The Politics and Poetics of Religion: Hindu Processions and Urban Conflicts

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In this paper, I will explore the ways in which processions, by their very visibility, foreground the relationships between the secular and the sacred, while contributing to a construction of identity and community, and simultaneously surfacing fractures therein. Using the example of multireligious yet secular Singapore, I will examine the state's management of a Hindu procession, Thaipusam; the tactics of adaptation, negotiation, and resistance that participants engage in; and the participants' experience of these processions, including the nature of their "sacred experience."[1]

Introduction

Processions have long been an integral part of religious life. They are among the most visible of religious activities in public spaces, and thus have the greatest opportunity for contact with secular activities and religious practices of other faiths. Because they tend towards the "spectacular," they heighten the potential for conflict. As events that attract crowds, the possibility of violence is real, as the experience in many countries reminds us. The politics of such events must be understood to avoid the troubles in various parts of the world.

1 This is an abriged version of a fuller paper titled "Religious processions: urban policitcs and poetics" that has appeared in *Temenos, the Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* (2005) Volume 41, No. 2, pp. 225–49.

To understand the politics, it is imperative to understand the meanings and values invested in such events—the poetics—thus enabling policy-makers and enforcement agencies to become aware of what sacred meanings are negotiable and which should remain fixed values.

Much of the geographical literature on processions addresses secular processions, including national parades (Kong and Yeoh 1997) and community parades (Jackson 1988, Lewis/Pile 1996). A parallel literature on religion deals with pilgrimages (cf. Kong 1990; Kong 2001). Indeed, there are many similarities between the nature and experience of processions and pilgrimages, though the latter is at a larger scale, often traversing greater distances, involving greater commitment of time, and possibly enduring more privations. In drawing on insights from existing literatures, I engage with the literatures on both secular processions and religious pilgrimages.

What is the nature of processional experience? In particular, in modern cities where functionalist urban planning may come up against sacred sites, and where Hindu, Jew, Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim may live cheek by jowl, what sorts of conflicts have to be negotiated in the continued performance of such religious practice? I explore this question using the multireligious case of Singapore, an officially secular city-state where all the major world religions are represented. This analysis is a focus on the micro-politics of urban life and its conflicts, pursued on the basis that such micro-politics is constitutive of the macro-politics of religious conflicts, manifested in religiously-based wars and unrest. Such macro-politics has historical roots, but is also daily constituted and reinforced through a micro-politics of friction that often appears less dramatic, less serious, less pressing than the drama and spectacle of religious wars, but which nevertheless is very real and influential in the warp and woof of everyday life.

Processions and pilgrimages: Some approaches

Pilgrimage is a "social construction, and inevitably, a cultural product" (Graham/Murray 1997: 389). The cultural product must, in turn, be understood in relation to its social, political, and historical contexts. The multidisciplinary literatures on pilgrimage recognize this social and cultural constructedness, and acknowledge how social relations are (re)enacted or challenged during pilgrimages, resulting on occasion in conflict, but also in reinforcement of community and identity.

Pilgrimages are thought to temporarily bring together individuals disparate in age, occupation, gender, ethnicity, social class, and power. Pilgrimages bond together, "however transiently, at a certain level of social life, large numbers of men and women who would otherwise never have come into con-

tact" (Turner 1974: 178). Pilgrimages therefore function as occasions during which communitas is experienced, and is a liminal experience, involving abrogation of secular social structure.

In contrast, scholars such as Eade and Sallnow (1991) argue that pilgrimage is a pluralist experience, a realm in which there are competing religious and secular discourses, leading to the reinforcement of social boundaries and distinctions rather than their dissolution. This is illustrated in a range of studies (e.g. Graham/Murray 1997; Murray/Graham 1997) where the multiple meanings of the pilgrimage route and site give rise to tensions and conflicts. Religious processions, at a scale smaller than pilgrimages, nevertheless encapsulate many of the issues confronted in pilgrimage analysis, and, indeed, are not unlike the experience of secular processions, for which analyses exist of pageants, parades, and Carnival.

Parades and processions "[serve] as a means to focus attention of private people on their collective life and the values they [espouse] through it" (Goheen 1993: 128). Not only do they mark out space, such "civic rituals" also represent "time apart," for they are "time separated from the normal activities" (Goheen 1993: 128). They also stress shared values and reinforce group cohesion by emphasising belonging. Further, they may be "characterized as demonstrations of community power and solidarity and serve as complex commentaries on the political economy or urban-industrial social relations" (Marston 1989: 255). On the other hand, these events may also reflect the spatial constitution of symbolic resistance, achieved through the symbolic reversal of social status (Jackson 1988). They offer a temporary respite from normal relations of subordination and domination, and thus offer a potential platform for protest, opposition, and resistance (Jackson 1988: 222). Yet, as Jackson (1988: 216) points out, the symbolic reversal of social status during these events should not be confused with subversion because it only serves to reaffirm the permanence of the social hierarchy. What they offer is a temporary respite from normal relations.

Fieldwork context

Thaipusam is celebrated in many parts of the world by ethnic communities from South India, such as Fiji, Mauritius, Trinidad, Durban, Toronto, Malaysia, and Singapore. It marks the birthday of Lord Subramaniam, one of the sons of Shiva. The spectacle of the event revolves around a device called a kavadi carried by participants along a processional route. Some may even pierce themselves with skewers or attach hooks to their bodies. The processions are generally accompanied by music and chanting. Some participants

also enter a religious trance during the procession. Generally, those who take part in the procession do so as a form of thanksgiving for prayers answered.
In Singapore, Thaipusam is an annual event in which the state's management has evolved. Religious processions in Singapore are carefully monitored and managed, a caution rooted in history. On 21 July 1964, during a procession celebrating the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, riots broke out as the Malay-Muslim procession passed through an area predominantly populated by Chinese. Different accounts exist of how the riots started. Regardless of what happened, given this precedent, much care is given to manage public events, including Thaipusam.

Two Hindu community leaders shared with me insights into the organisation of the procession. Annually, two to three months before Thaipusam, an application is made by the Hindu Endowments Board (HEB), on behalf of the two temples involved (marking the start and end point of the procession, respectively) and participating devotees, to the police to obtain a permit to hold the procession. Additionally, along the processional route are tents set up by Hindu devotees, serving water or milk to those participating in the procession. Tent owners also have to apply to the police for permits after seeking endorsement from the HEB. Following these applications, the police convene a meeting with the HEB and representatives from the two temples to discuss the ground rules and problems encountered during the last festival, so as to propose ways of addressing them.

Almost 10,000 participants can be expected annually: more than 8,000 carry milk pots, and more than 1,000 carry kavadis. Additionally, there are many more who set up tentage, and others who help the devotees. The logistical task is huge, given this scale of events. The two temples thus issue "rules, regulations and conditions governing Thaipusam," constructed to observe state rules pertaining to assemblies and processions (encapsulated in the Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order and Nuisance) Act and its related subsidiary legislation), and to manage the event. Individual kavadi carriers have to buy tickets from the temples to participate in the procession and pay a fee to defray the cost of organizing the event and handling the logistics. Big kavadi carriers pay more because they "take up the most space and need the most supervision" (ST 23 Dec 1999). Kavadi carriers have to inform the temples of the size and weight of their kavadis, which should not exceed certain limits (4 m from the ground up and 2.9 m in diameter), so as to ensure that they do not pose safety hazards to traffic or street wires. Devotees carrying milk pots may leave Perumal Temple from 2:00 a.m. onwards on Thaipusam Day, but kavadis and rathams (shrines on wheels) have between 7:00 a.m. and 7:30 p.m. to leave the Perumal temple. At the other end, the doors of the Thendayuthapani Temple will close at 10 p.m. Tickets are issued upon payment, and devotees are given specific times when they should assemble at Sri Perumal, in order

that the crowds may be managed. Further, all forms of musical instruments and recorded music are not allowed along the processional route. Only holy music is allowed within the temples' premises. The temples' rules end with a warning that any infringement will result in the prosecution of devotees and/or supporters by the police and the devotees being barred from future festivals.

Religious processions and the making of social relations

Davis' (1986: 6) description of nineteenth-century Philadelphia parades as "public dramas of social relations" provides an apt perspective for examining the Thaipusam procession in Singapore. Just as the nineteenth-century parades "define who can be a social actor," Thaipusam was both an occasion for boundary-making and one for reinforcing social ties, in particular, religious community, family, and friendship ties.

As an occasion for boundary-making, Thaipusam reminds us that a community is not devoid of internal tensions, and is not always characterized by homogeneous, or even consensual, traits and views. Thus, boundaries are internal to the Hindu community, as they are between the Hindu and other communities in multi-religious Singapore. The procession surfaced conflicts and tensions within the community, evident in two main ways. First, the latent discontent with a prominent foreign-worker population in Singapore, and in this particular instance, with an Indian foreign-worker population, is foregrounded in a public performance such as Thaipusam, with crowdedness and disorderliness attributed to them. One interviewee complained that the procession had become very protracted, with many delays, because of the growth in the number of kavadi carriers and the larger crowds. He attributed this to the increase in the number of foreign workers participating. Another intimated that "Thaipusam has been spoilt" because of the intrusion and rowdiness of "foreign elements." Yet others pointed fingers at "the younger generation" instead. One interviewee blamed the "youngsters," criticizing "the way they dance, the way they cheer, the way they change those movie songs to God songs." Boundary-making thus drew on age, class, and nationality as divisive factors.

The consciousness of "self" and "other" was also evident through repeated references to boundaries between the Hindu community and other communities. These references revealed awareness that this public display of Hinduism had the power to shape public perceptions about the Hindu community, and also offered the occasion for the "other" to show sensitivity to the Hindu community. In the former instance, Hindu interviewees referred to the unruly

behaviour of some young Hindu boys in the processions, and expressed deep regret that "You have other races watching you, so when all these happen, it gets wrong ideas into people's heads about us." In the latter instance, some interviewees expressed disappointment at the lack of understanding and respect by other communities of the sacredness of the event:

Frankly speaking, it is okay for them to watch, but I think there are members of the public who are not dressed properly and who don't behave well. […] We feel very offended when we are participating. […] We like people to be more properly attired rather than coming as though you are going for a show, a disco (Shamala, late 30s).

Simultaneously, the procession did not just serve as occasions of internal and external boundary-making. It was also an opportunity for the reinforcement of family and friendship ties, and the reaffirmation of community identity. At the most fundamental, the commitment to Thaipusam was viewed as a total family obligation. Mano, who has participated annually in Thaipusam for 27 years, says:

I have seen cases where people take it just for granted. Everybody carry, I also can carry. After they start walking, they just collapse. Just cannot fulfill the route. And some of them, when you're piercing, you can see them pinching because it's painful. It's hurting them. I wouldn't really say whether they did fast properly or not, but I know there's something wrong. Something is not right in the family. Maybe they did not fast. Maybe in the house, in the family, something is wrong. When I want to carry the kavadi, the whole family joins in. We all fast together.

This family involvement has the effect of bringing the family together. Such family participation extends to the day of the procession itself, during which family and friends provide both practical and moral support. Mohan says:

Just say for example, this big chariot which I carry. For some reason, if I can't pull it, somebody can help me to push. And if this big kavadi I'm carrying, for some reason I cannot carry, balance myself, the people all round, four of them, could hold me and … [help to] adjust it. And in the worst case, if you really cannot walk, they can dismantle it and bring you to the temple in whatever way they could help. Yes you need them to help because you will never know…That's why it's not just you yourself. I may be in the procession, but everybody is helping, also participating in this holy festival.

Spiritually and emotionally, Rama acknowledges the need for support, when the journey gets long and delayed:

The procession is about four km, and at some point of time, there would be a jam, and we have to wait for 2½, three hours. During that period, family is there or friends or relations to give you the moral boost.

But the strengthening of social relations is not confined to pre-existing ties. The sense of community among participants and well-wishers is enhanced

through the support given to those completing the thanksgiving journey, even among strangers. As Vani shared:

> Usually what happens is that after you are done with your procession, that means you have finished your task already, right. So then, it doesn't have to be someone that you know. You can also carry on and cheer along with everybody else, even if it is strangers. It does not have to be someone you know. We cheer other participants along to encourage them to the finish.

When probed, Vani and others were clearly aware of the boisterous youths and burgeoning foreign workers, and indeed expressed their annoyance and disapproval. Yet, their enthusiasm and support for participants, particularly when nearing the destination, were co-existent with their awareness of social difference. They did not feel a sense of egalitarian association, after the manner of Turner's (1974) communitas. Rather, it was a sense of support for those who have made sacrifices and bore the privations of the journey, not unlike support for athletes on the track. This did not amount to a numbing heap of emotions "where the lofty is combined with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid" (Folch-Serra 1990: 265). The experience of communitas, long accepted in many anthropological writings about pilgrimage, did not replicate itself in the context of the Thaipusam procession in Singapore. This may suggest that pilgrimages and processions are not directly comparable, but it may also suggest that the sense of sameness and egalitarian association may be a somewhat romanticized interpretation of the pilgrim experience.

Religious processions and the negotiation of poetics and politics

Religious processions also exist at the nexus of "poetic" performance and public politics, the negotiation of which forms the analysis in this section. Conceptually, I have framed the material in terms of the negotiation of soundscapes, timescapes, and sacred pathways, reflecting the multiple dimensions of the processional phenomena.

Negotiating aural space

That Thaipusam occupies aural space, and derives significant meaning from the manufacture and consumption of sound, may not have been so apparent if music did not become subject to policy and policing. No interviewee failed to discuss the significance of music to the creation of an appropriate atmosphere, and as an

integral part of the ceremony. Many took pains to explain the place of music in religion and in this particular public performance. Pany shared this perspective:

> Music is part of religion. If you notice, the drums, the long pipes played during prayers … traditionally, music, dances, language were performed in the temples, where culture was propagated. For the kavadi carriers, the music is to let them forget the pain and let them concentrate and to fulfill their mission.

However, over the years, restrictions have come to be placed on the noise level generated at public events. Music is disallowed along the processional route. This reflects a larger policy in Singapore, applicable in a variety of contexts. For example, the traditional Islamic call to prayer used to be made on a loudspeaker, outward from a mosque. It became regulated because, with population growth and urbanization, such sound production risked being regarded as intrusive by those not involved in that religion (Lee 1999). State regulations on "noise pollution" were therefore introduced, including turning the loudspeakers inwards towards the mosque, specifying acceptable noise levels for events such as Chinese operas, funeral processions, church bells, record shops, and places of entertainment. Even state-endorsed nation-building activities, such as pledge recitation in schools, are subject to these rules.

As a consequence, the desired "poetic" value of music is lost, and the continuing quest has become one for aural, not physical, space for religious activity. This politics of sound and space is expressed in a variety of ways, from the most supportive to actions that attempt to circumvent the intent of the law. At one end of the spectrum, Vani expresses full support for the regulations:

> I fully support the government doing this … because teenagers especially tend to take advantage if there are no rules, so they made the whole procession look like a hooligan get-together because they would dress in black and they end up taking garbage cans and turning them upside down like playing drums. So what happens was that it led to unnecessary fights because you have a lot of gangs there and compete who can make louder noise and stuff like that. … So after the restrictions were imposed, you can't find things like that now and it looks more festive.

Others accept, but without the same sense of support, such as Rama, who points to Singapore's perceived political culture of compliance:

> I think we just learn … you know we Singaporeans are so obedient. As long as the government says, we obey, you know. We may complain, but ultimately we still follow the rules.

In contrast, others are quite vituperative. Mano offers a pointed critique, and reveals that appeals have been made to no effect:

> We asked the temple and everything. They said no, they said it's against the law. Most of them, some of them, even myself, sometimes, I say walking like that, it's just like attending a funeral with no music and all. … Sometimes, with so many regulations, after a while, you're fulfilling the vows and everything, you should do it happily. Wholeheartedly. Not while cursing somebody.

For some, the appeal is built on the logic that if there are those misbehaving, action should be taken against them rather than to have a blanket ban on music, thus calling on the authorities to be more discriminatory in their strategies of management.

Finally, in a circuitous way, some interviewees point out that it is because musical instruments are banned that there are those who use empty tin cans and dustbins for improvisation, thus resisting sanctions in symbolic ways:

> These guys use dustbins. So when they see the police officer, they just put it down. After that they just pick it up again (Shamala).

Thus, the ban on music led to the creation of improvised sound, which in turn led to the perception amongst other participants and observers of a lack of respect and religious value, thereby ironically prompting their support of a ban.

Negotiating sacred time

Just as the poetics and politics of soundscapes are negotiated in aurally defined sacred space, so too has the bracketing of time come to shape the practice of religion. In the history of religion, particular days and specific times of the day have traditionally been set aside for religious practice, what Eliade (1959) has referred to as "sacred time," set apart from secular time. In contemporary society, what time is marked out as sacred is again a negotiated outcome between secular and religious agents. This is evident at two levels in the context of Thaipusam in Singapore: in the official appointment of public holidays tied to religious festivals, and in the allocation of time for religious activity in the public sphere. Indeed, apart from the choice of the day, other aspects of managing that time are much more guided by pragmatic secular considerations than religious ones.

In the official Singapore calendar, a series of public holidays are identified, corresponding to religious festivals for Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and Christians. There are also the culturally defined ones: New Year's Day and Chinese New Year, and secular public holidays: Labour Day and National Day. The choice of religious festivals that deserve public holiday status in many ways defines the extent of religious activity and participation that is facilitated for particular religious groups. Thus, several interviewees lamented the lack of a public holiday for Thaipusam and attendant difficulties. Shamala explained that, as she was not able to take time off work, she had to participate in the procession very early in the morning or late in the evening. This posed other problems—the extra cost of transportation in the early hours of the morning, recalling that milk pot bearers start at 2:00 a.m. ("you have to

pay double charges for taxis"), and the congestion in the post-work rush hour ("tempers flare for those in the traffic jam held up by us").

And what of the bracketing of time within the day itself? This is guided by temple regulations based on pragmatic considerations of crowd control and safety, as well as by self "regulation," based on the pragmatics of tropical, urban living. Temple regulations stipulate that those carrying milk pots may start at 2:00 a.m., though kavadis and rathams may only begin at 7:00 a.m., with the last participant beginning at 7:30 p.m. This bracketing of time is based essentially on pragmatic considerations to spread out the activities over as many hours as possible to avoid congestion, and to have those with the bigger paraphernalia (kavadis and rathams) on the streets only after the break of light. Additionally, participants further bracket the time in view of the hot afternoon sun in Singapore, so that few take to the streets during the afternoon hours. Whereas scholars of religion have written about sacred time as set apart from ordinary time, during which religious activities are propitious, in the context of Thaipusam processions, apart from the identification of a sacred day, which hours of the day particularly attract religious activity and which do not are guided more by pragmatic considerations than religious ones.

Negotiating sacred pathways

The processional route begins from Sri Srinivasa Perumal in Serangoon Road and ends in Sri Thendayuthapani in Tank Road, a journey of some 4 km. The former is in the heart of Singapore's Little India district, and the journey brings participants past a number of temples in that district. Previously, the route was symbolically significant because participants would wind past the Kaliaman[2] Temple (known as the "mother's temple"), and the Sivan Temple (known as the "father's temple") in Dhoby Ghaut. Devotees passing these temples would therefore pay homage to the "mother" and "father." However, the Sivan temple was relocated from the Dhoby Ghaut area to a temporary site next to Sri Perumal in 1984, and then to a permanent site in Geylang East in 1993. This move occurred because of the construction of a mass rapid transit station where it stood, and, despite appeals to the contrary, it was relocated.

Since 1993, the deity Siva has been brought annually to Sri Perumal on the eve of Thaipusam, staying there until the next night. This allows devotees to pay homage to the "father" from the start of the procession, before passing by the "mother" en route to Sri Thendayuthapani. In short, despite the community's investment of symbolic meaning in the Sivan temple and its location, secular priorities prevailed, and ritual adjustments were introduced to manage secular changes that impact on religious practice.

2 Kaliaman is the consort of Siva.

Conclusions

Since 1964, when the Mohammedan procession erupted into riot, Singapore has been carefully managing the public expression of religion, and indeed, other processions involving assemblies of people and public displays of spectacle. This is understandable, particularly given how the preceding analysis endorses the view that processions are arenas for competing religious and secular discourses, and are multivocal, of social and political significance.

In focusing on the social and political dimensions of procession, I have illustrated how social relations (including family, friendship, and inter- and intra-community ties) are reinforced or challenged through the event. I have also demonstrated how belief in egalitarian association on account of common participation and mutual support among participants is misplaced. I conclude therefore that the traditional concept of communitas associated with pilgrimages and the notion of solidarity, belonging, and group cohesion in processions perhaps remain relevant in some ways, but may have been overextended in a somewhat romanticized notion of egalitarianism and bounded community.

Politically, the processions are occasions when meanings are balanced and negotiated by state, temple, and religious individual. These may revolve around the significance of sound in religious experience and the associated symbolic resistance to state prohibitions and temple regulations. They may be about the secular acknowledgement of religious time through suitable bracketing out of that time in the secular calendar. They may involve the ritual adjustments made to accommodate state modifications of sacred pathways. In all of these, the politics at work is not that of overt confrontation or party politics or grand strategy, but one of everyday negotiations and local-level "tactics" (de Certeau 1984). Given Singapore's freedom of worship policy, time and space have been available for adherents to participate in the procession (despite some inconvenience). Participants have also been able to renegotiate meanings and values, finding ways to make music and pay homage to the "father" god. As a consequence, one of the conditions for the negative violence and aggression sometimes associated with religion in general, and such events in particular, is removed, that is, extreme feelings of deprivation in relation to the practice of one's faith. However, the seeds of some dispirited, and sometimes exasperated, disappointment are present, directed at the constraints on religious music-making, the perverse and unintended encouragement it gives to rowdy noise-makers on the pretext of creating an aurally-defined sacred atmosphere for participants, the crowdedness of the event, which lends itself to a channeling of frustrations towards "foreigners" and "youngsters," and the absence of an acknowledgement of this religious event via marking on the secular calendar, which is deemed to further contribute to early morning pre-workday crowd-

edness. Together, they have not seemed sufficient to constitute severe discontent. Nevertheless, it is imperative that these sources of irritation and discontent are recognized, with potential adjustments made to policy as circumstances change, for example, when the number of participants and observers grow, or when the profile of participants changes.

Finally, that religious experience is a multifaceted one bears emphasis here. Sacred space is defined visually and materially through landscapes, but it is also constituted of soundscapes and timescapes. Religion, to that extent, is an integrative institution, and religious experience may be best understood as a wholly integrated one, of sight, sound, emotion, time. It is only with this understanding that secular rules and regulations may be crafted to achieve pragmatic secular ends, particularly in multireligious urban contexts, while respecting religious imperatives.

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