possessed his own *murti*, and was a major object of worship. This was true at all the oracular temples I attended in both Guyana and Suriname.

illness that demanded ritual resolutions. Hindu conceptions of pain and suffering were preoccupied with questions of reputation and the afflicting power of gossip (*talk name, nindara, gap-sap*). A significant number of the Shakti rituals I observed involved people, especially women, distressed about how their domestic relations deleteriously determined their wellbeing and reputations as “proper” Hindus. To answer Kali’s questions in the chapter’s opening vignette, it was often unruly, drunken, and abusive husbands, fathers, or sons who were “in” a patient’s pain. Women would complain about the waywardness of their husbands, boyfriends, or children, despairing over their refusal to live as good Hindus and householders. Husbands and sons were frequently presented as shunning domestic and ritual duties in favor of “*sporting*” and “*gaffing*”—hanging out, drinking, and engaging in unserious but competitive banter with male friends (Edwards 1979; Sidnell 2000). This was sometimes expressed in fears of other socially destructive activities like sorcery (*ojha, obeah*), which would imprint enduring adversity on culprits’ families.

If allopathic medicine failed or was considered an inappropriate cure, the Hindus I knew would first consult a pandit or a pujari. Most pandits are also astrologers who diagnose harmful planetary influences and prescribe devotional therapies (Bakker 1999). These mainly consisted of sponsoring ritual offerings (*puja*), making fire sacrifices (*hawan*), and periods of regular ritual commitment in which the sufferer and their family maintained personal purity and worshipped the pertinent deities. These rituals sway the planets—especially Shani Deo (Saturn), and/or a more powerful personal god (*ishtadeota*), like Shiva—to intervene on the devotees’ behalf, to remedy their misfortunes after the sufferer is coaxed to acknowledge them as statements of divine

control. Though not astrologers, the Shakti oracular mediums I observed provided essentially the same ritual resolutions.

### **Mythological Pain**

Rather than rely on arcane Hindi manuals, Shakti oracles enacted the deities themselves, making divine efficacy (*shakti*) visible and audible to permit devotees the dread pleasure of consulting the deities directly. For Shakti rituals to work, sufferers have to learn to identify their pains as signatures of the divine agencies that oracles performed. Here is how Shivshaktidasa, the guru/founding oracle/pujari of the main Shakti temple I attended in Paramaribo, described how he absorbed this lesson from the character of his pain:

*Like a heavy weight in your stomach. Uh... it is like you didn't understand, that it happened to me. In that time, I go doctor and so, pain. At that time it was the wind, pain, so it is just like that. And then with the head, and the swinging, like... if skin, if something like, like, like Rahu or Ketu, Ketu must the head, Rahu the head, you find most disturbance with the head. And Ketu like a wrap your body, squeezing it. So, you are feeling that tying, the pain in your skin, your skin is, your whole body is tired. So that is Rahu Ketu who do that. So with all those pain in the belly pain, and sometime hot, cold sweat, cold fever and just like, you know. Steady it can happen all the time, an' just after sometime it happen again, and just ask myself why only me? I get sick steady, in the old home, my brother, my sister, my father, nuthin' (nothing) happen to them. Why me? Didn't know what the cause at that time. So then, later on we going to mandir (temple) learning more, to get to know more studying the deota (deities) them.*

In Shivshaktidasa's account, Rahu and Ketu, the demons (*asura*) responsible for solar eclipses, or the waxing and waning of the moon in the *Puranas* (Pugh 1986: 58), caused his pain by binding and wrapping his body in the same way as the sun. Shivshaktidasa's afflictions were a microcosmic reflection of Rahu and Ketu's mythical origins as the cloven head and body of a single demon who tried to steal the nectar of immortality from the gods after the churning of the sea of milk (Dimmit and van



Buitenen 1978). In their twained aspects, Rahu the head, and Ketu, the serpentine body, inflict pains indexical of their mythological role as the origin of celestial phenomena.

This is consistent with Shakti etiology that links different deities with ailments that correspond to their mythological function. Thus Sanganni, a deity linked with the ocean, was experienced in stomach pains on the principle that the stomach churned in analogous ways, while Kateri, the “little mother” (apparently a deified Tamil infertility



Figure 9 Guru Shivshaktidasa performing puja to his temple's Shiva linga—the aniconic form of Shiva

demon (Nabokov 2000)) was perceived in difficult pregnancies. These connections make mythological agency physically present in human bodies. Doing so transfigures human misfortunes into personal relations with a limited repertoire of known divine agents,

transmuting the everyday difficulties of getting by into palpable symptoms of the truth of Hindu sacred history. Hence, even though Rahu and Ketu are demons, according to Shivshaktidasa, his painful bondage to them was destined instruction. For him, as for other Shakti devotees, the highest good was for humans to recognize that their physical bodies instantiated Hindu mythology's encompassing cosmic hierarchy:

*Three year gone, dead or live, I was pass for me in that time and die. An' now I thank God that that no been happen so. So it is, was Rahu, Ketu and Shani Deo, the three dangerous Grah. Most, who give more sickness and more problem. So, it's like your head swim, you, you don't, you cannot learn or gain anything like you don't want to. Uh... like if you come so, uh... lost. So, so, disturb that you don't find good, that you don't feel good about anything. Good's there but you don't see it's good. So for all the three year I was passing through, passing through with it, for that I end up going to the mandir, the Madras mandir. I serve the mandir for that three year, from nineteen, twenty, 'til twenty-one, then I come (inaudible). So that was terrible. So, I, over from the age of twenty after that, then it was have to been happen, I end up with these deota, inviting if the deota... to make the sacrifice. Doing the devotion. And so then it happened. So again I start to feel the free. Feel free from what has happening. I forget but, put back all those things at back, so I say, as I say I gave up myself for help people now. If this is how it must happen, that the deota must come to help through this body then, I, I give up everything, surrender to that and... Because I do not like to see the time when I was pass through with all those things. I didn't want to see or hear about anybody else. So I will glad, I glad to do this, if they can able to reach [succeed]. To get the help them [to receive their help]. That's why I surrender myself. The deota must be there to help. It's like I ask them for that, it comes simple, peaceful, and give the help. It's I surrender to that.*

As Shivshaktidasa summarizes his period of illness: “Good’s there but you don’t see it’s good.” In this way, he learned to disavow his agency to see “surrender” as the highest human moral purpose. Learning from suffering is one of the things Asad (2011) identifies as a key attribute of the “religious” body. Both Shakti and Sanatan rituals attempt to rhetorically encompass the individually pained body to align it with universal/mythological imperatives of Hindu devotion. The language of the above quote charts Shivshaktidasa’s transformation into a proper devotee and medium. His chronicle of suffering fuses kinship to cosmogony to predetermine his eventual embodiment of the

deities for the sake of his immediate joint family. At the height of his youth, Shivshaktidasa was debilitated by an overwhelming sickness. Concurrently malevolent beings and functions of the convergences of impersonal divine and planetary action, Rahu and Ketu were simultaneously the method of his punishment and the vehicles of his personal and his family's collective salvation. By learning to see his pain as a manifestation of divine power, Shivshaktidasa became capable of recognizing his own body as a similarly depersonalized conductor of divine will so "that the *deota* must come to help through [his] body."

Shivshaktidasa and his siblings hold their father responsible for Shivshaktidasa's affliction, and their father's eventual suicide. Shivshaktidasa's father had routinely and rebelliously failed to propitiate the deities, an obligation he had inherited from his Indian grandparents. Shivshaktidasa's family members descriptions of this infidelity differed, but at least for the more devout members of his family, this primal inheritance was unquestionably the root cause. From multiple inquiries into the origins of Shivshaktidasa's and other family members' misfortunes, a picture emerged that was concurrently cosmic and relentlessly personal. Their father had continuously failed to abide by his ritual responsibilities, yet always claimed superior expertise, challenging his children and accusing them of inappropriate practice. His drunken belligerence, his violent abuse of his wife and children, were all the more ominous given his claims of ritual knowledge that included a brief conversion to Christianity.

In addition to his failure to acknowledge his devotional responsibilities, the family held that Shivshaktidasa's father's suicide was also a consequence of his father's pursuit of "*Inderjal* work". The *Inderjal* (Indra's Net) is the most notorious book of magic in

Hindu Suriname and Guyana. It is the definitive work of *mantra tantra*, the morally ambivalent but dangerously potent ritual magic that is widely rumored and hushingly claimed by many Hindus. According to Shivshaktidasa's sister, the story—as explained by a Maroon healer to another brother who lives in Cayenne—was that in pursuit of magical mastery her grandfather had killed a snake that then dedicated itself to punishing the family. The vengeful snake inflicted her father with all the violent “passions” that had caused his family such misery. Shivshaktidasa's father's excesses were thus seen as clear signs of the deities' anger. But, just as with the *grah*, this anger was presented in the context of the father and grandfather's previous trespasses on their inherited moral obligations.

After a long time in the hospital Shivshaktidasa began to attend the “Madras temple”, as the temples devoted to mediumistic possession and sacrifice introduced by Southern Indians are called in Guyana. In his search for healing, he came to obey the temple's strict regimen of devotion through routine food offerings, personal abstinence, and cleanliness. After adopting this ritual tradition's strident devotional discipline, Shivshaktidasa reassessed the implications of his illness. The more Shivshaktidasa devoted himself, the more his sufferings transmogrified into a vocation to embody the deities. In this way, Shivshaktidasa's specific pains led him to recognize the vital interdependency between his personal affliction and the deities in both their individuated and unitary natures.

For Shakti practitioners, pain and possession work as equivalent indexes of human dependence on the divine, the torture of one predicting the blank satisfaction of the other. Pain's congruence with Hindu mythology enables its ritual transfiguration in

oracular mediumship. Full-blown divine “manifestation” is the fulfillment of Shakti rituals’ translation of pain into corporeally imminent divine sovereignty. This can only be done by conscripting the sufferer’s pain into Shakti ritual, addressing it and giving it voice as an encompassing agent to make the pain an inexorable token of universal truths. The rest of this chapter analyzes how one Shakti oracular interaction implements this strategy to transduce personal suffering into a manifestation of human encompassment by the Hindu cosmos.

### **Anjali’s Suffering**

The following transcript reproduces an oracular interaction at the Paramaribo Shakti temple founded by Shivshaktidasa. In it, Anjali (Kali’s oracle from the opening vignette) consults Shiva, whom members of this temple regard as the supreme personality of God, who is here possessing Shivshaktidasa. Before I go on to analyze the interaction, it is helpful to consider how Anjali spoke about her own history of suffering. As with Shivshaktidasa, Anjali’s story is typical of Shakti devotees in perceiving pain and other misfortunes as communications of the deities’ primordial investment in everyday life. At the time of this transcript, Anjali was in her late 50s, and had long suffered the pains of poverty, migration, and sexism. She was of Madrassi descent and her parents had been Shakti devotees on the sugar plantation in Demerara, Guyana, where she was raised. Since her migration to Suriname in the late 1970s she had scraped by cleaning and cooking as a domestic. Childless, she had been through a number of abusive relationships that she implied continued with her present husband’s excessive drinking.

Anjali’s most protracted sufferings began after her parents’ deaths. She initially hoped that she would be spared their inherited Madrassi ritual duties, especially regular

animal sacrifices. With none of her brothers willing to undertake the regime of fasting and abstinence the deities' demanded, however, Anjali soon found herself compelled to resume her family traditions. The *nag deota*—the serpent deities generally worshiped in the form of cobras—came to her in dreams as a warning that she was expected to continue her devotional inheritance.<sup>137</sup> Enduring tenacious illness and interpersonal setbacks accompanied by intensifying dream visitations, Anjali eventually gave in and started to attend a Madras temple in Guyana. There, almost immediately, she began to “vibrate”—to manifest the *shakti* of the deities through uncontrollable shaking and swaying. Anjali described this as a vertiginous experience of overwhelming power, a concentrated effacing of body and will, the passive acceptance of which is considered profound evidence of a devotee's submission.

After Anjali came to Suriname, she was again beset by misfortunes designed to keep her diligent in her devotions. In her desperate search for healing Anjali, like many of the Shakti practitioners I knew, sought help in other ritual traditions. She visited Afro-Surinamese *obiyaman* and attended a Pentecostal church, but failed to experience any lasting benefit. After hearing about a Shakti temple at Marienberg (a large former plantation on the other side of the Suriname River from Paramaribo), Anjali felt she had no choice but to return to her own tradition. Until its pujari's death, Anjali attended the Marienberg temple regularly, though without her sufferings ever ceasing completely.

She heard about Guru Shivshaktidasa when he was still in the early stages of founding his own temple in Paramaribo. Through him the deities communicated the exact devotions Anjali owed them. Inspired by Shivshaktidasa's own fervent example, she

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<sup>137</sup> Serpent symbolism is ubiquitous in Hinduism, but is most heavily associated with Shaivite and Shakta iconography, in which it serves to condense shakti's protean potential to simultaneously instantiate danger and auspiciousness.

submitted herself with new vehemence to a version of his ascetic regime of strict vegetarianism and regular mantra chanting, and her suffering soon began to abate.

When I met Anjali, she had been attending Shivshaktidasa’s temple for more than 12 years. Despite her admiration for her “Guru”, she was increasingly debilitated by new pain that threatened her livelihood. She was likewise upset about the interpersonal politics at the temple, the practical management of which had progressively devolved on Anjali and another older woman, Lakshmi, with whom her relation was cordial but tense. She felt Shivshaktidasa (who at this point mainly kept out of the temple’s everyday affairs) ignored her and that other temple members disparaged her. At the time of the interaction in the ensuing transcript, Anjali told me she was deeply unsettled by the seeming inability of her constant devotions to stem her pain and mounting social frustrations.

In the interaction reproduced here, the deities have only just begun to manifest. Though Shivshaktidasa had largely retired from routine mediumship he would still “stand up” on important ritual occasions like *Maha Shivaratri* (The Great Night of Shiva, in this case in late February). At the moment recorded in the transcript, Anjali was only the second person to talk with the god during consultations that would stretch on for three more hours. Shiva sat on the floor in the temple’s main shrine with me sitting on his left side. Statues of the deities, including multiple iconic and aniconic images that Hindus conceive as equivalently containers of Shiva’s divinity, surrounded us. Anjali came in, gave Shiva her ritual greeting (*pranam*), and then sat at his feet:

Shiva:	Looks fixedly at Anjali’s face	Jai ho! (Victory) My blessings be with you! What can I do for you?	
Anjali:	Looks at	My nuh (don’t) want nothing, Baba. Me want me	I don’t want

	Shiva	pain get better. That me want.	anything, Father, only my pain to be relieved.
Shiva:	Looks fixedly at Anjali	Let every pain be my name. Let every feelings be my name! Let everything become me! Then I become one with you, then there be no pain. My child, in this material world everyone feel pain because, because the world itself is a pain. Is disaster. You have to go through with it, if you do not know that you feel pain, or you cannot really feel that pain, then you do not know that you lived. And you cannot know to serve me.	
Anjali:	Looks down.	Yes Baba, me know.	Yes, Father, I know.
Shiva:	<i>Looking at Anjali</i>	And all these pains bring one to heaven, bring one to the goal of my feet, bring one to my kingdom.	
Anjali	<i>Looking at the ground</i>	Yeah, Baba, but not so sometime.	Yes, Father, but it isn't always the case.
Shiva:	<i>Staring directly at Anjali</i>	When so ever you comes to me, when you reach with me, there is no pain.	When you come to me, when you arrive, There is no pain.
Anjali:	<i>Looks down to the left</i>	Yes, Baba.	
Shiva:	<i>Keeps looking at Anjali</i>	You have to feel in this world because you eat, what to prepare juice in this world. You wear what produce in this world. You drink what have been created in this world. All of these things will create pain in the body of oneself. The body have create from this world.	
Anjali:	<i>Looks at Shiva</i>	Baba, me wan' know...	I want to know.
Shiva:	<i>Looks Anjali in the eyes</i>	That is why I ask what you want me to do?	
Anjali:	<i>Looks at Shiva</i>	Want it come out from me body so I can (inaudible).	I just want to be rid of the pain.
Shiva:	<i>Continues to look fixedly at Anjali</i>	Those are the pains that have to come out, my child. Don't worry, it is going, easy by easy, but is holding you all the years past is going! It will loosed. Before the time come for you to leave this world, they will all go, you will leave freely.	These pains will be relieved, slowly but surely you will find that you are relieved of them before you die.
Anjali:	<i>Looks down</i>	But the time is too late because, what left to gone, without left?	But it is already too late because what [pain] is left to leave without it having left already?
Shiva:	<i>Looks up then at Anjali</i>	Nothing in the world is not too late for my child. In this world is nothing too late. So is this world. So	In this world, nothing is too late. That is



		is Bhumi Devi (the goddess of the earth). (Exhales)	how it is, that is how it is for Mother Earth.
Anjali:	<i>Looks down</i>	(mutters) Baba...	
Shiva:	Looking fixedly at Anjali	<p>You do not know how many pain, and weight and trouble that Maha Shakti, as Dharti have for everyone. You have little, my child. That is nothing to counter. Take my name, every pain to hold yourself, call name, every pain you feel, call my name. I will take care of it. Do not let the pain be more than you. There is nothing a devotee should allow to become more than my name. Namah Shivay! Om! Namah Shivay! I am the Holy Spirit. Only the holiness can take care of everything: pain and disasters, sickness and disease. Just as the Guru also faces pain, is anyone come here to help him chants some of my name? To help take care of what is happening around here? Or how to take care of every devotees that comes here? How much he alone can do? As long you wear the material body, create materially you have the feelings, the pain... if the Guru himself surrender himself towards us... this body belongs to the material world, it will not come, where the soul will go. It surrender to us. It will leave here (here he sighs). It create from this world, this earth. It have to leave here. The soul will go freely for the soul is free, dancing, going its way. As you are my devotee, my children... beauty is prepare for you. Never want of anything in this world, my child. That is what cause pain, when one desires over this and that. Wanting of this and that. That is the thing that cause pain, over and over in the body because, when you cannot find it... it, it disturbs... the mind and the heart. All the senses become disturbed! You do not want to walk properly anymore, you cannot talk properly anymore, you feel just lost. So don't worry.</p>	

The above interaction exemplifies some of the main ways in which Shakti rhetorical performances work to translate pain into an index that a simpler “spiritual” hierarchy always encompasses the apparently inescapable entanglements of the “material” world. From Shiva’s perspective, at least, the aim of the dialogue was to force Anjali—who routinely distinguished herself among temple devotees with the stubborn force of her personality—to submit to recognizing herself as Shiva: “Then I become one

with you, then there be no pain.” Though Anjali simply demands a cure, Shiva responds by representing her pain as a reminder of the necessity of this encompassing truth. In ways redolent of both Vedantic interpretations of the Upanishads and Christianity’s Platonic debts, Shiva urges Anjali to recognize pain as salvation, the supreme sign of her relation with an all-encompassing divine. Shiva commands her to feel pain as proof that the material world’s transcendence is inevitably inferior to Shiva’s promise of absolute, undifferentiated being. Shiva depicts Anjali as much like a prisoner in Plato’s cave, mistaking the illusory appearance of her immediate material world for the deep structure of reality. Shiva tells Anjali that she will only be healed when she has abandoned her mistaken search for physical gratification and learns to exclusively focus on him as the *only* fulfillment. Shiva explains pain as a necessary reminder of material imperfection. In order to complete this identification, Shiva evaluates Anjali’s complaints about her pain, and the pain itself, as signs of her deficient acknowledgement of Shiva’s power, a failure to know her true self through their devotional relation and see through the illusion (*maya*) of the material world. This is the ultimate asymmetry, one that Shiva works to reproduce in the structure of the interaction itself.

From the beginning of their dialogue, we see Anjali’s demands for immediate healing refuted by Shiva’s metaphysical lessons. As accords with the primacy of the Bhagavad Gita in Sanatan Dharm Hinduism, Shakti oracular mediumship urges devotional submission to make devotees sense their encompassment by divine power. As physically enacted through prostration, fasting, and possession, submission is key to Shakti ritual. Paying attention to the direction of Anjali and Shiva’s gaze illustrates how

oracular interactions perform metaphysical rhetoric to cajole such submission.<sup>138</sup> While Anjali repeatedly looks down or away, only twice momentarily making eye contact with Shivshaktidasa's Shiva, he holds her fixedly in focus. As described in the previous chapter, this strategy is the inverse of, but complementary with, another common Shakti oracular practice where the medium speaks with their eyes completely closed. In either instance, the consulting devotee is denied intersubjective equivalence in the interaction, while the oracle repeatedly interrupts their attention to hold the floor as an exclusively knowledgeable speaker (see Hanks 2013).

Anjali's eye movements act as evidence of the pragmatic effects of how Shakti oracular practice performs rhetoric in ritual interactions, expressing the interactive structure of her subordination. Despite her loud complaints outside of ritual occasions, in this and other oracular interactions I recorded, Anjali temerity was apparently constrained by the event's generic premises and Shiva's explanations. In the transcript, whenever Anjali tries to voice dissatisfaction with her pain, Shiva overwhelms her reservations with a fixed look and a blast of dispersing metaphysics. In this way, Shiva repurposes everything Anjali says as an expression of her insufficient self-knowledge. Thus, however much Anjali attempts to suggest the contrary, the asymmetrical premise of the interaction organizes how she can respond. By Shiva's account, pain is a blessing; a lesson that humans are in fact immaterial souls "sparks" from himself, God, the "over-soul" (*Paramatma*). Paradoxically, this final refuge is also the polyphonous and morally ambiguous will of Shakti puja's possessing deities, here performed by Shiva's refusal to immediately heal Anjali's suffering in order to teach her a lesson. So Shiva tries to

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<sup>138</sup> Sitting on the floor with reduced noise, this interaction was one of the very few in which I noted down where participants were looking.

convince Anjali that her personal pain is a substantiation of divine grace—what she is also supposedly experiencing in her audience with Shiva.

To convict Anjali that she needs this subordination, Shiva’s rhetoric marshals two other key tropes. As conveyed in the statement, “Let every pain be my name”, Shiva first tries to assimilate Anjali’s pain to his sovereignty over her and the world. When he says this, Shiva denotes his agency in the pain and sutures the pain’s meaning to the “great mantra of Shiva” (*Shiva Mahamantra*): “*Om Namah Shivay.*”

Chanting the “great mantra of Shiva” was perhaps the most basic element of Shivashaktidasa’s temple’s liturgy. At every ritual juncture—during the opening offerings that preceded oracular rituals, when the deities began to manifest in their mediums, and when they left their oracle’s bodies—this mantra was intoned by all present devotees in steady unison to generate a permeating collective drone. Shivshaktidasa normally spent a better part of the day chanting the mantras (*doin’ jap*) of all of the temple’s deities, which he regarded as the foremost discipline of his ascetic “surrender.”

In practice, mantra recitation, individual or collective, involves a performance of the elementary poetics of encompassment. Divine names, when recited as mantra, are held to condense the whole of a deity’s power. In reciting them, devotees strive to fix their minds solely on the deities’ names so as to feel themselves united with divine efficacy. This was repeatedly explained to me as a principle way devotees learned to sense that they contained, and were contained by, divine *shakti*. In saying, “Let every feelings [*sic*] be my name! Let everything become me!” Shiva is specifying that all experience, and especially the sensation of sound, is *his* primordial being. Pain, like

sound, becomes a “vibration” of Shiva’s self as the cosmic ultimate. Just as what appears to be a mantra’s separate words and phonemes are reduced to the generative, encompassing ur-sound in Shiva’s name, all pain is presented as a single symptom of Shiva’s primordial control.<sup>139</sup>

Similarly, in order to complete the rhetorical and pragmatic encompassment of Anjali’s pain, Shiva introduces a third superordinate entity, Mother Earth (Bhumi Devi, Dharti Mai). In doing so, he produces a female figure that—as Maha Shakti—is also Shiva’s own energy, the generative force with which he creates matter. Shiva establishes an analogy in which Anjali is both like and unlike “Mother Earth.” As female, Anjali and the Earth are similarly suffering “mothers” (as all older women were ritually addressed). Despite this, the identification exposes Anjali’s pains as infinitely dwarfed by the burden of the collective suffering born by the earth, as *her* mother. Just as Shiva claims to absorb the material, Mother Earth contains Anjali’s pain. Shiva is telling Anjali that she should abandon her egoistic desire for healing and respond with gratitude that her suffering are so minor in relation to those endured by Mother Earth. In this way, however Anjali answers, Shiva responds with calls to greater devotion, the ultimate sum of human purpose.

Both the rhetorical premises and organization of the interaction position Anjali in terms of the compounded social disjunction between her and her Guru, her and Shiva, and her and Mother Earth as an asymmetry between her and God, between her apparent physical identity and her true “spiritual” self: “Do not let the pain be more than you.

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<sup>139</sup> This focus on the condensing potency of sound belongs to an ancient tradition of “sonic absolutism” (Parreira 1991) in Brahminical ritual that identifies the world with the efficacy of Sanskrit in ritual speech (Yelle 2003; Mandair 2009). Long integrated into Bhakti devotional practice, in contemporary varieties of popular Hinduism this predominantly takes the form of reciting the mantras of the deities.

There is nothing a devotee should allow to become more than my name.” Such rhetoric in performance permits Shiva to encompass Anjali. Every facet of her suffering is reduced to a nominal element of the cosmic structure and purpose performed in her interaction with the “manifesting” god. Though Anjali reacts to this with disappointment, she is compelled—at least in the space of the interaction—to submit to the devotional program Shiva commands.

The nested complexity and soteriological compulsion vested in the rhetoric of Shivshaktidasa’s Shiva shows how important pain is to achieving encompassment in Shakti ritual practice. Pain compels in ways that enable ritual to condense multiple, interwoven descriptions of suffering. As in Shiva’s theology, the poetics of Shakti ritual interactions integrate these diverse tropes and sensations into a seemingly inevitable statement about human existence.

The sense of inevitability, however, also contains an inherent discordance. Oracular mediumship focuses attention on the medium, the channel of communication. However convinced human supplicants might be, a Shakti medium’s body—the god’s material conduit—remains ever present and pronounced. Ulterior motives of any kind attributable to recognizably human interests always threaten to interrupt the messages communicated by oracular mediums. Cosmological descriptions—the mythic force of the gods’ personalities—are conveyed synchronously with the incontestable fact that a medium’s body remains visibly present before supplicants in all its human fallibility. Pain, on the other hand, focuses this fallibility on the medium’s other, in the bodies of the devotees oracles address. To the extent that a possessing deity can ritually situate her or his self outside of pain to describe it as an objective and meaningful property of

existence, oracles are capable of producing an alternative description of the human embodiment. To the degree Shiva maintains his impossibly complex position of being both the identity of the universe and Anjali's true identity as voiced in another person, he can translate Anjali's pain from an immediate sensation into both an abstract principle and a vivid example of the coinciding immediacy and transcendence of divine efficacy.

The pain initiates this recognition that divine control is divine identity; as Shiva's descriptions of her place in eternity build and interlock, Anjali is revealed to be a seamless weave of human and divine purpose. Pain is the deity, evidence of divine necessity, and sign of Shakti rituals' need to efface human motive. Anjali, as a particular human person, is rapidly submerged by this rising cosmological tide. Her agency becomes yoked to the pain's instigation to abandon any other life for devotion. This surrender, and the pain that polices it, promises Anjali that she is equally such an open channel, a mediator without motives.

The rhetoric of encompassment as performed by Shivshaktidasa's Shiva goes beyond healing, to make pain an inescapable virtue of the spiritual reality that encompasses the everyday material world. When this transduction of the material into the spiritual is accomplished, the status of pain is transformed. Such rhetoric moves pain from a flickering hypothesis into a certainty capable of diagnosing any form of suffering. This is how, Shakti oracular ritual, the gods declare that they have encompassed pain, and reduced it to another expression of their presence and power. Of course, as can be seen in Anjali's evident disappointment in the face of all of this, the distance between pain and its justifications may frequently be insurmountable for even the most persuasive ritual rhetorics.

## Conclusion

Pain plays a significant role in the rituals that convince many Hindus and Ndyukas that their lives are defined by relational ontologies of encompassment or coalition. Pain, which the liberal tradition more often than not conceives as the most harrowingly solitary of experiences, becomes an emphatic sign of the relations each of these traditions assert lend structure to human existence. In each case, the sense of this arises from the pragmatic organization of oracular ritual interactions. Just as Da Sabun and Ma Tranga/Da Kodyo work together with Sa Nyoni and her sister to expose her multiplex, coalitional identity, so Shiva uses his interaction with Anjali to push through the singularity of himself as the ultimate reconciliation of pained matter and transcendent spirit.

Though Ndyuka oracles perform asymmetries between humans and spirits/deities similar to those of their Hindu counterparts, they focus on bringing people to acknowledge the multiplicity of their coalitional personhood rather than mandate the ethical supremacy of self-surrender to encompassing deities.<sup>140</sup> For Ndyuka, the goal of ritual is to come to the fullness of personal capacity by becoming aware of the many relations that predicate personal action. Conversely, for bhakti devotionism as performed in Shakti puja, the ideal is the devotional reduction of the self to a part a condensing series of ever more encompassing levels/identities of existence. In each case, pain is converted into an index of some a priori relation that precedes and defines its specific human instance. In both traditions, oracles work to position sufferers in relation to their pains, objectifying them as the eruptions of relational dependencies beyond

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<sup>140</sup> When absolute surrender is enforced, like in anti-witchcraft movements, it is because the person is a deadly witch whose greed must be subjugated.



human control and understanding. In doing so, both traditions invite afflicted patients to sublimate their perspectives into the epistemic standpoints of spirits and deities who exceed the frontiers of human capacity. In this way, both traditions seek to transform the phenomenology of human embodiment. In the next and last chapter, I go on to explore the limits of these differences, describing how modalities of coalition and encompassment are embedded in the aporias of land ownership and sovereignty in contemporary Suriname.

## Chapter 7

### Spirits, Land and the Limits of Coalition and Encompassment in Plural Suriname

*“A nation is not formed by taking over the language, or religion, of others; that’s not necessary to form a nation. A nation is formed by the feeling that Suriname is the soil on which we all find our existence and that this ground is dear to us; that is solidarity. No one can impose this feeling on you, no one can force it, you acquire this feeling from your creator. Therefore Mr. Speaker, let us do everything we can to allow this feeling to come to fuller expression.”*

Jaganath Lachmon (Staten Van Suriname, 1959: 321, cited in Dew 1978: 102)

Looking at Surinamese currency (the Surinamese Dollar, generally referred to as SRD), you will notice a fascinating omission: people. Instead of representing Suriname’s diversity, Surinamese money displays the façade of the central bank and different images of undeveloped places in Suriname’s vast rainforest interior. Rather than acknowledge the nation’s ethnic and religious variety, bills portray Suriname’s pluralism as a byproduct of supposedly equal legal access to the nation’s natural resources. With each exchange at the market and every paycheck, Surinamese dollars enact this rhetoric to show that the state has procured religious and ethnic inclusivity by providing title to the land and its future development, a legal tender inscription of the Jaganath Lachmon speech quoted above.<sup>141</sup> As property and potential, depicting the landscape on currency enables the Surinamese government to present functioning ethnic and religious pluralism as the outcome of the entire populations’ shared economic belonging on the land as

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<sup>141</sup>Jaganath Lachmon was the key leader of the VHP, the major Hindustani ethnic party, and thus the Hindustani person most closely associated with negotiating the terms of Surinamese Independence.

guaranteed by the sovereignty of the state. In doing so, the Surinamese state uses ethnic and religious pluralism to strategically assert its ultimate right to economic determination over the nation's immense unexploited territory (Munneke 1991).

This right, however, has its limits. At the same time the Surinamese state presses its secular sovereignty over an allegedly undifferentiated national territory, Surinamese people of all ethnicities—including many in the government's upper echelons—recognize that powerful spirits control the Surinamese landscape. Autochthonous spirits enact an unsettled logic of settlement, in which the land itself can contest human ability to fully comprehend and allocate it. These spirits do all they can to exert their sovereignty over human lives, from seizing bodies to governing access to the land's wealth and fecundity. Spirits of the land can compel people to create and sustain ritual relations with their places of residence, a key concern for many Hindus *and* Ndyukas. These practices shadow state sovereignty, questioning the state's entitlement to the land and the viability of the model of pluralism through economic settlement that sustains the state's legitimacy. To avow its ultimate control, the Surinamese state cannot recognize alternative ways of conceptualizing title to the land implicit in ritual relations with tutelary spirits. The state must demand the secularization of territory to make its regulation the only force that lends economic shape to the nation.

This chapter examines the impasses provoked by the encounter of Hindu and Ndyuka relational sensibilities of encompassment and coalition with the Surinamese state's legal norms of secular, liberal sovereignty. Much as senior state officials can entertain conflicting conceptions of spirit and state control, so questions about the terms under which Hindus and Ndyukas can claim belonging to the Surinamese land expose the

often-paradoxical consequences of the preponderant relational sensibilities performed by both populations. In particular, I examine how many Hindus and Ndyukas experience spirits as sovereign over the Surinamese land and the wealth it generates. I argue that, given the conundrums of secular pluralism, doubts about human ability to live beyond the control of such “ethereal agents” (Khan 2004) demonstrates the limits, not only of liberal ideologies of state sovereignty, but also of rhetorics of coalition and encompassment to really cope with the fact of Suriname’s diversity.

### **Ndyuka Territory, Spirits, and the Ambivalent Tragedy of Property**

Understanding Ndyuka conceptions of property is critical for comprehending how Ndyuka coalitional sensibilities encounter the liberal norms of state sovereignty. As elucidated in chapter 2, in traditional Ndyuka territories, corporate lineages (*bée*) and clans (*lo*) are the only legitimate human possessors of land and its usufruct (Köbben 1979, see also Price 1975 for the Saamaka). Persons and families are granted use of portions of clan territory for farming, hunting, fishing, and mining with the acknowledgement that it will revert to the lineage when the person dies.<sup>142</sup> The principle of corporate ownership is connected to coalitional conceptions, especially to the collective, hereditary transmission of personal transgressions through avenging spirits. At the most basic, many Ndyuka perceive corporate title to the sentient land as granted through normally unwanted partnership with spirits. Here is how one Ndyuka man described it to me:

*After all of the problems (fuka, literally curses) that we forest people (busi kondee sama, an idiom for Maroons as a whole) have had to cope with, we have become accustomed to the beings (sani, literally things) of the forest, what they don’t like, and*

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<sup>142</sup> This is technically the same with personal property, which, though notionally relapsing to the lineage at death, is almost always distributed to the deceased’s children.

*the ways they should be respected (lesipeki). Similarly, we have come to know what we need to do to be at peace (fii) with them, and also what they need in order to accept peaceful coalition (libi makandii) with us. For those others [spirits] who cannot stand to live with humans, we have learned what we need to do to respectfully remove them from a place and find somewhere else for them to live. It is critical to know how to purify the land you want to clear for a garden in forest that hasn't been previously cut. Every place on earth is occupied by the beings (sani) that the creator placed there. When you come from where you have been to a new place where something else lives, then you need to proceed with respect. Because the beings that live there don't want others to come and force them from where they have been living.<sup>143</sup>*

Like the Ndyuka proverb states, “Every headland in the river has its *tukanai*” (a very large predatory fish)<sup>144</sup>—meaning every location has an agent which owns it. Every “place” (*peesi*) in the landscape is the sentient “house” (*osu*) of a multitude of agentive beings, whether the enlivening souls (*yeye*) of animals and plants, or members of major classes of spirits like Ampuku and Papa.<sup>145</sup> As with dealings with fellow humans, the critical issue for Ndyuka in dealing with places is the respect owed to these others. This is put in terms of living peacefully or freely (*fii*) with spirits, enabling them to exist harmoniously alongside human beings who depend on the resources these spirits control. This peaceful freedom is perhaps the key trope of Ndyuka moral discourse, concurrently invoking the colonial treaty that recognized their ancestors’ independence and the ideal condition for collective life.

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<sup>143</sup> “*Fu di wi enke busi konde sama kon leli sabi disi baka ala den fuka di wi kisi fu a busi, da wi kon gventi anga den sani fu di wi kon sabi san den no lobi, ofu a fasi di yu mu wooko anga lesipeki anga den. So seefi san wi mu du fu meki fii anga son fu den sani ya, ma ooktu san den abi fanowdu fu den sa kon fii anga libisama. Tawan di no man tan makandii anga libisama san wi mu du fu puu den ape anga lesipeki fu poti den go a taa peesi pe den sa libi. A de taanga fanowdu fu wasi a busi pe yu wani koti waan goon fu di a busi a de soso. Ala peesi fu a goontapu abi sani di a mekeman fu a goontapu poti fu libi ape. Da te yu komoto a pe yu abi fu tan go a pe wan taa sani abi fu tan da a de fanowdu fu yu mu go de anga lesipeki. Bika na wan sani fu a goontapu no sa wani taa sani go puu en anga makiti fu teke a peesi pe a abi fu tan.*”

<sup>144</sup> “*Ibii tyontyon abi en Tukanai.*”

<sup>145</sup> Though far from the only concern dealt with in oracular divination, questions around how to confront the vexed question of relations between humans and lineally mediated local spirits remain important. Perhaps because of the urban milieu in which I worked, the repercussions of territorial trespasses against spirits only explicitly accounted for a minority of cases (which were dominated by concerns over witchcraft and *bakuu*). These concerns were implicitly strongly present, however, something made clear by the fact that *Ampuku* mediums accounted for the majority of the Ndyuka oracular-healers with whom I worked.

Spirits, like people, want to keep to themselves, doing whatever it takes to preserve their “free” autonomy. Competing desires to be left alone force people and spirits to find ways to live in coalition (*libi makandii*). If this model of coalition cannot be attained, then the resident spirit needs to be respectfully removed (*paati*) without inciting its wrath and turning it into a *kunu*. In both cases, the future garden or house site is washed with a prophylactic medicinal mixture and a libation poured to request the spirit (the “earth mother” (*goonmama*)) to either permit the work and enable its prosperity or gracefully vacate the site.

Such concessions are possible and imperative because Ndyuka perceive the forest as the spirits’ invisible village, organized in near identical ways to those of the Ndyuka themselves, and accordingly subject to the same methods of authority and agreement.<sup>146</sup> Though these parallels establish communication between humans and spirits, they also create the conditions in which mutual moral recognition is easily violated, transforming indifferent ambient spirits into wrathful *kunu*. As explained by the story of Dikii in chapter 2, such affronts are not only common, but have catalyzed the concepts of history, personhood, and self that shape Ndyuka understandings of territorial rights and the wealth such rights produce.

### **Poverty, Need, and the Consequences of Human Nature**

The Ndyuka I knew tended to regard themselves as “poor” (*pina*, which also implies affliction and suffering). Ndyuka hold that escaping from this condition of poverty is one of life’s basic ends (see also Köbben 1968; Thoden van Velzen and van

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<sup>146</sup> Certain trees (particularly the *kankantii* (the silk cotton, *Ceiba pentandra*), termite mounds (*kantasi*), and soil (*doti*, *goon*) of the forest, are seen as the spirits’ houses, just as the *kankantii*—which dwarfs everything else in the forest—is the spirits’ *kuutu* house.

Wetering 2004, 2013). Necessary economic action—whether as subsistence hunting, gardening, and foraging, or wage labor—to alleviate want always threatens, however, to multiply collective suffering through inflicting new *kunu* on a person’s family and lineage. Returning as *kunu*, aggrieved spirits demand a portion of people’s wealth, ritually seizing personal property as a “fine” (*buta*) in compensation for a lineage’s collective guilt.

Though the Ndyuka I worked with made a point of professing their own moral integrity, they still incessantly asserted that humans, and especially other Ndyuka, were essentially bad (*libisama ogii*). Just as the guttering, uncanny invisibility of spirits permits their agency to be assessed only after they have been angered, so the hidden thoughts of other humans equally threaten what people feel they firmly own with the results of revenant grief, resentment, and anger. Whether among humans, or between humans and spirits, human ignorance and greed rapidly escalate ethical affronts. These inevitably balloon from interpersonal animosities into collective moral debts. Try as they might to free themselves, this culpability holds kin groups in intergenerational stranglehold, but also imbues them with distinctive capacities and skills, among which is the right to make use of certain territories in everyday tasks of subsistence. Accordingly, even though spirits retain the advantage of being the land’s more potent original owners, these relations equally ensnare them in human commitments. In this way, aggrieved spirits come to protect a clan’s land, using the same powers that enable them to afflict the lineage to smell out and punish unlawful intruders on clan land. This resulting symbiosis is the ultimate guarantee that a lineage and clan belong to that land, a right granted through their having to bear the difficult consequences of living with the land’s spirits.

**Bodies as Places and Places as Bodies: Attainment of Wealth as the Moral Lesson of Coalition**

Though far from the only concern dealt with in oracular divination, questions about how to face the vexed relations between humans and lineally mediated local spirits remain imperative. Perhaps because of the urban milieu in which I worked, the repercussions of territorial trespasses against spirits only explicitly accounted for a minority of cases (which were dominated by concerns over witchcraft and *bakuu*). Implicitly, however, these concerns were strongly present, as was made clear by the fact that *Ampuku* mediums accounted for the majority of the Ndyuka oracular-healers I heard about and worked with. When the subject did come up, the complications of human-spirit interdependence were generally handled through a strongly felt isomorphism between human bodies and selves and places and spirits. Here is an example from one of Da Sabun’s consultations:

Man 1:	Papa, miseefi kon suku uwii fu wasi. Na gowtu busi mi e wooko. Mi ná e fende. Soms mi e fii fu bali winti. Da mi wani yu seeka a sani gi mi.	Father, I have also come in search of leaves with which to wash. I work in the goldfields, but I don’t have any luck. Sometimes I feel the spirits possess me. So I want you to repair these affairs ( <i>sani</i> ) for me.
Da Asaigoontapu: (Da Sabun’s Ampuku spirit)	A ná toobi, a uwii a mu wasi. Meke yu meke wan lijst: amooman; yooka peesi; piepiepaw; gaan masusa, pikin masusa; baaka uman; filii; angumangamaka; ayuun tetei uwii; wan tiki dee kalu; dii pisi baw; wan gaan bii; wan weti switi sopi.	No problem, he must wash with leaves (meaning <i>obiya</i> ). You must make a list: amooman; yooka peesi; piyepiyepaw; big masusa, small masusa; black woman; filii; angumangamaka; onion vine leaves; one piece of dry corn; three pieces blue detergent; one large beer; one white sweet alcohol.

As captured by the phrase “the body is a house for the all the things that live inside it” (*a sikin na osu fu ala den sani di tan de inisei*) cited at the beginning of chapter 2, and in accordance with the principle of “self-similarity” that governs Ndyuka “fractal”



personhood (Wagner 1992), bodies—human, animal, and plant—are perceived as just another sort of place, fields of intersecting relations that must be regulated to achieve the healthy coalitions needed to unlock their productivity. As the transcript shows, since all wealth is the result of work (*wooko*) at specific sites, the analogy of body to place is intimately related to how Ndyuka conceive the acquisition of prosperity. To acquire fortune the man should treat his body as the parallel of the place in which he works. He must wash his body with the same leaves with which he would calm the spirit owner of his gold claim, bringing the two into productive coalition.<sup>147</sup> The man’s previous failure to do so enabled the place to begin to express its anger through him, grafting its indignation over being disturbed without due respect into his body and denying him its wealth.

To own a place, including the human body, is to belong to it by being in a relation of mutual recognition. The formative control Ndyuka regard places as having over humans is strongly conveyed by the “good god” (*bun gadu*, also called the “place god” (*gadu fu a peesi*), the third agent in the widely cited three spirit model of Ndyuka personhood (Vernon 1985, 1993). The *bun gadu* is the spirit of the place where a person was conceived as incarnated in each human body. It reminds people of their derivative

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<sup>147</sup> This focuses on the eliding of physical and moral cleanliness, a critical theme in Ndyuka ritual. Once when John and I were visiting Ma Amba, one of the Ndyuka oracular healers we were working with, she showed us the leaves she would use to make *obiya* for one of her prospector clients who had become unable to find gold. She told us that these would be mixed together to wash (*wasi*) the ground where he worked so that the *goonmama* would no longer “seal off the gold” (*tapu a gowtu*) and share her wealth (see also Vernon 1985). As with everything involving spirits, the leaves used must be of the correct varieties, from species the spirits liked. Using these would “make for a clean body” (*meke kiin sikin*), ingratiating a person to the spirits so that they would “listen to your prayers” (*aliki a begi*) and “collaborate with you” (*wooko makandii anga yu*).<sup>147</sup>

Such cleansing assemblages “clean” (*kiin*) a place so as to restore collaborative respect within a place and its residents. Ndyuka conceptions of property, are thus derived from the imperative of maintaining the correct kinds of relations between various places that disclose coalitions, be it the human body, or a place, whether a goldmine, a village, or a garden.

dependence by making a person dream that they are floating, lost in the middle of a deep body of water. With vivid force, such dream imagery expresses the sensation of desperately floundering in undifferentiated internal space, suggesting that the *bun gadu* has withdrawn located belonging to a place from the dreamer. The Ndyuka I knew interpreted such dreams as demands from the *bun gadu* for human recognition. When a person has this sort of dream, he or she is supposed to feed the *bun gadu* by depositing a food offering on the ground. The act of feeding reaffirms that the person is aware that their embodied existence is granted through coalition with the place where they were conceived and through which they support themselves and their kin.

The importance of this relation was emphasized in a lesson I was given one evening by the Cottica Ndyuka oracular healer Da Mangwa and his neighbors, Romeo. In the midst of a long soliloquy accompanied by Da Mangwa's repeated rhythmic affirmations, Romeo held forth on the relation of body to spirit. Romeo said that people must always obey their intuitive feelings. He gave the example of an office worker going to work who, as soon as he or she was about to arrive, received a sudden impulse to instead call in sick. Romeo stated that the person experienced this feeling because something was amiss. Maybe someone was bewitching them, or they had done something wrong that offended their body or soul (*akaa*). Alarmed, the person's embodied spirit (*yeye*) reacted with a sudden flash of queasy insight. Romeo said that this was the person's body (*sikin*) communicating that the aggregate person was in danger. Romeo said that a person had to listen to these messages from the body, and do the things that kept the spirit (*yeye*) happy. Otherwise a person will get sick, and even die.

Romeo immediately followed this lesson with an example from the gold fields (*gowtu busi*): “as with the body” (*enke a sikin*), he said, when a person goes to prospect for gold, they have to be scrupulously moral (*du bun bun*). Prospectors will “dirty” (*tyobo*) themselves if they lie, steal, or murder, all of which will cause the a claim’s *goonmama* to punish them, withholding gold, possessing them, or sickening disrespectful prospectors to the point of death. Romeo continued by saying that a prospector cannot be greedy and deny their proceeds to others, especially to a claim’s resident spirits. Doing so creates enemies (*fayantiman*) among one’s fellows and upsets one’s own spirit. If a prospector is mining at a place they do not have ritual title to, when another prospector arrives, they should never threaten the new comers or chase them away. Instead, the person mining should recognize that they are merely borrowing the earth’s wealth, keeping what they have found and then moving on to share the same common resource with others.

Romeo’s monolog, when considered alongside ideas about *bun gadu*, and punitive autochthonous spirits, traces a principle of moral symmetry that runs through the tangled complications of Ndyuka conceptions of personhood, place, wealth, and coalition. As previously discussed, rights to a place’s productivity are granted through ritual acts that recognize that place’s spirit otherness. This recognition depends, however, on establishing a deeper mutuality between people and places. Ndyuka rituals to the sentient land invite places to see that the people using the land’s resources both respect the place’s difference and share common moral concerns and material desires. In this way, places host human persons as another element in the network of relations among the many animal, plant, and spirit agencies that they contain. If a person fails to respectfully

recognize their dependence through acknowledgements like routine libations, the place will express its anger by denying them its benefits, making the person sick, or dramatically possessing them or one of their relatives.<sup>148</sup>

To recall Romeo's lesson, he portrayed the embodied Ndyuka person as being in relation to their own self as a prospector is to their gold claim. For many Ndyuka, human bodies are thus coalitions similar to those between places and their inhabitants; to fully flourish, bodies must be given the same kinds of ritual attention as villages, gardens, or goldmines. This homology suggests that, for many Ndyuka, the otherness embodied by places is as much internal to human persons as it is an external property of locations in the landscape.

### **Mutual Recognition and the Evasiveness of Ownership**

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Ndyuka persons never entirely own their bodies. Instead, persons emerge from out of their many intersecting relations with lineally mediated human and spirit others, among which the self is merely one element. It is the historical specificity of this relational network that accounts for any one person's discrete body and personality. This specificity means that human persons can only be assembled at specific places, as parts of those places and the rules (*weiti*) that regulate them. This relation of ethical interdependence shows the central ritual role of the analogy of body to place to healing both people and land from the inevitable evil that failing to acknowledge another's reciprocal personhood unleashes. By implication, this also entails that human bodies should be treated with the same respect owed places. As described in chapter 4, the same sort of ritual washing used to cure persons, is thus the means many Ndyuka use

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<sup>148</sup> Prospectors frequently tell stories of fellow miners suddenly running off into the forest and disappearing in acts of possession.

to coax the land and its spirits to cooperate with them in building fruitful, mutually benefitting, coalitions.

Ndyuka hold that these coalitions are only generative when humans recognize the rules (*weiti*) and prohibitions (*kina*) that grant due autonomy to the other people and places. Paying attention to these regulations is one important aspect of the principle of mutual respect that constitutes Ndyuka perceptions of moral relations. A story illustrates this:

*One taboo (kina) day (this refers to Thursday when people are supposed to cease working in the forest out of respect for the Ampuku spirits), Da Yeenan went to hunt in the forest. He was accustomed to hunting tamanuwa (the great anteater, Myrmecophaga tridactyla) with a machete. But on this taboo day, Da Yeenan was in for bad luck, because while hunting he encountered an anteater that fought back when he tried to kill it. The anteater grabbed him and threw him to the ground, his gun and machete falling some distance from where the anteater had him pinned. Da Yeenan fought that anteater the whole day, without letting go. Da Yeenan struggled to escape until he was exhausted. So Da Yeenan began to implore the things of forest (spirits) to help him. When he called to them, they heard, because the anteater lost its advantage and Da Yeenan was able to grab his machete and cut off the foot with which the anteater held him to the ground. Da Yeenan only arrived back at home late at night, having battled the anteater for an entire day. As he walked through the door of his house, he immediately fell down “gwolow!” (an idiophone describing how something heavy falls) on the ground. And so, from that day to the present, the spirits possess him.<sup>149</sup>*

The preceding is typical of stories about how spirits become involved in Ndyuka life. In it a variety of human trespasses against the rules that protect the autonomy of spirits and the places they live ignite in a life-threatening encounter, and result in Da Yeenan inadvertently surrendering his body to them. It is implied that both his bad luck

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<sup>149</sup> “Na wan kina dei da Yeenen go a onti a busi. Da Jeenen be abi a gwentu fu kii tamanuwa anga how. Ma a kina dei ya da Jeenen naki ogii ede. Bika di e go a onti ne'en a miti anga wan tamanuwa ne'en di a go fu kii en ne'en a tamanuwa feti anga en. Kisi Da Yeenen towe a doti pe en goni anga en how kai faawe. A tamanuwa feti Da Yeenen a hii dei a nai losi en, Da Jeenen feti fu komoto te a weli. A so da Jeenen bigin kai den sani fu a busi fu yeepi eng. Di a kai den sani de yee, bika a tamanuwa losi en afu so te a be sa kisi en how en koti a tamanuwa ana puu a pe a be oli en. Da Yeenen doo neti a osu fu di a meti be oli en hii dei te neti. Di a doo osu a kai gwolow a doti en so a bigin bali wenti te tide.”

in being assaulted by the anteater and his good fortune in being saved through spirit intervention were retributions. Even though his plea for help was heard, it was only in order to teach Da Yeenen and other humans a lesson about the repercussions of failing to respectfully recognize spirits' sovereignty over their territory.

Da Yeenen's irresponsible disregard for the spirits, when followed by his desperate invocation of their help, made him dually culpable. Like most such stories, no mention is made of Da Yeenen's intentions in violating the prohibition on hunting on a Thursday. Whether he meant to or not, it was of his own inconsiderate volition that he disregarded the prohibition, provoking the misfortune that necessitated him later beseeching the spirits' rescue. In doing so, he inadvertently conceded his agentive autonomy to the spirits who freed him *in spite of* his grave breach of respect. Benefiting from their powers even in transgression, he was pushed into merger with the spirits, coming to share his body with them. In this way, Da Yeenen was made a medium for the spirits' anger to his contemporary lineage members at the time of the incident, and to future generations through the hereditary transmission of his "debt" (*paiman*) to either his own children, or his matrilineal nieces and nephews (*sisa pikiin*).

Such stories depict a world pervaded with an elemental moral of coalition, in which claims of human ownership (like the unrestricted right to hunt) result from misrecognition of the many relations that always already entangle people's pasts and futures. In the wider world of human existence, just as in Ndyuka council meetings (*kuutu*, discussed in chapter 2) respect is necessary because of the many others inescapably present to demand it. Though respect and the rules that regulate it are a basic injunction, it is also clear that these are impossible to fulfill. Similarly—also as in

*kuutu*—failure to exercise due consideration permits affronted others to intrude on the autonomy Ndyuka persons and kin groups work diligently to attain. Whatever ameliorative steps they take, the guilty kin group remains vulnerable to those they have wronged, and live in fear of their curses, a principle that correspondingly extends to non-human spirits. Thus, any act of human misrecognition is equivalently recognition by some other of the power the offense grants them over the often-unwitting offender. Ndyuka conceptions of respect imply that people always exist for the sake of these relations; the wellbeing of a specific embodied person is dependent on how effectively they can maintain the ethics of recognition across the fields of relatedness they contain and project.<sup>150</sup>

For the Ndyuka I knew, the interdependence of humans, spirits, and territory was consequently a paradoxically generative strain of human life. Like Da Yeenen's rash decision to hunt on Thursday,<sup>151</sup> however much people seek personal advantage, they are always condemned to do so as part of a pre-established collective of kin mediated misfortune. The medical anthropologist Diane Vernon who did her research in the 1970s and 80s at Tabiki, a downriver (*bilosei*) Tapanahoni Ndyuka village, describes how those she worked with perceived transgressions against spirits as responsible for the very fact of human conception:

*Each human conceived is the result of the intervention of such an entity and of it alone. This, disturbed by the intrusion of a woman in its territory, or similarly by the*

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<sup>150</sup> Another way of saying this is that, because people always stand for their lineage, and thus that lineage's constituent history of coalition, any act of personal ownership is contingent on a person's aptitude for performing their self as an embodiment of the lineage as a collectivity. In this way, individual interests may become indistinguishable from those of the lineage, which, in events like *kuutu*, are also ongoing ritual enactments of the historical recognitions among humans and between humans and spirits that account for the fusing of a lineage to its territory. Resultantly, property and autonomy are similarly accomplished through the ways in which Ndyuka people learn to perform themselves as identical to the coalitions of relations that that enable the symbioses of personal and collective claims.

<sup>151</sup> When there would be no other hunters in the forest.

*pollution of its residence by a woman, or another of her offenses, turns on her and “goes in her belly” visiting its vengeance under the form of sickness/death and the generative relation of life. Uniquely, these nature spirits find themselves at the two ends of the cycle of human incarnation and disincarnation, all of a person’s metamorphoses refer to one ultimate cause: the intervention of a spirit provoked by a blunder, a fault, or an act of human meanness (Vernon 1993: 22).<sup>152</sup>*

Vernon’s summary pointedly condenses the tragedy of coalition and the matrilineal thrust of its logic. Greed and ignorance—the fundamental imperfections of unassisted, relationally dependent, human beings—inadvertently result in destructive encroachments on others, trespasses which, however unexpectedly, sustain human existence. In this picture, each Ndyuka person is an accidental aggregate of human and spirit, their personality the result of a breach in the proper conduct of relations.

If the person—the foundation of most forms of ownership—is conceived as the composite effect of a failure of moral recognition, then what is personally acquired by a person becomes suspect, simultaneously a sign of some transgression and its collective consequences—something clearly demonstrated in the importance of seizing and cleansing personal property in all of the major Ndyuka anti-witchcraft ritual cults and campaigns. Similarly, it is members’ transgressions that finally account for the joining of lineage and its land. Any act of sustenance that supports the lineage potentially entails violence that will ramify among all its members, becoming misfortunes like those recounted in the previous chapter. Whether personal or collective, Ndyuka territorial rights and the wealth those rights produce are never the result of simply entering *terra*

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<sup>152</sup> *Chaque conception humaine est due à l’intervention d’une telle entité et d’une seule. Celle-ci, dérangée par l’intrusion d’une femme sur son territoire, ou même par la pollution de son domicile par une femme, ou encore ‘autrement offensée par elle, se rebiffe et « va dans son ventre » exercer une vengeance sous forme soit de maladie/mort, soit de relations génératrices de vie. Car seuls, ces genies de la nature se trouvent aux deux pôles à la fois du cycle de l’incarnation et de la désincarnation humaine, toutes les métamorphoses de la personne renvoyant alors à une ultime cause unique- : l’intervention d’un esprit provoquée par une maladresse, une faute ou une méchanceté humaine.*



*nullius* and mingling one's labor with its resources as imagined by the liberal tradition (Locke 1986). Instead, property is a misfortune felt by all, a repercussion of ethically blind encounters with the other people and beings that enjoy precedent rights over the land and its resources. In this way, the land possesses its presumptive human owners more than they can ever possess the land.

The invisible presence of these beings and relations renders any act of claiming personal ownership precarious, potentially invoking contrary claims, the rectitude of which exceeds unaided human knowledge. Against their desire to retain some degree of personal control over their already multiplex persons, Ndyuka perceive humans as doomed to live in coalition with spirits, the only beings capable of substantiating the legitimacy of human claims over places.<sup>153</sup> Just as in the case of Da Yeenen, attempts to simply take resources from the sentient land always result in the human body and the kin relations it condenses being seized by those resources' legitimate owners. Such acts of

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<sup>153</sup> At the same time, such logic is profoundly ironic. Just as often, spirits and their afflictions separate people from what they do and have, transducing personal moral transgressions in collective action. Spirits belong to clans as clans belong to spirits. Ownership is a result of this tortured mutuality. Both however are beyond the capacities of singular people to adequately represent. Even when a person is possessed, they are performing the asymmetry of their multiplicity that affirms that their actions arise from elsewhere. In this way, Ndyuka corporate ownership is another affirmation that legitimate authority is never entirely in human hands.

Here is an example: after I had been in Suriname for many months, I realized that I had successfully recorded only a handful of Ndyuka ritual songs. While driving my friend Ma Domii home to Sunny Point, I asked if she might sing for me. She was actively involved in the ritual life of her son's healing shrine (*obiya kampu*), so I thought she could easily help. Ma Domii looked at me and said, "People don't know spirit songs; songs come when they arrive" (*Sama á sabi winti singi, singi kon te den doo*). At different times people would make similar statements about ancestral histories (*fesiten toli*), saying that, even though they "owned" these as descendent clan members, they would "come" only after libations had been poured. Initially, I thought that such rhetoric was simply a way of thwarting meddlesome inquiry. Soon, however, I realized that claims not to know—about the basic impossibility of *personally* possessing certain classes of knowledge—were ubiquitous and immensely important. The Ndyuka I know endeavor to speak in ways that distance themselves from what is said, in what Michael Lambek describes as "ironic" speech acts. As Socratic irony strove to expose the Platonic forms, Ndyuka rhetoric cultivates human ignorance to validate the efficacy of the categories of intergenerational continuity. People disclaim ownership of songs, of ancestral stories, or speak in proverbs to distance themselves from the possibility of their own agency, so that they become intermediaries of these other, more morally constitutive categories and beings.

transgression result in the collective “sin” (*sondu, sonu*) and “responsibility” (*fantiwoutu*) that enable both human and spirit others to have power over lineages and their members. Such cumulative guilt weaves land, people, and spirits together, every act sustaining lineal continuity attributable to the ways in which the inevitable misfortunes of collective life have dissolved all of these together to afford rights in places through an aggregate collective suffering.

### **The Impasse of Ndyuka Territorial Ownership, Christian Conversion, and the State**

The preceding sections have detailed how common Ndyuka conceptions of legitimate ownership derive from the frequent failure of humans to recognize the spirits of the sentient land. Territory and other forms of property come to belong to a corporate group through how drawing sustenance from a place ineluctably furthers collective moral indebtedness to it. As can be seen from Romeo’s account, these principles oddly intersect with the liberal notions of property advocated by the Surinamese state, which stress its right to grant individual titles to the land and its resources. The discourse of property propounded by the Surinamese state makes a classical liberal distinction between individual and state ownership, in which individual property is theoretically independent of the state, but in fact is a function of the state’s sovereign right to enforce economic value through punishment. Ndyuka conceptions of land rights exist at the intersection of both systems, For many contemporary Ndyuka, discourses of equal access to resources compete with ideas of lineally mediated rights in sentient places derived from ever compounding relations of collective suffering.

The Ndyuka I knew actively made use of both rhetorics, but in ways that often obviated each other. The orthogonal intersection of these two very different conceptions

is witnessed in Ndyuka reactions to the 2007 Inter-American Court of Human Rights Case, *The Saramaka vs. Suriname*. The panel of international judges ruled that the Saamaka Maroons had an inalienable right to “freely determine and enjoy their own social, cultural, and economic development, which includes the right to enjoy their particular spiritual relationship with the territory they have traditionally used and occupied... in accordance with their customary laws and traditional collective land tenure system” (cited in Price 2011: 235).

Though there is not much question over the sanctity of territory in immediate proximity to villages, many Ndyuka are opposed to extending formal legal protections when it comes to the vast tracts potentially claimable by other Maroons as ancestral territory. As mentioned in chapter 2, though composed through complex histories of living with the land and its spirits, such entitlements are always subject to controversy and disagreement. Maroon lineages, clans, and nations continue to fight over the terms of these prerogatives even as members of the Surinamese government—including Maroon politicians—illegally distribute land in ways advantageous only to themselves and their supporters. Within the cascading segmentary system in which Ndyuka coalition sensibilities coalesce, Ndyuka pessimism about others places them in the difficult position of trying both to retain full ritual control over their own conscious lands while not being legally denied access to sources of potential wealth in other Maroon and Amerindian peoples’ territories.

Given spirits’ ambiguity as sources of both belonging and suffering, they play a complex and mercurial role in these debates. Because spirits are associated with collective suffering, Ndyuka people are frequently extremely reticent in invoking them

through direct reference to their names and identities. The dense thicket of prohibitions that surround spirits to ensure that they remain in exclusive relation with a particular kin group compounds this, and intense inter-clan competition only renders this information more dangerous. This produces the peculiar situation whereby, even as secular international human rights law recognizes the legal validity of Maroon relations to sentient places, many Ndyuka remain apprehensive about the unforeseen ways these selfsame spirit relations will cause them harm, either by afflicting them with sickness or by denying them access to natural resources like gold on which their livelihood depends.

To the extent that there is a coherent Ndyuka theory of “coalitional” property relations, it appears to be one of ambivalent tragedy. As discussed in chapter 2, Ndyuka struggle between the need to take advantage of all available sources of wealth, and the inevitable misfortunes these basic desires produce. As the Ndyuka proverb says, “knowledge is expensive” (*sabi dii*).

Just like Ndyuka people, spirits are an active part of the global economy. Spirits desire wealth in commodities, charging people for their knowledge, and assessing fines in the main imported ritual commodities of cash, alcohol, and cloth. As I was once told by an Ndyuka police officer, “People know a true oracular healer because they demand a lot of money” (*Sama sabi wan tuu tuu obiyaman omdati den akisi fuu moni*). Spirit efficacy has accordingly become integrally tied to the protean power of money. More than merely the original owners of the land’s wealth, spirits are the source of the generative capacity (*kakiti*) to produce abundance (Vernon 1985). Money, particularly the ways in which it is prized from the earth as gold, concentrates connections between wealth and ritual knowledge, giving spirits sweeping authority over how Ndyuka encounter the volatile

demands of the global commodities market (Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering 2004, 2013). Ndyuka attempts to fix their relations with spirits through exchanges of wealth have thus only made them more dependent on destroying spirit habitat in attempts to appease them.<sup>154</sup>

Spirits are accordingly ambivalent influences. By giving people competing ritual rights to their wealth, spirit simultaneously substantiate Ndyuka claims to exclusive ancestral rights and endorse the destructive expansion of polluting gold mining. As members of social coalitions, spirits are part of the broader politics of relatedness in Suriname, standing by what is to their advantage, particularly when it concerns access to imported commodities.

Such contradictions again exemplify the struggles between gerontocracy, revelation, and egalitarianism that permeate Ndyuka sociality. Even as spirits directly challenge (even in international law!) the Surinamese state's conceit of absolute control over undifferentiated secular territory, as agents operating within the tragic sensibility of Ndyuka coalition, spirits just as frequently approve the impossible egalitarian quest for the natural resources that the young and untitled hope will create greater intra-Ndyuka equality. Thus, while spirits' "laws" now provide some of the strongest *legal* warrants for enforcing Maroon rights, the sad consequences of inevitable Maroon inequality within the realities of global capitalism foster the recruitment of spirit favor for greater Maroon dependence on destructive resource extraction and the excessive inequalities between people—and between people and spirits—it instantiates.

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<sup>154</sup> Just as the resources around villages have become steadily more diminished as populations have increased necessitating Maroons look to more distant hunting grounds, Maroon prospectors act as wage foragers, repeatedly moving on when gold is exhausted.

Along with ever-present fears of witchcraft, these concerns seem to have a decided role in stoking Ndyuka conversion to Christianity, principally Pentecostalism. With large scale Ndyuka immigration to the coast, Ndyuka—and specifically Ndyuka women who were the most subject to possession and punishment by spirits—have flocked to Pentecostal and other churches.<sup>155</sup> While these churches are many things—icons of literacy and a certain cosmopolitanism; a source of magical wealth; a refuge from kin obligation and domestic disputes—it is as exorcists that they exercise their most muscular role, promising to free people of the many spirits that afflict them through lineal relations. At the church services I attended in Sunny Point (which hosts at least six different churches, three of which are Pentecostal) the weekly climax of the eight hour long service was the expulsion of Ampuku, Papa, and Bakuu spirits through the intervention of the Holy Ghost (*Bun Yeye, Heilige Geest*). In doing so, these churches enact a notion of divine sovereignty which, even as at it transcends the powers of the secular state, reproduces the ways in which the Surinamese state claims to subordinate all ethnic differences to a unitary framework of value and purpose.

Ndyuka narratives of Pentecostal conversion made forcefully apparent the power of these ideas of sovereignty within Ndyuka conceptions of coalition. When I asked people why they had become Christians, they overwhelmingly answered they did so in response to “family problems” (*famii nowtu*): witchcraft. When I inquired about how they came to see themselves as sinners, I was unanimously greeted with incomprehension: “But I have never done anything wrong!” Newly ethically composed, converts perform their inclusion in the church by narrating themselves as continuously evidencing God’s

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<sup>155</sup> These are most prominently the Volle Evangellie Church based in the Netherlands, God’s Bazuin Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Moravian (E.B.G.S, Herrenhutters), and the Catholic.

power. One young man explained that humans have three souls two of which are God and Jesus. Such descriptions protect converts from the rival claims of their lineages, restoring the ethical security of active dialogical subjectivity, though now presented as an expression of God's universal sovereignty. Such assertions further reduce Ndyuka Christian converts to ignorance of anything other than God as they have come to embody him. Converts' agency was God's agency, an active sign of his control over, not only them, but of Suriname as a whole. Conversion thus represented only subjective synchronization to the Christian coalition that must have always made them up.<sup>156</sup>

In this way, Pentecostal sanctity has dovetailed with Maroon urban migration to Paramaribo—the religious pluralism of which makes it a quintessentially secular space. Ndyuka conversion to Christianity provides a strategy for performing a coalitional moral self while abrogating the necessity to obey the many constraining demands of local spirits. Though Pentecostal Christianity supports common Ndyuka desires for genuinely moral wealth by promising to bring them into attunement with God's will, in doing so, like spirits, it also justifies inter-Ndyuka inequality, given moral weight to social refusals that would otherwise be seen as immoral acts of human selfishness (See Richman 2008 for Haiti). The desire for inclusive coalition with a more encompassing form of divine sovereignty has thus brought many Ndyuka into practices that, by weakening their willingness to make exclusive claims to ancestral land, may yet deepen their economic marginalization.

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<sup>156</sup> If they had sinned they could not now purport to speak for God for they would innately embody those faculties of wrongdoing.

## **Hindus, Secular Sovereignty, the Problem of Coalition**

Whatever else they are, Maroon narratives of their kinship with and embodiment of spirits of the sentient land resonate with common Afro-Guyanese and Afro-Surinamese discourses that their long suffering as slaves grants people of African descent a greater right to govern both nations (Dew 1978; Williams 1990, 1991; Jackson 2012). This has rationale remains a key plank in rhetorics of resentment aimed against the descendants of Asian immigrants. While Indo-Surinamese and Guyanese vehemently dismiss these claims, doubts remain about the extent to which the legal norms of state sovereignty are really sufficient to assert secure Hindu belonging to the Suriname and Guyanese land.

These problems are especially acute for followers of Brahminical Hinduism. Recent settlers and the major legal landowners, Hindus are doubly exposed to the impasse of how to participate in both the legal and moral regimes of secular territory and universal religion enjoined by the state *and* assert valid belonging to the land against Afro-Surinamese and Indigenous Amerindian claimants. Though the model of sovereignty subscribed to by the Surinamese state insists that both indigenous and colonial land titles were legally extinguished as Surinamese independence (Munneke 1991; Price 2011), popular Hindu ritual practices express decided uncertainty about whether this can ever be completely accomplished. These uncertainties expose the necessity of encompassment for Hindu survival, and the limits of what its performative modes can achieve in plural societies. In the rest of this chapter, I will examine the reasons for this contradiction and its implications for contemporary Surinamese Hindus.



Based on continuing heterodox Hindu rituals for propitiating autochthonous spirits, I give evidence of Surinamese Hindu aporia in the face of conflicting ideologies of secularized territory, universalized religion, ethnic competition, and sentient land. Aporia ‘refers to the feeling of being at a loss, of being perplexed, or of being embarrassed when confronting such problems’ (Bubandt 2014:35). Aporia is the puzzled impasse that arises from the ‘inherent instability of any system of meaning’ (Bubandt: 36). For Surinamese Hindus, the doubt inspired by the aporia of belonging is not evidence of ‘the ways in which convictions gain and lose their force’ (Pelkmans 2013:1), but of how, despite hegemonic institutional pressures, uncertainties persist to enforce unresolvable paradoxes in the discourse and practice of encompassment (Bubandt 2014). Hindu attempts to resolve encompassment’s contradictions reveal the ways in which ritually expressed doubts about legitimate Hindu belonging simultaneously trouble state sanctioned pluralism and Hindu claims to ethno-religious distinction (for an illuminating comparison with Trinidad, see Khan 2004).

For Surinamese Hindus, the aporia induced by the diasporic settlement of the Surinamese land results in a sustained equivocation in which encompassment exerts a central influence. Hindu aporia before their own ritual practices illustrates the profound doubt produced by encompassment when encountering the demands of state pluralism and alternative Afro-Surinamese conceptions of sovereignty. Confronting rival communal histories of living with the sentient landscape, many Hindus struggle to secure rights to both land and nation that only impel further unresolvable doubts about whether owning the land really means belonging to it.<sup>157</sup> As much as rhetorics of encompassment

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<sup>157</sup> Aisha Khan (2004) gives a superb treatment of another version of this problem for Indo-Trinidadian inclusion in Trinidadian pluralism.

promise to secure Hindu precedence by subordinating the logics of the secular state and local ritual to Hindu self-understandings, such rituals divulge the lingering threat Hindus continue to feel about their place in Suriname.

### **Surinamese Land and the History of Hindu Belonging**

The difference between owning the land and belonging to it crystalizes core processes in the history of Surinamese Hinduism. As discussed in chapter 3, Surinamese Hinduism and Hindu perceptions of the land evolved from the entitled peasant pluralism that soon came to define the Hindustani community (Gowricharn 2013). As discussed earlier, Hinduism became an egalitarian ethnic religion focused on household patronage of pandits (Van der Veer and Vertovec 1991; and Khan 2004 for Trinidad). Censure from and comparison with other religions—especially hegemonic Christianity—encouraged ideological metaphysical encompassment. Like discussed in chapter 3, as all souls are fragments of the Hindu Godhead, all other religious traditions are understood as derivations from the originating purity of “eternal” (*sanatan*) Vedic Hindu practice (Bakker 1999). This is safeguarded by careful rhetorical stress on Hinduism’s ultimate monotheistic nature. This enables Hindus to accept other traditions while carefully subordinating them to their own. As pandits pruned back the Hindu pantheon to a core of ‘pure’ pan-Indic ‘Sanskritic’ deities, they also widened their ritual range. From weddings and funerals to sorcery, pandits assimilated previously distinct expertise to expand the subordinating power of Brahminical orthopraxy (Van der Burg and Van der Veer 1986; van der veer and Vertovec 1991; Khan 2004 for Trinidad).

Pandits worked with their newly egalitarian peasant patrons (*jajman*) to encourage the ritual and economic reconstitution of Hindu households and kinship through the

endogamous, genealogical reproduction of supposedly primordial Hindu distinctiveness. As described in earlier chapters, Hindu economic success is presented as a result of the preservation of Hindu ‘tradition’ (*nem, traditie*). Surinamese Hindus repeatedly told me that they demonstrate ‘honor’ (*ijjat*) by upholding their ‘ethnicity’ (*jaat*), especially through marriage (*biyah*), and worshipping the Hindu gods (*dewta*). Concurrently, the colonial policy that promoted Asian agricultural settlement also stressed the patriarchal household as the primary unit of production. For many Surinamese Hindus, the conjunction of communal ideals and colonial policy remains incontrovertible proof that Hindu practices were uniquely destined to develop Suriname (See Jackson 2012 for Guyana, and Khan 2004 for Trinidad).

Hindu ethnic self-certainty rested on cultivated Hindu distinction from the land and its associated ethnic others as previously ‘wild’ (*jangli*) and ‘dangerous’ (*khatarnaak*). Such prejudice is as much the culmination of colonial policy as of Hindu ideologies of ethnic exceptionalism. To justify their own settlement, Asian immigrants brought to replace Afro-Surinamese Creole laborers assimilated many of the tropes of colonial racism. Hindus regarded themselves as the chosen instruments of Surinamese development because of an innate superiority over other ethnic groups. Hindus understood this superiority as being conferred by their willingness to work and commitment to reproducing Hindu distinctiveness. Because of these ideologies, Amerindians and Maroons—the two ethnic groups with the strongest territorial claims and the least degree of assimilation to reputable Dutch-derived cultural standards—continue to be the objects of particular contempt. With their small population, Amerindians are not feared like Maroons, but both are lumped together as peoples of the

‘interior’ (*benninland/jangal*). Hindus consider these populations lazy, stupid, violent, and prone to sorcery. These purportedly essential traits were used to explain the perceived chronic inability of Maroons and Amerindians to “develop” (*ontwikkelt*) the country through the kinds of state recognized agriculture and construction that Hindus dominate. Recent mass Maroon and Amerindian migration to predominantly Hindu areas on the coast is the subject of persistent apprehensions about their atavistic influence. As one Hindu woman told me: “When they (Maroons and Amerindians) settle here, it becomes like the wilderness” (*Jab ulogon hiyan ail hiyan jangal ek jaise howe*). It is then no accident that these same groups should be so strongly associated with the land that Hindus supplicate in non-Brahminical sacrifices.

Despite Hindu dismissal, the rituals they perform for autochthonous spirits are almost certainly influenced by Afro-Surinamese practices. As laid out above, Maroon and Creole Afro-Surinamese rituals emphasize the primacy of relations with a multitude of spirits who inhabit the earth (*gronmama, goonmma, golonwinti*) or are the earth (*Aisa*) (Wooding 1981; Vernon 1992). In ritually adapting Hindu rituals of place to propitiate indigenous spirits, Hindus bypass Afro-Surinamese prerogatives even while they appropriate the moral rights to the land’s wealth justified by ethnic prejudices and ritual relations.

### **Hinduism, Secularism, and the Sovereign Land**

Whatever the boons granted by the colonial government to Hindu settlers, they came at the cost of submitting to the logic of secularization. Secularization depends on a twofold disciplining of religion and the state. While religion is restricted to describing the de-territorialized moral and metaphysical propositions held by particular individuals and

institutions, the public co-existence of the religions so defined is made further evidence of the state's unique ability to stipulate civil society's genuine interests (Asad 2003; Cannell 2010). The civil pluralism inherited by the post-colonial Surinamese state necessitated that Hindus subscribe to a limited conception of religion that ignored the possibility of ritual relations based on the demands of sentient places (See Khan 2004 for similar issues in Trinidad).

The distance between India and Suriname corresponds to that between assurance and doubt about the legitimacy of Hindu ritual and the degree to which it is capable of legitimately encompassing the "alien" Surinamese land. Brahminical Hinduism's encounter with Dutch and British colonial theories of religion and politics inadvertently exposed the complex ways in which ritual authority—and practices of encompassment—in South Asia was premised on place.<sup>158</sup> In South Asia, certain kinds of trespass beyond carefully territorialized socio-ritual identities called into question peoples' rights to inhabit both social positions and the territory that conferred it. This was expressed by the often-repeated fear that surrounded Hindu immigrants losing their caste upon crossing the ocean (Gowricharn 2013; Kelly 1991; Khan 2004; Speckman 1965). Though there are multiple reasons for this, of particular import were the many ways, witnessed in both village rites and major pilgrimages, in which spirits and deities pervaded the Indian landscape with evidence of their past deeds and present power in alternative displays of sovereignty (Bhardwaj 1973; Fuller 1992; Sanford 2005; Singh 2012; van der Veer 1997). These were also ranked in terms of a divine hierarchy that absorbed local deities

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<sup>158</sup> This should not, of course, be understood as without a complex Indian past in which urban forms of elite ritual, intellectual, and devotional practices had to contend with the complex field of popular practices closely tied to livelihood, sovereignty, and kinship across an often highly mobile and continually redefined territory (Sanford 2005; Singh 2012; Smith 2006).

into those of pan-Indic importance (Biardeau 1981; Fuller 1992). While the presence of local deities and spirits substantiated kin and caste groups' rights to territory (Mines 2005; Raheja 1988), their encompassment by "Brahminical" deities gave such prerogatives the appearance of "universal" prestige.

The diasporic disruption of these dynamics—the incongruity between imported ritual and local belonging, ownership of the land and accordance with its agency—continues to be one disconcerting source of aporia in contemporary Surinamese Hindu life. Removed from the immediate mythic/political intensity of the sub-continent, immigrant practitioners of Brahminical Hinduism were forced to reorient to a new geography of authority, a task in which pandits were both challenged and helped by colonial conceptions of religion (See Khan 2004 for Trinidad). For Dutch colonial administrators, as for the contemporary Surinamese state, "religions" could be recognized because they were de-territorialized expressions of moral revelations derived from transcendent, scriptural sources (Leertouwer 1991; Masuzawa 2005). The 'orthodox' Hinduism practiced by the overwhelming majority of Surinamese Hindus was only acknowledged by the colonial state after a central council of pandits formally organized its practices to accommodate Dutch colonial conceptions of religion the 1940s (Bakker 1999; De Klerk 1951, 1953; Van der Veer 1991). This new orthodoxy represented a compromise between pandit authority, popular practice, and scathing criticism from both Christian Missionaries and iconoclastic Arya Samaj reformers (van der Burg and van der Veer 1986; van der Veer 1991). Brahminical orthodoxy's institutional consolidation finally made Surinamese Hinduism a respectable, modern, and fundable religion in the eyes of the colonial state, a role it continues to enjoy (Bakker 1999). It also expressed a

deep diasporic commitment to India as the sole sacred place, the cosmic centrality of which was only available in Suriname via pandit ritual mediation.

And yet many Surinamese Hindus remained existentially uncomfortable with this denial of power to the Surinamese land. In incongruously juxtaposing “purified” Brahminical authority with mutually negating state and spirit sovereignties, the success of Brahminical Hinduism’s conversion into an encompassing world religion also encouraged diasporic Hindu aporia. If Hindus cannot unequivocally lay claim to their ritual right to belong to the Surinamese land, how are they to guarantee Hindu flourishing in the face of an agentive landscape formed by indigenous histories stubbornly beyond Brahminical encompassment? While actively espousing the rhetoric of a universalist Hinduism, Surinamese and Guyanese Hindus continue to practice apotropaic rituals that seek to affirm their right to belong on the land through sustained ritual relations with it. These rituals threaten to confound the ‘respectable’ (*netjes*) institutional Hinduism that emphasizes private belief in Indian gods foreign to Suriname *and* the state’s claims to sole control over a fully secularized national territory. Through these “unorthodox” rituals, Hindu households sought affirmation from the land itself of their right to live on it.

### **Hindu Rituals to the Sentient Land**

Hindu rituals to the sentient land comprise collective performances of the variegated doubts Hindus have about their belonging to and future in Suriname. According to the members of the Hindu extended family I worked with between 2007 and 2013, the typical ritual for propitiating the land was a yearly sacrifice (*puja*) to an autochthonous Amerindian spirit (*ingi winti/bhut*). Anecdotal evidence suggests that

these rituals are common among Surinamese Hindus, particularly those residing outside the city. Similar rituals are attested throughout India and among the first Surinamese Hindu settlers, who performed ritual sacrifices to Dih Baba—a village or territory’s tutelary deity (De Klerk 1951: 87). Contemporary Surinamese versions of these rituals mirror Hindu Guyanese practices of propitiating a property’s “land” and “boundary masters.” These are often thought of as “Dutchman”, at once the ghosts of dead Dutch plantation owners from the period when Guyana was a Dutch colony (Williams 1990), and identified with Surinamese Maroons. The ubiquity of these practices demonstrates a mutual sensibility inherited from the Northern Indian past shared by most Indo-Surinamese and Guyanese, and the many continuing interchanges that tie the communities together at present (Williams 1990, see also McNeil 2011 and Vertovec 1992 for Trinidad).

Despite this ubiquity, Hindus are deeply reticent about rituals to the spirits of the land. Even when the Hindus I knew did disclose details, these ritual practices remained wreathed in apprehension and uncertainty. In the family where I observed such offerings, the two youngest male members were visibly uncomfortable with my documenting it. Although they assisted their eldest uncle Sieww (the family’s perceived head with whose household I lived) with the sacrifice, they would tell me no more about the rite than that it placated a ‘bad’ (*kharaab*) spirit and should not be spoken of.<sup>159</sup> Their fear mixed unease about the spirit’s power over them with more general anxieties over the appropriateness of its appeasement. Notwithstanding their vociferous condemnations, the same young men insisted on the necessity of the ritual, which the family performed as quickly and

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<sup>159</sup> Such disclaimers are typical of Surinamese Hindu ideas of masculinity as personifying shrewd control and cautious incredulity.



quietly as possible. In this they echoed Sieuw, the ritual's organizer. He avowed that the ceremony must be done for the benefit of the 'whole family' (*sab palwar*)—his household and those of his three siblings' who shared the spirit's territory—and indicated his nephew's recent motorbike accident as superlative verification of the need for continued ritual vigilance.

Family members said they only knew two things about the land's spirit: his name, and that all the Hindu households on this tract of land (about 3 hectares along a single lane paved road) make him offerings. When I asked Sieuw about how his family came to perform the ritual, he told me his father had bought the current property from another Hindu farmer who had been granted it by the Dutch colonial state. Since their livelihood depended on planting and selling rice and vegetables, his father had wanted to set up his own household on a road with better access to the markets in Paramaribo. Upon settling on their newly acquired parcel, the family found that nothing would grow. The neighbors instructed them to sacrifice to the spirit owner—a practice they apparently had previously performed on their other land for a different spirit. Sure enough, after making the offering the soil became fertile and they supported themselves by what their labor produced from the land. Sieuw said that everybody in the area made such offerings, some at the end of the year, some at the beginning, whether or not they continued to farm.

Sieuw's family's sacrifice took place on New Year's Day. Even though the extended family was riven by acrimony between the siblings' spouses, almost everyone helped contribute to the offerings. In the morning, the women of the extended family's constituent households gathered two live roosters, candy, liquor, sodas, cigarettes, candles, dried fish, and cheese sandwiches. They poured the drinks into their best glasses,

and placed them on trays heaped high with the assembled offerings. The men and I took the offerings to the base of a gnarled tree in an inconspicuous, overgrown corner of the property separated from the family's houses by a patch of fallow pasture. The women



Figure 4 Sacrifice to the "Three Finger Indian"

followed but did not actively participate, preferring to watch from a respectful distance. At the base of the tree, we laid banana leaves and lit candles and cigarettes. Sieuw and his brother then severed the roosters' heads, lined them up on the leaves, and poured libations of astringent Surinamese rum through their still working beaks. Making sure everything fit, they covered the offerings over with more banana leaves, washing away the blood with small glasses of cola.

When the ritual was performed, it was done swiftly and in near silence. Talk was limited to Sieuw's whispered instructions about how to place the offerings. No talk or prayers of any kind were addressed to the spirit. After the sacrifice was laid out, Sieuw's younger brother's son tied five strings of firecrackers to three posts that remained from a rotted fence. He hurriedly ignited them and, pursued by the staccato clatter of the exploding firecrackers, we walked quickly back to our respective homes. Throughout the ritual Sieuw and the other sacrificers wore quietly self-censorious expressions of hard work grudgingly done. These they maintained until, safely at home, they melted back into their daily routines.

The family could not abjure its ritual obligations to their land's spirit, nor publicly acknowledge its practice. Other than hurried, dispensing ritual action and its attempted drowning out in startling but catharsisless fireworks, nothing could be said to resolve their doubts. Confronted by the negative consequences of either suffering the land's wrath or jeopardizing their own respectability and the efficacy of Brahminical encompassment, the family was forced to remain mute.

### **Doubt, Spirits, and the Limits of the State**

The doubts' expressed by Sieuw's family and my earlier overview of similar Ndyuka concepts expose a problem with anthropological treatments of sovereignty. As Singh (2012) has noted, recent attention to sovereignty has been through Agamben's post-Foucauldian adoption of "political theology." Reliant on the juridical fiction of complete control and taking European history for granted, Agamben's (1998) approach draws from the work of Carl Schmitt to collapse the power of the totalitarian state and the Christian deity into the sovereign's absolute ability to define 'states of exception.'

Despite their importance, Agamben inflected theories map only imperfectly on to the “unsettled sovereignty” (Hansen and Stepputat 2006: 305) and alternative conceptions of power so often encountered in post-colonial contexts (Singh 2012). In Suriname, a small, hyper-plural population and a vast rainforest territory have limited the state’s supremacy in frequently ambivalent ways. Recent independence, an unsettled history of ethnic competition, military rule, and parliamentary democracy, all continue to fan a multitude of doubts about the Surinamese state’s effective control over the nation’s thinly inhabited territory.

The indigenous spirits disobligingly propitiated in Surinamese Hindu ritual divulge the frequently awkward ways state and spirit sovereignty similarly arise from doubts about the effective limits of their encompassing control (see Mitchell 1991 on the state). With both spirits and the state, it is the unpredictable possibility of enforcement that disconcerts people. Like often-invisible property boundaries concealed in state files (Hull 2012), spirits exert their control by being always *potentially* involved in the everyday happenings of peoples’ lives. Though not usually explicitly invoked together, accident, illness, or family discord can all—but just as often do not—involve either spirits *or* the state. Measured against the scale of the Surinamese land and the sweep of the unpredictable in the events of the everyday, however, the post-colonial state inconsistently retreats into its own secular circumscription.<sup>160</sup>

Sieuw’s responses to my questions about the state were appropriately parallel to my inquiries about his property’s spirit: “If I don’t bother them, they don’t bother me”—a sentiment similarly shared by many of the Ndyuka with whom I spoke. To both forces,

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<sup>160</sup> Frequent rumors about politicians’ patronage of occult ritual specialists attest to the pronounced sense that the state is not sufficiently potent enough on its own, and that real control is to be found elsewhere.

Sieuw and other Surinamese only owed wary recognition of the possibility that either could choose to exert their control. Nevertheless, with their invisible power and compelling rights to the land, spirits do not so much contest the Surinamese state as expose the attenuations of its influence. The state may deed land, but it cannot guarantee settler safety from spirits or the colonial history to which they attest.

### **Spirits, Landholding, and the Impasse of Universal Hinduism**

Sieuw's family called the land's tutelary spirit "Three Finger Amerindian" (*Dri Finga Ingi*) in Sranan. Perhaps the smallest and most impoverished of Suriname's ethnic groupings, Amerindians would appear a poor choice as arbiters of power over the land, but one that is almost certainly connected to their having antedated Afro-Surinamese presence. Despite their social marginality, as spirits, literally repressed Amerindians perpetually threaten Hindu Surinamese currently inhabiting the land with their shadow sovereignty over the soil. Hindu sacrifices propitiating legally banished Amerindian spirits disclose the extent of Hindu uncertainty about state sovereignty and Brahminical authority. While neither is rejected, real doubt remains about either's claims to final and effective mastery of a sovereign land aware of its own separate history. The Sranan name jointly attests to the spirit's ethnic difference and moral ambiguity, impressing a vivid sense that the offerings to him are disconcertingly outside orthodox Hindu rituals and households.<sup>161</sup>

Amerindian spirits exist among a miscellany of other 'shadows' (*chaahin*) associated with the land and its previous inhabitants that mark human lives. Some Surinamese Hindus tell of possessing serpent spirits (*nag*) who cause those who settle on

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<sup>161</sup> The name also testifies to the probable derivation of elements of the ritual's logic from Afro-Surinamese sources.

their land to writhe on the ground. There are also diverse “nature” spirits (*winti*), ghosts (*bhut-pret*), and demons (*bakru*)—whom Hindus describe as little hairy black men abandoned by their Afro-Surinamese former owners on the land. My friend Dew owed an emergency visit to the hospital to such an afflicting demon; it entered him and made him violently ill after he failed to pour a libation while relaxing with his friends by a forest stream.

For Hindus, as for the Ndyuka, these spirits are the invisible owners of a place, enjoying precedence over materially restricted humans. Whether passing by or actively settling, humans are vulnerable to spirit ire, ardor, and even curiosity. While spirits can ramify into dramatic outbursts of full possession, ordinarily they manifest in humans as sickness and other misfortunes. Hindus do their best to keep spirits at bay through Brahminical rituals that erect metaphysical defenses around Hindu households and subordinate local spirits to Hindu gods.

Surinamese Hindu offerings to Amerindian spirits reveal the limits of these Brahminical formulas of ritual control. Lacking any generally acknowledged sites of concentrated sacredness like those that cover India, the household is thus the unquestioned center of Surinamese Hindu ritual life (Van der Burg and Van der Veer 1986). Surinamese Hindus regard houses and land as in some sense alive and in need of proper sacramental attention to sustain their auspicious (*subh, mangan*) receptiveness to their human inhabitants. Surinamese Brahminical ritual attempts to colonize the land by making the notionally ethnically endogamous household the core and aim of Hindu life. Each facet of establishing an “orthodox” Hindu home or farm is accordingly delineated by Brahminical ritual. Pandits position the home and the household in definite relation

with the space and destiny of Hindu astrology. The family's pandit supervises the building of a house (*ghar*) and the lives led by the household (Van der Burg and Van der Veer 1986). Pandits astrologically determine when a house's construction should start, how it should be oriented, and consecrate the site by sprinkling milk at the property's four corners. Upon moving into a new home, a family hosts a *griha pravesh jag*—a Vedic fire-sacrifice for the pandit's and the household's favored gods (*istadevata*). These rituals invoke the gods to protect the home and insure its auspiciousness—particularly through erecting the ritual flags (*jhandi*) found in Sanatani Hindu yards (*jagaha/prasi*). The pandit's well-compensated efforts reproduce a household as Hindu, maintaining it as a manifestation of the moral order embodied by the Hindu deities and a fulfillment of Hindu tradition.

In contrast to Brahminical rituals that perform cosmological and moral encompassment of human beings by transcendent Indic gods, sacrifices to autochthonous spirit owners stress the difference between the land and its Hindu residents. Even when residents are sure of their presence, pandits do not actively propitiate non-Hindu deities or spirits. This is especially so because such rituals are understood to involve blood sacrifices repugnant to pandits and the Puranic deities they worship. Rituals involving spirits are often otherwise dismissed as “bad” (*kharaab*) or “not modern” (*na modern*) (Van der Veer 1991; Bakker 1999)—something expressed in the sacrifice's location in the backyard. Along with alcohol, ‘life’ (*jiw*) sacrifice is seen as the antithesis of “pure” (*safa, shud*) religious practice, and strongly associated with malicious magic (*ojha/obiya*) (Khan 2004). This pattern is widely attested to throughout India (Fuller 1992; Parry 1994), but in Suriname such conceptions of purity take on specific ethnic coordinates, as

seen in the Amerindian identity of Sieuw's family's spirit.

The ethnic particularity of these spirits disbars them from the devotional (*bhakti*) ethos propounded by pandits, which sees genuinely encompassing transcendence as uniquely conferred by Hindu practice (Khan 2004). Pandits may prescribe ritual remedies for spirit affliction, but they will not formally address these spirits. This places autochthonous spirits troublingly outside of Brahminical orthopraxy, leaving their propitiation to the household. Such ritually negotiated land claims then, are derivative of successfully appeasing the place's essential difference. In performing them, Hindus acknowledge their uneasy dependence on land not fully theirs and forms of social difference not completely incorporable into the supposedly universal forms of Brahminical ritual and the ethnic exceptionalism it endorses.

Although government grants and pandit rituals theoretically give Hindus total legal and cosmological title to the land, sacrifices to indigenous spirits show Hindus' awareness of the tortured importance of their own foreignness. Separated from India's continuously impacting local and mythic histories (Van der Veer 1988), Hindu migrants struggled with the disconcertingly anonymous, racialized landscape left by Suriname and Guyana's two hundred year histories of indigenous displacement and African slavery. As Sieuw's account of the origin of his family's sacrifice shows, many Hindus are still sensitive to evidence of the land's alien sentience. From crop failure to misfortune and family strife, Hindus seek to appease the land's difference while retaining rights to its abundance. Much like many Ndyuka, by propitiating the land's autochthonous spirits with mass-produced food and drink, Hindus launder the wealth of the market economy to attempt to convert local spirits into safeguards for Hindu ethnic continuity. Precisely



because of the benefits of ritual relations with the land, they remain subject to aporia as the impossible secret of Hindu success.

Unlike most Ndyuka, it is unthinkable for Hindus to admit that their comparative economic success could be as dependent on indigenous spirits as on Hindu ethnic-religious difference. Ritually acknowledging the basic sovereignty of indigenous spirits comes perilously close to admitting that Hindu led development could be just another form of unjust extraction from the land's rightful owners. As with the state's claim to be the sole instrument of national prosperity, or Brahminical claims to their rituals' universal authority, the enduring power of indigenous Surinamese spirits expose cherished Hindu convictions of ethnic exceptionalism to painful doubt.

### **Shakti Puja and the Conundrums of Encompassment**

Shakti practitioners have been very successful in challenging these doubts and consolidating the ritual logics of encompassment. Shakti puja in Suriname and Guyana has assumed the role of dealing with local spirits kept on the margins by Brahminical Hinduism, continuing a process of assimilation that has long connected Suriname and Guyana (Moura and Pires 2015). Unlike pandits, who may only treat such afflictions with steadfast privacy, Shakti oracles confront these spirits openly, performing dramatic exorcisms of persons and property like houses and cars with practices that strongly parallel Afro-Surinamese rituals of purification like the one described in chapter 4.

Shakti rituals resolutely encompasses these diverse spirits by handling them as subordinate manifestations or agents of their own pantheon of Hindu deities. In this way, troubling local "Dutchman" or other "landmasters" become subordinates or incarnations of ambivalent mediating deities like Khal Bhairo whom Shakti ritualists themselves

manifest in pursuing their work. Shakti practitioners see their ritual ability to subsume this moral ambivalence as yet a further index of the encompassing power of their devotional practices, imbuing divine purpose to even the most troubling practices of black magic. By making all heterodox beings lesser emblems of the power of Sanskritic deities like Shiva and Kali shared with Brahminical ritual, Shakti ritualists absorb pervasive Hindu uncertainty into a potent demonstration of the Hindu universalism they struggle to share with orthodox Sanatan Dharm Hinduism. Once again, however, the success of encompassing one of the myriad sources of diasporic Hindus' existential precarity comes at the expense of respectability. No matter how grave their perceived threat, any attempt to openly confront spirits of the sentient land places those that do so beyond the bounds of legitimate religion, and colors Shakti practitioners with a disconcertingly racializing otherness.<sup>162</sup>

In such a situation Hindus find it better to keep quite and do the rituals that work with consistent anonymity. For Hindu Surinamese, as Aisha Khan (2004: 118) has argued for Indo-Trinidadians, “resisting superstitious thinking can symbolize empowerment”, it can also result in dread uncertainty about the degree to which Hindus can extricate themselves from both the power of unacknowledged spirits and others' scorn. In this way, though popular Hindu rituals for the sentient land perform some of the most ancient impulses of South Asian religion, they equally threaten to become evidence for the failure of Hindu assimilation to the respectable norms of public religion on which their claims to encompassing exceptionalism depend.

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<sup>162</sup> Ironically, this puts Sanatan Dharm Hindus in an analogous position to the indigenous spirits to whom they sacrifice. Even though Hindus insist they have made the greatest contribution to developing the land, the terms of the state sanctioned pluralism on which their political and property claims depend means that Hindu conceptions of supremacy could never be acknowledged (See Williams 1991 for similar issue in Guyana).

## **Conclusion: Ethnic Religion and the Aporia of State Pluralism**

Hindu rituals to the sentient land highlight the aporia that emerges from Surinamese Hinduism's transformation into a universalist ethnic religion that is at once a purified, eternal, and transcendently encompassing tradition *and* the people who perform its fragile practices at a specific time and place. Such non-Brahminical rites divulge the insufficiency of respectable Hindu ritual or state sovereignty to exclusively sustain Sanatan Dharm Hindus in Surinamese society on Surinamese land. In the face of this impasse, these Hindus must refuse to speak about or actively castigate rituals they perceive as threatening Hindu respectability or exposing of Hindu dependency. This is the only way Hindus can retain their identity as members of an encompassing universal religion of 'belief' (*biswaas*), even as their practices reveal un-extinguished Indigenous or Afro-Surinamese sovereignty over the land. At the ritual I attended, the family's anxiety over the decency of the ritual was complemented by a keen sense of its efficacy. Their collective action reasserted the family's "jointness" (Lalmohamed 1992) as a productive 'unity' (*ekta*) in the face of the spirit's menacing ethnic difference to show Hindu ability to manage the land's threatening wildness as a resource for Hindu flourishing.

In this sense, these rituals are an attempt to assuage Surinamese ethnic and religious pluralism as much as a means of acknowledging the land's capricious sovereignty or the failure of Brahminical ritual to adequately encompass it. It is the Hindu household's foundational otherness from the land that paradoxically threatens and enables its endurance. Unlike the Ndyuka for whom belonging means being in a debt of coalition with the land, a Hindu family can only belong to the land as a result of their

essential difference from it. Hindus must continually reenact their difference in the public rites of pandit priests, and through state sanctioned agricultural transformation of the land into the economic productivity that pays for the reproduction of Hindu ethnic distinction. In rituals to native spirits, the land is to be bought off with the wealth it has nurtured and consumer goods it has enabled its residents to buy. The threefold cyclical conversion of the land into family wealth, and family wealth into belonging, thus reiterates Hindu claims that it is Hindu ethnic superiority that enables their industrious dominance over Surinamese agriculture.

Any certainty about this, however, is belied by the vigorous Hindu censorship and denunciations of the morality of these ritual practices. Such equivocation shows that even as Hindus seek to come to ritual terms with their dependence on an intractably foreign land, they recognize that such practices make them just like their allegedly “primitive” neighbors in the eyes of secularist state ideology and the pandits who strive to conform to it. The very rituals the Surinamese Hindus I know use to ensure their belonging on the land permit others to contest Hindu ethnic distinction and territorial rights. Such condemnations of Hindu ‘idolatry’ (*afgoderij*) were at the heart of the initial hostility between the Dutch emulating Christian Creole elite and Hindu newcomers and remain a potent source of anti-Hindu sentiment. Against the background of a post-colonial pluralism still defined by the norms of Dutch middle class culture, Hindus continue to perceive how vulnerable their ethnic exceptionalism is to the contradictions of state sanctioned pluralism. Even as Indo-Surinamese Hindu families converse with their children almost exclusively in Dutch to preserve Hindu advantage, they feel the continued need for annual sacrifices to protect them from the menacing spirits of their

own property. In the end, the Hindus I worked with were unable to reconcile their imagined ethnic advantage with existential insecurity about their ritual and political encompassment of the land. Though Hindus are favored poster children of Surinamese pluralism, in neither the realm of secular achievement nor popular ritual can they let down their guard.

Their diasporic situation demands Surinamese Hindus look beyond their immediate conditions to encompassing universal principles that always inadvertently point back to the inconsistency of their claims to both ethnic distinction and legitimate belonging. Hindu awareness of their own cultural fragility in a pluralist society premised on liberal values of secularized property and de-territorialized religion ill agrees with rituals that recognize indigenous spirits' control over Hindu flourishing. The resulting aporia divulges how Surinamese Hindu difference is importantly premised on a presently unresolvable relation to Surinamese territory.

Ironically, however, whether or not recognized by the state, it is precisely this sense of belonging that Ndyuka and other maroons are widely recognized to enjoy by other ethnic groups, but which so many Maroons presently strive to escape. Though with deep roots in Afro-Surinamese practices, recent attempts by many Ndyuka to live beyond tradition, testify to the same dynamics that define Hindu impasses before indigenous spirits. Bound to them by suffering, Ndyuka have similarly become newly reticent about spirits. Beset by doubts about their security on the Surinamese land, Hindus and Ndyukas alike persist in the impossible task of acknowledging both spirits and the state, neither of which can give them what they really crave—a final feeling of uncontested belonging.

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