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# Hinduism in Singapore: Ethno-nationalization in Process

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### 1. Introduction

Based on my field research in Singapore, I would like to discuss the changing nature of Hinduism. In Singapore we find Hindus in a multi-ethnic society in which the majority population is Chinese. Hindus form the third largest group after the Malay-speaking Muslims. Singapore, urbanized and exposed to the global economy for many years, provides an interesting example of what can happen to Hinduism when it travels.

How do scholars make sense of the Hindu religion as a social phenomenon? Usually the following types of observation are made. Compared with Christianity and Islam or Buddhism, people often characterize Hinduism as a ritualistic religion. There is no Hindu Jesus, Mohammed or Siddharta Gautama: it is a religion without a founding figure. Similarly, sacred scriptures do not have the same force to Hindus as the Bible or Quran do to true believers. The Vedas are considered as the most sacred texts, but they are not used as a guide for

conduct in present-day India.

People receive the core knowledge of Hinduism through rituals, gradually coming to their own understanding of its ideas and symbolic meanings. Trying to catch the bubble of Hinduism many scholars seem content to sum it up by saying that rather than being based on orthodoxy it is a religion of orthopraxy (Harper 1964). Although, over the millennia, it has developed a body of philosophical interpretation, this has rarely spread beyond the subcontinent. Hindus tend to say that this is because people do not become Hindu, but are born Hindu. In that sense, like Judaism, rather than a proselytizing world religion, Hinduism is frequently characterized as the religion of an ethnic group. Rather than missionary activity, the spread of Hinduism depends on the migration of social groups.

While thinking about the phenomena that I observed in Singapore, I wondered if the time had come to reconsider this somewhat consensual characterization of Hinduism in the context of globalization and the social changes wrought in Singapore. First of all, when Hinduism is transplanted to become a minority religion in a colonial setting or host country, there has been a tendency for it to be codified and transformed into a set of non-practical knowledge that lacks social function. It becomes de-contextualized. This is, indeed, one of the features of the so-called Neo-Hinduism that appeared in India from the nineteenth and early twentieth century as a defense against cultural criticism, which held that Hinduism was primitive and magical. Furthermore, rituals that have disturbed those in power have become objects for "reform." The colonial government targeted such practices, and the Hindu elite acceded to their suppression. This happened both in India (Tanaka 1999) and overseas in Malaysia and Singapore (Nair 1972). Textualization<sup>1</sup> and the alteration of rituals were the main Hindu response to encounters with non-Hindu hegemonic regimes.

The tide, however, has turned. First of all, rituals that were criticized in the past have become for Hindu minorities effective symbols that now attract many people, both Hindu and non-Hindu. Secondly, the development of visual and virtual technology means that images of the rituals can be positively and effectively presented. Spectacular festivals are more effective in attracting numbers of people than profound philosophy. Such developments, however, do not necessarily deny the past efforts to textualize. These days, text and image can be integrated to put across a powerful message in identity politics.

I will begin by commenting on the present situation of the Indian community in Singapore. After describing the general features of local Hinduism, I will analyze a votive kavadi ritual performed at the Tai Pusam festival and propose that the perception of kavadi has changed.

## **2. Hindu Society in Singapore: Syncretism, Religious Knowledge and Reform<sup>2</sup>**

The earliest Indian migrants came to British Malaya in the nineteenth century. Most migrated to work on sugarcane and rubber plantations under the British Imperial regime. Four out of five of these early migrants from India were Hindu. They belonged to the lower castes including Untouchables, and were mostly from South India. By contrast, people from higher castes, especially Brahmans, were conspicuously absent. Indians, which in Singapore officially means people from anywhere in South Asia, account for less than 7%, or about 200,000, of the current population of Singapore.<sup>3</sup> Tamil-speaking Indians from South India formed 62% of the Indian population in 1980. Many of these have improved their standard of living and recent immigrants from India in the 1980s have come to occupy the lowest strata of the Indian community.

There are two government bodies that deal with Hindu religious affairs: the Hindu Endowments Board and the Hindu Advisory Board. Following the complaints about the mismanagement of religious institutions, the Hindu Endowments Board was set up in 1905 as the Mohammedan and Hindu Charitable Endowments Board. In 1969, it was split into Hindu and Muslim boards, the *Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura* being the Muslim offspring. Board members are appointed by the Ministry for Community Development and hold office for a term of three years. It is charged with the management of four temples. In 1915 the Hindu Advisory Board was set up to advise the colonial government on Hinduism. Both organizations are concerned with the promotion and protection of Hinduism in Singapore.

For the majority of the Hindus living in Singapore, the temple plays a significant role in religious and secular activities.<sup>4</sup> There are about thirty temples in Singapore. Although each temple is devoted to a particular deity, it usually also houses various other gods and goddesses in its precincts. Each temple is the center of four or five major festivals and employs several priests, either from

India or, in the far less wealthy temples, from the local community. Interesting locally is the cohabitation of Vaishnava and Shaiva deities in one temple. In India, where it is rare to see these deities worshipped in a single temple, the devotees of Vishnu and Shiva tend to worship as distinctive sects. The Shiva Krishna Temple is a case of this local peculiarity, although, according to one of the management committee staff, it is textually sanctioned. It is by no means unusual to see non-Hindu images, such as manifestations of the Buddha, in Hindu temple compounds in Singapore (e.g. Murugan Hill Temple). Furthermore, it is not uncommon to see Chinese people paying their respects to Hindu deities in a temple. Perhaps the converse is true of Hindus, too. The syncretistic qualities of local Hinduism are emphasized as a positive sign of religious harmony and national unity in Singapore, and are often highlighted by the mass media.

Some Hindus, however, feel threatened by this syncretism (cf. Sinha 1987: 172-173). Generally speaking, given the way of life in modern Singapore, it is practically impossible to spend the necessary time for the complex rituals and religious observances, so essential for Hindu religious life. Furthermore, conversion to Christianity, especially on marriage, is a common cause for concern. One opinion, widely voiced, is that Indian youths are losing their tradition. On the other hand, in a multi-cultural setting, people are made increasingly aware of their particular ethnic and religious background.

Numerous social and religious organizations run educational programs to transmit Hinduism to the young. One of these, the Hindu Centre, which was set up in 1978, very actively organizes numerous seminars and workshops. Unaffiliated with any sect or linguistic group and using mainly English, it is regarded as an overarching organization. According to Mani, it is oriented towards Sanskrit and Vedic Hinduism and is reluctant to promote Hinduism using the Tamil language as the medium of communication (Mani 1993: 800). The approach of the Centre can be divined from the following extract from the house journal, *Omkara* (vol. 1):

“Many of the rituals and customs have significance and meaning. But only a minority practice these rituals and customs in full awareness and understanding. To many performance of rituals is a habitual exercise. To the elder, such blind belief (reinforced by personal experience) may promote and sustain Bhakthi (tr. faith). But the younger generation, with keen, inquiring minds living in an Age of

Scientific Inquiry and swarmed by the wealth of knowledge is not prepared to blindly adhere to such precepts. Applying logical analysis and upholding the supremacy of reason, the young mind is baffled and confounded by the complex concepts of Hindu Philosophy. Such young minds need to be given convincing explanations. The younger generation has to be taught the precepts of practice in a comprehensive manner. It was to preserve the spiritual and cultural values of Hinduism—the oldest of prevailing religions of the world, that the Hindu Centre was established in 1978” (Hindu Centre 1982:33)

Here the answer to the problem of communicating the essence of Hinduism is to teach it using simple English words, not through rituals or original sacred texts.<sup>5</sup> In 1982 the government introduced a subject called Religious Knowledge as a compulsory subject to be taught to all upper secondary students. At first, the curriculum included Bible Knowledge (English and Chinese), Buddhist Studies (English and Chinese), Islamic Religious Knowledge (Malaya), and Hindu Studies (English). In addition World Religion was added. In 1983 Confucian Ethics, and, in 1984, Sikh Studies were also introduced.

The Hindu Centre was involved in producing the textbook for Hindu Studies. Subsequently, in 1983, the Curriculum Development Office published two Hindu Studies textbooks, Hindu Reader Books 1 and 2, together with several workbooks. The nine chapters are titled: The Basic of Hinduism; Life and Religion; Hindu Contribution to World Culture; The Ramayana; The Mahabharata; The Hindu Philosophy; Deities, Shrines and Worship; Rituals, Ceremonies, and Festivals; and Legends from Mythology. The author was Manoj Das, who was also active as a Hindu English teacher and writer at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education at Pondicherry, South India. The secondary school course remained compulsory until 1988.

These tendencies of textualization can be considered evidence of a current of reform within Hinduism. In a narrow sense, however, the reform movement started in the 1930s, influenced by the Dravidian Movement that originally got underway in South India to resist Brahman domination<sup>6</sup>: the Brahmans were held to be immigrants from the north. With the purpose of promoting the welfare of Tamils and social equity among the various castes, raising the status of women, and encouraging thrift and temperance among Tamils, in 1932 the Tamils Reform Association was formed in Singapore.<sup>7</sup> Although Brahmans were not dominant in British Malaya and Singapore, the Brahmanical rituals in a marriage

ceremony became a target of reform, and were consequently simplified.

Furthermore, there was an effort to eradicate some of the violent and superstitious aspects of Hindu rituals: specifically targeted were firewalking, kavadi with skewers (*alagu kavadi*), and animal sacrifice. In 1937 the Association wrote a letter requesting the colonial government to ban *alagu kavadi*, which can currently be observed at the Tai Pusam festival. "As the practice of loathsome self-mortification with skewers is prevailing in this country and in an increasing rate in recent years among the labour classes and as there is a mass rational opinion against this ill practice, which has neither religious nor moral sanction, the Hindu Advisory Board should be requested to consider deeply and to recommend to the Government of the Straits Settlements for the abolition of this ill-practice in the same lines as that of the Government of Madras" (1940 a letter to the Hindu Advisory Board quoted from Nair 1972:33).

This appeal, however, was not successful. Neither was a similar request made in 1950. Prevailing sentiment led to the temporary ban of *alagu kavadi* in two prominent temples, which was lifted owing to leverage from wealthy Hindus. The appeal to officially ban animal sacrifice was favorably received in 1948.<sup>8</sup>

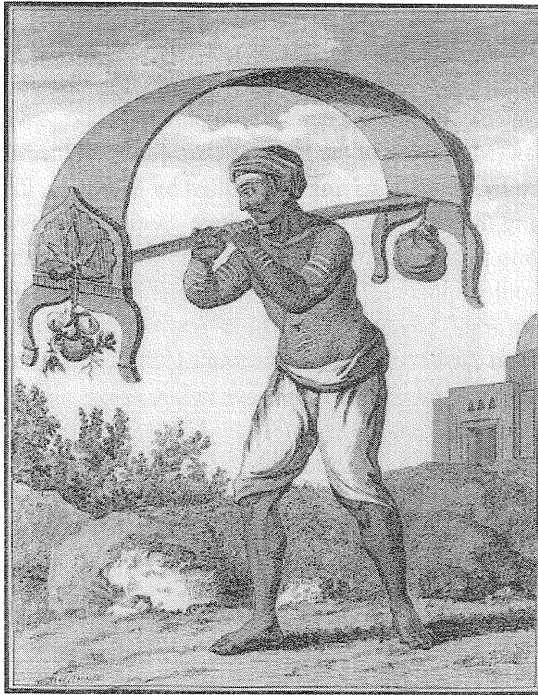
### 3. Votive Rituals and Symbolism of *kavadi* <sup>9</sup>

When Hindus suffer sickness or other troubles, they may supplicate for the help of a particular deity, vowing to perform a ritual service if the request is granted. After recovery, a votive ritual in thanksgiving is performed. When children suffer, their parents will make a vow on their behalf.

Votive rituals should be performed as promised when the vow was made. Although small-scale rites are conducted on Tuesdays and Fridays, both of which are sacred to the Hindus, the greatest number of votive rituals are performed during the festivals. Vows to a deity may range from making an offering of fruits to the construction of a temple.

Votive rituals are full of sacrificial symbolism. Consider these examples. 1) A man rolls around the temple, fully out-stretched, holding a coconut and sprigs of margosa leaves over his head. After he has completed a circuit of the temple, he smashes the coconut on a round stone in front of the temple. The rolling is interpreted to be equivalent to *diksa* (liminal period of sacrifice); the

coconut serves as a proxy for the sacrifice of the man himself. 2) A female votary touches her head to the ground in prostration, stands up, and steps forward a few steps and again prostrates herself. She repeats this until she has completed a full circuit, whereupon she smashes a coconut at the conclusion of the ritual action. One of the most common votive rituals in Tamil culture is kavadi, or dancing (adu) with a pole (kavu). The kavadi is a three-foot long pole, topped by an arch, and decorated with peacock feathers, limes, and streamers of papers (Plate 1).



**Plate 1.** Basic form of kavadi (Sonnerat 1782)

Two pots containing milk are tied to the pole. For alagu kavadi, the structure is made of four or more arched metal frames and many small skewers stick into the flesh of the kavadi bearer. After bathing in the early morning the votaries gather at a local temple, where, with assistance from family members, they decorate the kavadi and pray. Some of the votaries carry their kavadi and begin trembling as they achieve trance. After this, they go out and proceed on foot to another temple, where they offer milk and receive sacred ash from a priest, after which they collapse.

The kavadi is primarily a votive rite for Murugan, as explained in the following myth from the Palani Murugan temple.

“Agastya (a sage, who went to Mt. Kailas to worship Shiva) was given two hills, Shivagiri and Shaktigiri, as sites of worship, with permission to take them south. One day he met the demon Itumpan, who had survived the slaughter, by Murukan (Murugan), of the hosts of Cur. Since all the other demons had reached heaven by virtue of having been killed by Murukan, Itumpan spent his time performing their sraddha (funeral) rites. Seeing he was of good nature, Agastya sent him to bring the hills. When Itumpan arrived at the hills, a kavadi (the shoulder pole) appeared, and the eight serpents which support the world took the form of ropes so he could tie the hills to support. In this way he lifted the mountains and carried them southwards until he reached Avinankuti (Palani). Suddenly he felt faint; he put the hills down and rested, but when he tried to lift them again he could not move them. Puzzled and sorrowful, he climbed one of the hills, and there he noticed a child under a kura tree. ‘Go away’, he said to the child, and added that he was a murderous demon. ‘This is my home’, said the child; ‘pick it up if you can!’ ‘You may be small in size, but you tell big lies’, cried Itumpan as he leapt at the boy. But the child was Murukan, playing his games, he killed Itumpan at a stroke. When Itumpan’s wife Itumpi heard of her husband’s death, she prayed to Murukan, who revived him. Agastya came to worship Murukan at the spot, and he ordered the demon to serve Murukan there for his salvation” (Shulman 1980:48-49).

According to Clothey, the story goes on as to relate that Itumpan was restored to life and served Murugan. Itumpan asked permission to evermore attend at the god’s portal and petitioned his master to especially bless those who come to fulfill vows bearing a kavadi. Both requests were granted (Clothey 1978:119).



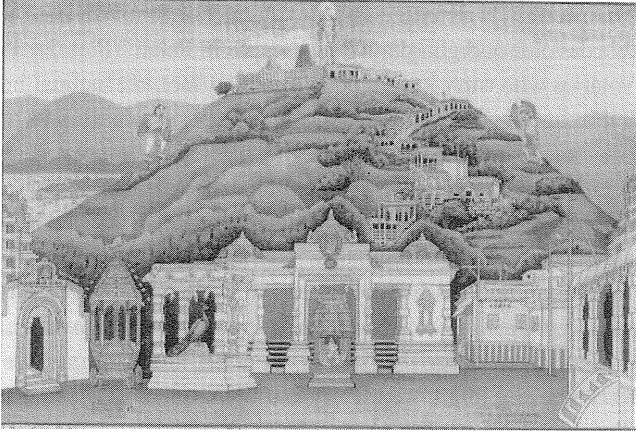


Plate 2. Palani Hill Murugan Temple

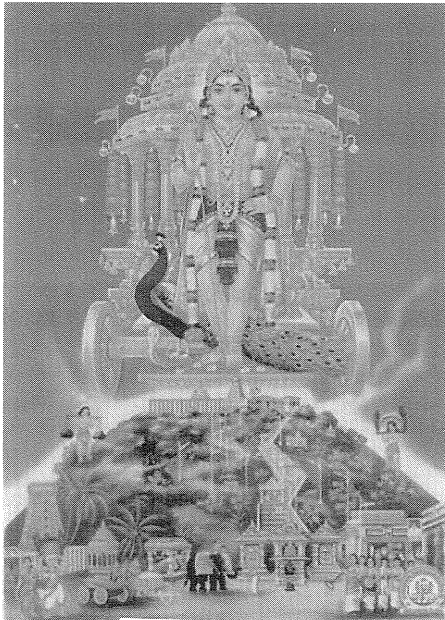


Plate 3. Murugan

This demon was killed by Murugan, but later revived and became Murugan's devotee and guardian at his temple in Palani (Plate2&3).

Votaries who carry kavadi poles are, therefore, reenacting the experience of the demonic devotee, Itumpan: through symbolic death and by becoming humble devotees, votaries shed their evil aspect.

A kavadi is typically decorated with peacock feathers, the peacock being Murugan's vehicle. Its connection with Murugan is described in a myth from the Tiruccentur Murugan temple.

"Murukan and his hosts are said to have come here (Tiruccentur in Tamilnadu) in pursuit of Surapadma (an immortal demon), by then deprived of much of his army. Seeing the battle go against him, Surapadma entered the ocean where he became a vast, fiery red mango tree spreading expansively underwater. With his vel (lance) Murukan split the tree which therewith turned into a peacock and a cock" (Clothey 1978:121-122).



**Plate 4.** Murugan with his mount, a peacock

“Murukan tamed them both by his benevolence. He then mounted the peacock and rode on it around the world. The god adopted the cock as the emblem of his banner”(ibid.: 83) (Plate 4).

Thus, when a votary carries a kavadi decorated with peacock feathers, he symbolically becomes a peacock, Murugan's vehicle. The votary again enacts a process of transformation: the demon becomes a humble devotee of Murugan. A small, lance-shaped skewer (vel) is sometimes pierced through the votary's flesh, harking back to Murugan's demonic enemies who were killed by his mighty lance (vel).

In the transformations of both Itumpan and Surapadma the symbolism of sacrifice is evident. The sacrificial victim is described as the deity's vehicle or mount. Becoming a vehicle is a typical expression of submission to a deity. Trance, sacrifice, and becoming a vehicle or a guardian for the deity, all involve the transformation through total surrender of self to a divine being.

To sum up, the practice of kavadi exhibits both this-worldly and transcendental dimensions. Motivations for kavadi tend to be this-worldly and directed at self-maximizing gains, but the underlying ideas and symbolism are more profound and concerned with the self-negation and other-worldly salvation. It is not difficult to recognize bhakti or personal devotion in ecstatic kavadi performance. This underlying complexity may explain why kavadi is popular and appealing to contemporary Singaporeans.

#### **4. Tai Pusam: Regulations and Change**

In Singapore, the Indian community celebrates three important festivals. The first, Deepavali, or the Festival of Lights, in November, is a public holiday.<sup>10</sup> It is essentially a domestic ritual, with a stronger hold on North than South India. The other two are of South Indian origin and observed in temples: Tai Pusam is associated with Lord Murugan and the Firewalking Festival is dedicated to Draupadi, the heroine of the Mahabharata.

Murugan was the second son of Shiva, and the younger brother of Ganesha, the elephant-headed god. Tai Pusam falls on the day of the full moon day in Pusam during the month of Tai (January-February), usually in late January. Many devotees carry kavadi from the Srinivasa Perumal (Vishnu) Temple in Serangoon Road (better known as Little India) to the Thendayuthapani

(Murugan) Temple in Tank Road.

The Firewalking Festival is observed in the first-established goddess temple in Singapore, the Mariyamman Temple in China Town. It occurs as the climax of a four-month long recitation and performance of the Indian Epic of the Mahabharata. Draupadi is not the main deity but is enshrined inside the temple. The Thendayuthapani Temple is one of the few temples managed by a caste-base community. It was built on Tank Road in 1859 officially by Chettiars, a merchant caste from South India who were very influential as moneylenders in British Malaya and elsewhere.

Considered to be the main festival of the Hindu community in Singapore, the Tai Pusam festival attracts much attention.<sup>11</sup> On the eve of the festival, a silver chariot is taken to the Mariyamman Temple and then to another Chettiar-managed temple, Sithi Vinayagar Temple on Keong Saik Road. Some Chettiars, without skewering, carry wooden kavadi to accompany the chariot. Such participation is restricted to Chettiars. On the arrival at Thendayuthapani Temple, according to one description, "a dramatic scene takes place. The kavadi bearers form a circle and begin a rhythmic dance while one or two of the supporting Chettiars recite songs and verses" (Evers and Pavadarayan 1993: 858). A large number of people gather at Srinivasa Perumal Temple, 4 km away from the Tank Road Murugan Temple, where they prepare kavadi and other offerings.

Early in the morning of Pusam, devotees head off from there bound for Thendayuthapani Temple. They perform three types of votive ritual action; bearing of a milk pot, which is carried on the head; bearing, without skewering, of wooden kavadi, carried on the shoulder; and, restricted to men, the bearing of alagu kavadi, which weigh over 45kg<sup>12</sup> (Plate5).

The total number of the votaries has been increasing year by year, whereas those who carry alagu kavadi have remained fairly constant at around 650.<sup>13</sup> The votaries are accompanied by their family members and friends. On the arrival at Thendayuthapani Temple, they offer milk to Murugan for consecration.

To regulate the procession, from 1973 the Hindu Endowments Board prohibited music and dancing in the street. Inside the temple precincts only traditional musical instruments can be played. In 1978 the first explicit criticism of Tai Pusam appeared in the Straits Times (10 Feb 1978). It asks the following

question at the outset; is Tai Pusam becoming a comic or fun lovers' opera or is it losing its solemnity and sobriety? Then, it quotes some remarks by Hindus, "Thaipusam (sic) was becoming more of a carnival" or "Wearing multi-coloured fancy dresses, they (young people) danced through the streets with funny gestures and acted in a way I must call obscene." It concludes, "most of these youths who misbehaved did not come to support any particular kavadi carrier, but "outsiders" who wanted some fun." Similar opinions were repeated in the article covering Tai Pusam the following year (5 Feb 1979).

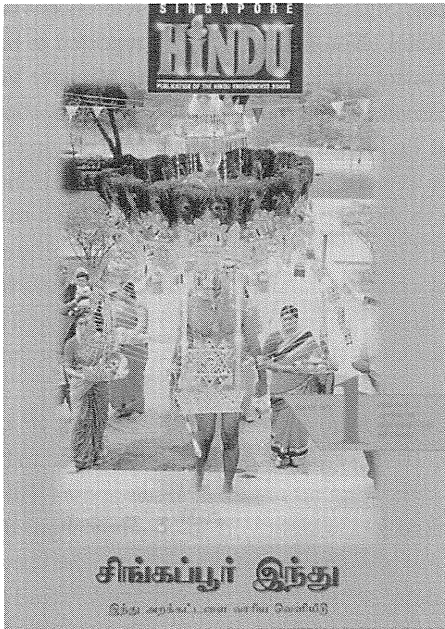


Plate 5. Skewed kavadi (from the Front Page of Singapore Hindu)

Even in 1990, Singapore Hindu, a quarterly journal published by the Hindu Endowments Board, was still complaining: "Incidents of supporters playing musical instruments and dancing on the streets were less. Nevertheless some musical instruments were confiscated by the Police," or "Devotees still

keep forgetting that they are attending a religious function and therefore have to be attired appropriately” (vol.1 no.2, p.13). A similar criticism appeared again in the Straits Times in 1991 (4 Feb). Only in 1992 was the festival described as orderly, quoting one Hindu’s remark “In the past, many people were shouting and playing around, and they made it difficult to concentrate. They were just not respectful. Now the situation is much better” (21 Jan 1992).

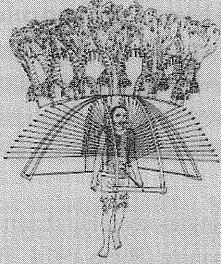
Newspaper articles on Tai Pusam generally show that Tai Pusam or kavadi is considered to be a Hindu rather than a Tamil festival. From the names of kavadi bearers we can find evidence that people of North Indian origin also participate in Tai Pusam. Significantly, no explicit reference is made to the prominent position of Chettiars. Non-Hindus are also reported to have carried alagu kavadi and such prominent public figures as Prime Minister Mr. Lee Kuan Yew have attended the Festival. This type of participation has contributed to forming a general idea that Tai Pusam is significant at both national and ethnic levels. Reports in the media do not mention any divisions in the Indian community. According to Sinha, in the mid-1980s, Tai Pusam started to “appeal to those clusters of Hindus to whom it traditionally was not significant. For example Brahmins (sic), Malayalis, North Indians and also individuals from literate backgrounds and other religions such as Sikhism and Islam, as well as members from other ethnic categories such as Chinese, in increasing numbers, participate in the festival” (Sinha 1987:143-144).<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, there is no criticism of the practice of kavadi, disdain is rather expressed towards those young people who are said to be carnivalizing a solemn festival into something more like a comic opera. This criticism of the young is directly linked to a widely voiced concern about the attenuation of Hindu traditions, especially among young people. The prevailing sentiment seems to be that if young people could properly understand the religious significance of Tai Pusam, they would stop mocking it with their foolishness. Thus the formerly negative perceptions of alagu kavadi have been superseded by criticism of the young. As the main spectacle of Tai Pusam is kavadi, it has also become a symbol of the Hindu community and an icon for the multi-cultural nation-state. This kavadi is represented not as a gruesome ordeal but as an aesthetically impressive action. The skewers are neatly and symmetrically arranged on the back of a kavadi bearer. Aesthetic style moderates and draws attention completely away from any painful, thus “savage,” nature.

At the same time, Tai Pusam and kavadi have been textualized. First of all, a small booklet on the festival is officially prepared and issued on the day of the festival. At school, in the Hindu Studies Reader, the chapter on rituals, ceremonies, and festivals describes major festivals, but not Tai Pusam, but it is no surprise when a textbook covering the totality of a religion ignores local particulars. In the associated workbook, however, an exercise is devoted to the Tai Pusam festival in Singapore. On the page opening this section there is a picture of a devotee carrying alagu kavadi (Plate6).

In light of the past efforts to ban alagu kavadi, the presence of the picture in the workbook suggests a radical change in the perception of kavadi in Singapore: now it is felt appropriate to use it as an image picture in a school workbook.

**EXERCISE V**  
Give brief answers to the following questions.



1. Which festival is associated with this picture?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Name the deity usually associated with this festival.  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Why do we worship this deity?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. What do devotees carry from one temple to another during this festival?  
\_\_\_\_\_

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**Plate 6.** Kavadi in the textbook (Exercise V)  
(Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore 1986: 54)

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Comprising so many things, from a body of philosophical thought to rituals with rich, but sometimes disturbing, symbolism, Hinduism is notoriously difficult to define. Some Hindus have offered coherent accounts of their philosophical principles, but the symbolic import of many of its rituals remains intractable to convincing articulation.

Outside India, in the attempt to textualize Hinduism in textbooks and small explanatory publications, the diversity within Hinduism is downplayed or even effectively denied. While this textualization has been taking place, however, the spectacular performative aspects of Hindu devotion have also come to the fore. What could be conceived of as a case of ethno-nationalization has occurred in which actions such as kavadi and firewalking, are also expressions of ethnicity in a multicultural context.<sup>15</sup> Here the spectacular, but aesthetically acceptable aspects of the festival get sensational attention. This is how Hinduism is typically represented in the Singapore Hindu, and especially in tourist pamphlets. Philosophical Hinduism, expressed coherently in English, and popular eye-catching Hinduism seem to have converged in contemporary Singapore. In multi-cultural Singapore, actively open to globalization, orthopractic Hinduism tended first towards orthodoxy, then towards spectacle. Things have spiraled so that formerly abhorrent ritualistic features can now be acceptably presented in a new context.

In several papers on Singaporean Hinduism, Babb has insisted that Hindu rituals are individualistic in nature (Babb 1974, 1976, 1978). While there is no denying that many young Hindus and non-Hindus participate in rituals such as firewalking for personal reasons, I would like to emphasize that, to achieve a more complete understanding of the social nature of Hindu festivals in contemporary Singapore, we have to take account of both individualistic and collective dimensions. Babb has viewed changes in Hinduism as a process that has been carried forward by ritualistic individualization. Babb's observation was, perhaps, more relevant to the mid 1970s. While it is true that the rituals are more open to non-Hindus, this ingress occurs only at the extreme margin of the core ethno-nationalization of Hinduism in today's Singapore.<sup>16</sup>



## Acknowledgements

The staff members of several Hindu organizations and temple management committees kindly met me and helpfully responded to my inquiries. Although not specifically drawn upon in this article, my involvement with the study and field observation of Hinduism in India, Sri Lanka, London and Canada for the past twenty years has given me a firm grounding from which to comment on Hinduism in Singapore. I owe thanks to the staff of the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore; especially Drs. Chan Kok Bun and Anadha Raja, who were constantly helpful both in Singapore and Japan. My understanding of Singaporean Hinduism obviously owes a great deal to the insight of Drs. A. Mani and V. Sinha. I have learned much from their works and in conversation with them. Prof Atsuko Fukuura of Shiga University gave some significant advice regarding the references. Finally I express my gratitude to Dr. Timothy Tsu at the Department of Japanese Studies (NUS) and his wife Mari for their warm hospitality during my stays in Singapore.

## Notes

1. The concept of textualization comes from Sinha (1987).
2. As for the history and present situation of the Hindu community in Singapore, see Mani 1993 and Sandhu 1993. The most comprehensive account of Singaporean Hinduism up to the mid 1980s is found in Sinha's M.A. thesis (1987) and her subsequent articles based on it (1993, 1997).
3. Here, the category of Indians includes Pakistani, Sri Lankan, and Bangladeshi.
4. For more detail, see Sinha (1987: 88-103). She studied thirty-three temples.
5. The following section is based on Sinha (1987) and Tamnay (1996).
6. The following section is based on Nair (1972).
7. Group leader E. V. Ramaswamy Naikkar visited Singapore in 1929.
8. Very occasionally, animal sacrifice is performed (personal communication and Sinha 1987:116, n. 19).
9. A substantial part of this section is reproduced from my book (Tanaka 1997: 92-97).
10. Until 1968 Tai Pusam was also a public holiday. Following a revision to the Holiday Act, each ethnic community was allocated two public holidays. The Indian community is allowed the Festival of Lights and for the Sinhalese of Sri Lankan origin, Vesak, the day of Buddha's birthday. People of Sri Lankan origin are categorized as Indians, but they do not have a particularly strong presence. On the other hand, Buddhism is one of the major religions of the dominant Chinese community. Naturally, few Hindus are content with this arrangement.

11. The following account of Tai Pusam is based on Babb (1976), Sinha (1987: 120-131), and Evers and Pavadarayan (1993). See also Collins (1997) for an account of a festival in Penang, Malaysia.

12. Women, while carrying wooden kavadi or a milk pot, may also undergo self-mortification.

13. The total number of participants in the procession after dipping from 200 in 1966 to 60 in 1967 has been rising. In 1974, there were 100 votaries. In 1997 the figure was 1,200. Thereafter, 5,000 in 1988, 5,800 in 1991, 7,000 in 1993, 7,700 in 1995, and 9,500 in 1996.

14. Tai Pusam is described as having become "an important national festival and a tourist attraction" (Palaniappan 1996:31).

15. Deepavali has seen similar changes. According to the Straits Times, "It used to be a quieter family affair. Now the other races perceive Deepavali as being the big hari raya of the Indians. Indians feel this too and they go all out, inviting other Singaporeans to their homes" (24 Oct 1992). It should be noted that in the process of contemporary ethno-nationalization elsewhere, ethnic culture is not necessarily expressed in sensational spectacle. For more on spectacularization in relation to tourism, see Yamashita (1997).

16. Babb certainly recognizes a collective dimension in Tai Pusam, but by this he means a traditional framework of family and kin, rather the ethnic dimension of the overarching Indian community.

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