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Alike but different

- The understanding of rituals among Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus in Denmark

Abstract

This article will discuss the meaning(s) of rituals among Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus in Denmark with special focus on the second generation. It will use Roy A. Rappaport's theory on ritual both as communication and as a basic social act, but it will also, in line with Jan Assmann and Hervieu Legér, understand the ritual as a storing place of collective memory. It will give a short outline of what can be called the institutionalisation but also the place-making of the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu tradition in Denmark, but the empirical focus will be on the chariot procession (Tēr), which attracts thousands of participants every year. The Tēr procession is an example of continuity and change. Continuity because the participants try to reproduce the ritual as they know it from Sri Lanka, however changed so it fits into or communicates with the new setting.

Keywords: Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus in Denmark, ritual as communication, ritual as a social act, institutionalisation of religion, place making.

In Denmark in 2017 there live 11,700 people of Sri Lankan origin (Statistics Denmark, January 2017), roughly 10,000 of whom are Hindus.¹ The first Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus came to Denmark in 1983 because of the escalating conflict in Sri Lanka. They were mostly men, and they were categorised as ipso facto refugees. During the 1990s they were reunited with their families left behind or they married Sri Lankan Tamil women and began to settle down. More than 8,000 (about 75%) of the Sri Lankan Tamils living in Denmark have become Danish citizens, which demonstrates their serious wish to settle down in Denmark for good.

The Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus have now been in the country for approximately one generation, and the second generation of Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus, who either were born in the country or came to the country as small children, are now establishing families of their own. Many of the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus have moved from the middle of Jutland, where a lot of them initially settled, and are establishing homes in various locations around Denmark.

What is of particular interest in relation to the theme of this special issue on the meaning of ritual in a migration setting is that along with the new patterns of settlement and along with the Sri Lankan Tamils receiving Danish citizenship, new Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu temples, the main place for conducting rituals, have been established. The number of Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu

¹ Since Statistics Denmark, who register all newcomers to Denmark, do not take religious but only geographical affiliation into account, it is difficult to provide an exact figure when it comes to religious grouping. I have assumed that the percentage distribution is the same as in Switzerland, where about 87% of people with a Sri Lankan origin are Hindus.

temples has grown from two in 2010 to eight in 2017.

I have followed the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus in Denmark for around twenty years and interviewed both first- and second-generation Tamils with emphasis on their relation to both the Sri Lankan Tamil tradition and Hindu religion more generally. It becomes obvious that Hinduism is no longer just a ‘way of life’, but a ‘part of life’, and should therefore be understood as an entity or a system in itself, which has to be given topicality in the new setting in order for its members to provide meaning. Here, some of the institutionalised rituals seem to be given particular importance.

In this article, I will explore the meaning of ritual for second-generation of Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus in Denmark in particular. Here I will especially focus on Tēr (“waggon or chariot”), a ritualistic procession during which the main god or gods of the temple are taken out in chariots to circumambulate the temple. From a religious point of view in this way the gods not only sanctify their own dwelling place for the coming year, but also sanctify the surrounding society. But at the same time by being religion in public display it is also identity-creating signalling a special belonging both externally to the surrounding society and internally to the group itself. This dual form of expression not only affirms a sense of specific solidarity and group cohesion for the insiders, which can be on a religious, cultural or social level, but also makes this particular group visible in the public sphere (David 2012: 454).

Tēr is held on the penultimate day of *Mahotsava*, which is a festival lasting ten to fifteen days memorising the consecration of the temple but perceived as the most important part of this long festival. And as Knut Jacobsen points out, processions are staged public events, and as such they have both participants and spectators. They are therefore performative. And because they are public, they also involve external groups – spectators who are confronted with an “otherness” which challenges their own identity (Jacobsen 2008: 8).

To understand the meaning of the Tēr procession I will use Roy A. Rappaport’s theory on ritual both as communication and as a basic social act. This will be combined with the idea that the ritual is a storing place of collective memory (Assmann 2006 and Hervieu Legér 2000). But because adaption to a Danish setting has caused an institutionalisation or “templeisation” (Narayanan, 1992) of tradition, which points to a spatially change of ritual conduct from the home and the public space to or around the temples, I will start by outlining this process among the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus living in Denmark, a process that can be observed in nearly all immigrant or diaspora groups in Europe. The institutionalisation of tradition does not only have an impact on a decisive shift of authority from the family to the religious specialists and from the private sphere to

the institution. It also turns the institution into the primary bearer of tradition or collective memory that is handed down both practically and symbolically to the next generations. This also has a crucial impact on what meaning(s) are attributed to institutionalised rituals in a migratory setting.

The Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus in Denmark and their adaptation to a Danish context

“We do celebrate Christmas with presents and a Christmas tree, decorated with things our children make at school, in our living room, but we don’t sing Christmas carols or go to church. It also reminds us of our celebration of light called Deepavali. Some of our Tamil friends in Germany go to church, but we have decided not to. We think it is important that our children have a relationship to our temple, instead. It’s not that they are not allowed in church – they go there with the school – we just want them to get an idea of where our tradition comes from or is strongly connected to.”

(Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu, man in the mid-30s and father of two children)

The above quotation from a parental point of view is a good example of how the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus in Denmark try to become part of Danish society and Danish traditions without losing their relationship with the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu tradition², which has bound them to Sri Lanka as a common shared homeland for generations both as a concrete place and an abstract religious place as mentioned in the introductory article. On the one hand, the father quoted above does not want his children to be excluded from the most important Danish festival in the year – Christmas – but on the other hand he does not want them to lose their relationship with their homeland or the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu tradition, which the temple and the rituals conducted in the temple somehow seem to ensure or conserve.

This inclusion of elements from Danish tradition and culture also seems to make the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus more aware of what they consider the important hallmarks associated with being both Hindu (religious identity) and Tamil (ethnic, cultural and social identity), but also

² It is not by coincidence I use the concept “tradition” instead of religion. In my perspective, the concept “Hindu religion” refers to what seems to relate to the idea of having a universal Hinduism with special features that encompass all Hindus in the world. From the point of view adopted in this paper, tradition is more local, emphasising that the Hindu tradition in Sri Lanka as well as everywhere else in the world, including Denmark, is a particular tradition formed by context.

Danish (their new social and cultural identity). It also provides us with an interesting example of how inclusiveness and exclusiveness related to tradition or culture may mutually affect each other. But as the example with the adaptation of the Danish Christmas Eve also shows, they adapt the tradition on their own terms. In this way, Christmas somehow becomes their own or is given a symbolic meaning that does not clash with their own religious system – this may be called the transference of rituals from one tradition to another (Fibiger 2016). The outcome is both something new and something recognisable.

By emphasising that the temple is the tradition bearer or keeper and therefore something he hopes his children will develop a relationship with, the father quoted above touches upon something crucial in the process of adaptation. First of all, the institutionalisation of tradition, which suits Danish society at large, and secondly the importance of having a place or space where the specific Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu tradition can be preserved in some way, linking the first and second generations to a mutually shared idea of belonging and to a shared homeland or genealogy. As stated by Martin Baumann, “A diaspora situation shall be qualified by a group of people that perpetuates a recollecting identification with a fictitious or faraway geographic territory and its cultural-religious traditions” (2009: 153). And he continues his argument by emphasising a tri-polar interrelatedness of the diaspora group in itself, the country of origin, and the country of residence (2009: 153).³ This means that we can fruitfully study the mutual impact of these three components and the balance between cultural and religious identity and keeping up a bond to Sri Lanka on the one hand, and adaptability within the religious tradition on the other.

This might be the reason for the existence of a strong awareness of keeping up the tradition or orthopraxis in the temple. As one of the members from a temple board told me: “It was not until I came to Denmark and got involved in the work around our temple⁴ that I became aware of how to conduct rituals in the right manner and according to our holy scriptures.” Or as a well-esteemed Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu priest visiting the temple told me: “The pūcāi (‘worship’, pūjā in Sanskrit) you see here in the Sree Sithy Vināyakar temple is in many ways closer to tradition than the pūjā conducted in smaller temples in Sri Lanka.”⁵

The increase in the number of temples in Denmark (from two in 2010 to eight in 2017) is therefore not only a visible marker or symbol that this group of people has decided to stay

³ Meaning that if this tri-polar interrelatedness is not there any longer, we cannot talk about a diaspora situation.

⁴ He is referring to the Sree Sithy Vinayākar temple in Herning. This is one of the two oldest of the eight Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu temples in Denmark and was consecrated in the year 2000.

⁵ This is also what I have noticed myself during my fieldwork in Sri Lanka.

(Rukmani 1999), but also evidence of the establishment of sacred space that connects all Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus in Denmark to their common shared tradition notwithstanding their age or migration history. Or as expressed by an old Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu man on the day the first temple was consecrated in Denmark:

“Now, I also feel at home in Denmark because I can communicate with our gods and get a darśan (‘auspicious sight or glimpse of the gods’) here, something I can share with my children and introduce to my grandchildren – that is at least what I hope.”

In other words, “God Needs No Passport”, as expressed by Peggy Levitt (2007) in her book with the same name about immigrants and the changing American religious landscape. But in relation to the Hindu tradition, I can add that the god or gods do need a consecrated space to manifest themselves.

The institutionalisation of the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu tradition in Denmark

As mentioned before the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus in Denmark today have no less than eight consecrated temples, indicating the importance of the temple in the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu tradition. This also fits well with an old Tamil saying: “do not live in a village where there is no temple.”⁶

One of the two oldest Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu temples (kōyils in Tamil) in Denmark is located in one of Herning’s industrial districts, and the other is in a converted barn outside Brande. Both were consecrated as temples around 2000, which means that the gods are now considered to be truly present in the god statuettes (mūrtis) during the worship service. This is of great importance for a Hindu bhakti-oriented pūjā, during which a vision or sight (darśan) of the god can both purify from bad karma and lead to mokṣa or mukti (liberation from being reborn). This darśan is also one of the pivotal points for the religious interpretation of a temple procession.

Before the first temples were consecrated, the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus met in the gym halls of local schools, which they borrowed on Friday evenings. Here they formed a small interim temple with a few pictures of the most important gods. This was not sufficient for the

⁶ These words were spoken by Avvaiyar, a poet who lived during the reign of the Chola dynasty in the 10th century. She is often pictured as an old, intelligent lady, and she wrote many of the poems that remain very popular even now and are included in school textbooks in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka.

growing community. Therefore, more permanent addresses were needed, and two groups of Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus rented a roofed apartment in Vestergade in Herning and a folk-dancing hall in a residential district in Brande. While the first temple in Herning was dedicated to Vināyakar, which is one of several Tamil names for the elephant-headed Ganeśa, the folk-dancing hall was dedicated to the goddess Abirāmi. Two different congregations were formed.

It was around the converted building in Brande that the first chariot procession (Tēr) took place in Denmark at the end of the 1990s. This event not only attracted more than 3,000 Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus but also became a struggle for expressing their religion in public space. With reference to bad toilet conditions, an argument put forward by the mayor, the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus lost not only the battle for public space but also the opportunity to express a common shared religious and cultural identity in public. In the words of Richard Bauman and R. D. Abrahams, processions are “religion in public display”, with behaviour and objects associated with a particular meaning and value being made public (Bauman & Abrahams, 1981: 303).

The Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus initially moved outside the city and bought a deserted farm. They preferred to move rather than demolishing one of their most important annual rituals.

After the temples in Brande and Herning were established, no new temples were built for a number of years. But since 2013 no less than six new temples have been established at different locations in Denmark: Svenstrup near Ålborg, Åbenrå, Vojens, Skrydstrup, Vallensved near Næstved and Stenlille. This escalation in the number of temples reveals that the second generation of Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus has begun to establish itself throughout Denmark. They seem to want a temple near where they live, and all the small new groups have collected money jointly to make this possible. For example, the two temples on Zealand and the temple in Skrydstrup were established in closed schools, which the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus respectively in 2013 and 2015 could buy relatively cheaply due to the large school mergers that took place owing to declining child numbers and the need to make municipal savings.

Looking at the short history of Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus in Denmark, I will distinguish between three periods. While the 1980s and 90s can be termed an adaptation period in which young men and then newly established families had to adapt to Danish conditions, the end of the 90s and until 2010 could be called an establishment period. The first temples were consecrated and a common cult took shape. The period from about 2010 up to the present can be called a consolidation period in which the jointly established and recognisable cult has spread to temples around the country to be preserved there. This does not mean that the second generation participate

on a regular basis in the temple worship, but they appreciate the fact that the temple is there when needed – also as a way to preserve their culture.

What is especially interesting to note in relation to the templeisation of tradition in Denmark is that all the temples built from 2013 onwards have a connected congregation hall in which small family rituals as well as big cultural events can take place. This means that many of the domestic rituals (grihya rituals), especially rites of transition (samskāras),⁷ which form a major aspect of Hindu religiosity and accompany a person through his or her life, have moved from the homes to the temples. This does not mean that all ritualistic activity has stopped in the private sphere. Daily rites at the home altar as well as fasting rituals are still kept there, but bigger ritual events in which a priest is involved have more or less moved to the temple.

This is also why the temple (kōyil in Tamil, mandir in Sanskrit) and the rituals held in or around the temple play a crucial role for the second generation, who have been either born or raised in Denmark:

“The rituals in the temple have an impact on my understanding of being a Hindu, but also when it comes to the ethical aspects and how to behave. In a funny way, I become aware of these aspects in the temple....

Even if I don’t understand the rituals that are conducted in the temple, they give me some kind of confidence or structure. It relates me to my tradition, and then you are reminded of what to do and what not to do.”

(24-year-old Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu woman)

In these comments, it becomes clear that for this woman the temple is the primary tradition keeper. But it is even more interesting that her understanding of the ritual somehow extends beyond its primary scope. This matches Rappaport’s understanding of the participation in the ritual as a social act or perhaps even as a social contract binding the person to the group.

“In attending to ritual’s form, we must not lose sight of the fundamental nature of what it is that ritual does as a logically necessary outcome of its form. In enunciating, accepting and making conventions moral, ritual contains within itself not simply a symbolic representation of social contract, but tacit social contract itself. As such, ritual, which also establishes, guards, and bridges boundaries between public systems

⁷ It is common for a Hindu to have 8-16 samskāras through his or her entire life from before birth until death. Name-giving rituals, the first feeding, the introduction to the Tamil alphabet, marriage and death samskāras are performed in the temples in Denmark in particular.

and private processes, is *the* basic social act.” (Rappaport 1999, 138)⁸

Rituals as communication

As indicated in the above quotations participating in a ritual is signalling belonging. Or in the words of Rappaport the participation will in some way or another bind the participants together as a group. This doesn't mean that all of the participants attribute the same meaning to the ritual, rituals are multivocal and as mentioned in the introductory chapter new meaning(s) can be attached in a migration context.

In the perspective of this article which considers the meaning of ritual in a contemporary migrant setting in Denmark, I will focus in particular on his understanding of ritual as communication, as elaborated most explicitly in Roy Rappaport's book: *Ecology, Meaning and Religion* from 1979. I regard the following aspects of his theory as particularly useful in understanding the possible meaning(s) of rituals among migrant groups: 1) First of all he agrees with Robertson Smith (1927) that it is acts and not interpretations that constitute the most stable part of any ritual. This means that although the way in which the participants understand a ritual and the kind of meaning they attach to it may vary, the acts they perform together as a group do not. And in the relationship between ritual and myth he stresses that ritual specifies the relationship of the performer to what he is performing, whereas myths do not. In other words: to recite a myth does not necessarily mean accepting it (1979, 193). 2) Secondly, he supports the Durkheimian understanding of ritual (see *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, 1912) as the basic social act binding a group together as a group. 3) Thirdly, he emphasises the uniqueness of ritual in expressing something that nothing else can do in the same way: “...rituals are not simply an alternative way to express certain things, but that certain things can be expressed only in rituals” (Rappaport, 1979, 174). Rappaport thereby touches upon a crucial element within the performance of a ritual, namely that it expresses or communicates something that cannot be communicated in the same way in any other human act. 4) Fourthly, he emphasises that the importance of participating and following the rules of the enactment of the ritual is not to ask why they participate but just to

⁸ Roy A. Rappaport (1926-1997) who has his theoretical inspiration from both semiotics (Peirce, Tambiah) and speech acts (Austin and Searle), as well as more classical anthropological theories such as those propounded in particular by Durkheim but also by Maurice Bloch, Van Gennep, Victor Turner and Radcliffe-Brown, it is easy to inscribe his interpretation of ritual in a much wider perspective. Indeed, this is something he did himself in his ambitious book: *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, which came out posthumously in 1999. In this book, he defines ritual as ‘the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers’ (1999, 24,).

note **that** they participate: “the acceptance is intrinsic to performance” (ibid. 1979: 194). In this way and in his own words: “This is to say that by performing a liturgical order⁹, the performer accepts, and indicates to himself and to others, that he accepts whatever is encoded in the canons of the liturgical order in which he is participating” (ibid. 1979: 193).

In the perspective of this article, these four characteristics of ritual make a ritual transportable and adaptable to a new setting but without losing its main aim, which is to bind people together as a group regardless of time and space. Ritual can in that perspective be called: the enactment or an index of belonging. In other words, ritual communicates by both saying and doing.

This is also in line with Rappaport’s understanding of the ritual as both **auto-** and **allo-**communication¹⁰. He defines auto-communication as communication which participants direct to themselves regarding the fact that they belong to the group or tradition in question. Allo-communication, on the other hand, involves the participants showing their co-participants that they somehow adhere to or accept what Rappaport calls the canonical order, distinguishing this group from other groups such as other religions, traditions or other communities. Rappaport differentiates between self-referential and canonical messages or codes within a ritual. Whereas canonical messages are based on symbolic meaning (making a ritual distinct from other rituals), self-referential or indexical messages have to do with conditions here and now and refer to the conditions of the participants and also the possible function of the given ritual. Whereas the indexical or self-referential is concerned with the immediate, the canonical is concerned with the enduring. The canonical part of a ritual will somehow make references to something outside the ritual, legitimising the present act – this can be a transcendental power, or a part of history or genealogy, or to do with the fact that this ritual has been performed before. The canonical part of the ritual is what makes a human ritual different from an animal ritual (ibid. 1979:179-183).

It is important to note that both auto- and allo-communication are in play at the same time. Even when conducting an individual ritual (meditation) in solitude, there will be some form of allo-communication as long as the ritual in question follows some kind of traditional encoded order.

I regard both auto- and allo-communication as very important features when discussing the meaning of a ritual in a migratory setting. And as I will show in the coming empirical examples, rituals and the preservation of some rituals matter – also for the second generation of Sri

⁹ By liturgical order he means a relatively invariant sequence of acts and utterances encoded by someone other than the performer himself (1979: 191-194 & 1999: 169-175).

¹⁰ He is inspired by Anthony Wallace 1966, 237 ff.

Lankan Tamil Hindus, who are critical in other respects of some of their parents' non-reflexive ritualistic behaviour.

In my view, Rappaport's dual communication scheme lacks¹¹ a third form of communication, particularly when focusing on minority and/or migrant groups: communication from the group concerned to the surrounding society. In the absence of any better suggestion, I call this **outer**-communication, implying an inside group/outside group relationship. I regard this outer-communication as particularly important when a group is coming into being as a new group either in history or in a new geographical place. This does not mean that a group uses outer-communication to erect barriers around itself. Instead, the purpose of outer-communication is to communicate with your surroundings, to other groups and to society in general, that a group **exists**, that it has to be taken into account as part of society at large and has to be accepted with its special features. It is my conviction that the outcome of this outer-communication will have an impact on auto- as well as allo-communication and vice versa, thereby having an impact on identity formation both on an individual and on a group level.

When it comes to explicit religious rituals, or if the performer of the ritual attaches some kind of soteriological value to the act, a fourth form, which I suggest can be called transcendental communication, can be in play. Rappaport calls this transcendental entity for USP (Ultimate Sacred Postulate), a broad term including cosmological axioms, postulates concerning the existence and power of holy and sacred spirits, and declarations of faith which are given an aura of some kind of other-worldly value (Rappaport 1999: 263-276). In that way just the possibility to relate a transcendental communication to a ritual gives it a special aura of authority.

Table 1:

Auto-communication:	A message to yourself that by participating in the ritual you understand yourself somehow as part of the tradition.
Allo-communication:	A message to the co-participants that you understand yourself as part of the group and accept the canonical order connected to the ritual. This communicates a form of social contract and an acceptance of the norms or the morality intrinsic to the structure of the ritual.

¹¹ It can also be understood as an extension of his allo-communication.

Outer-communication:	A message to other groups, to the surroundings and to society at large, that the group understands itself as a distinctive group that the surroundings somehow have to take into account as a group with special features.
Transcendental communication:	A message to a presumed transcendental entity. This form of communication which can be given some kind of soteriological value is a feature in rituals given explicit religious meaning.

The relation to rituals in or around the temple

The celebration of the Tamil New Year (Puthandu), which falls in April, and the Tēr chariot procession connected to the 10-15-day festival Mahotsava, celebrating the consecration of a temple, are described by most of the second generation of Tamil Hindus I have interviewed or just talked to¹² as the two most important festivals during the year. These two rituals are not only important religious celebrations, but also social events at which people can meet other Tamils who they have not seen for a long time. At the same time, they both can communicate internally to themselves (auto), within the group (allo), to the surroundings (outer) but also to the gods (transcendental) a special belonging.

Tēr seems to be given particular importance by the second generation of Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus. Generally, they did not know much about what was actually happening when I asked them about the meaning of the ritual elements in Tēr, but they knew that it was a ritual during which they could be blessed and purified by the gods and given a darśan.

In general, my respondents attached great importance to the social element of Tēr; but they also underlined that Tēr is a mixture of fun and seriousness, and that the option of taking part in the procession was important as well. Here are some of their comments, all by young Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus between 15 and 25 years old:

"It's a tradition."

¹² I have conducted more than 50 interviews as well as a great number of formal and informal discussions (especially in relation to temple festivals) with young second-generation Tamil Hindus in Denmark.

"We meet a lot of people we don't usually see because there are Tamils from all over the country."

"It all creates a nice atmosphere."

"It's kind of solemn, but at the same time it's also nice when we eat and laugh together, buy food in the small stalls and go to the market together."

"I don't really know what's happening, but ask my mother, she does. I just like the atmosphere and wearing Tamil traditional clothes, which somehow reminds me and everyone else of who I am"

There is no doubt that the procession means a lot for these young Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus, and this is because it has more than one function (religious, social, cultural), and it can fulfil many different needs at one and the same time. But it can also be given different forms of meaning – both for the individual and for the group as such.

In the following, I will give a brief description of the Tēr procession during the annual birthday festival of the Srī Sithy Vināyakar Temple in Herning, as it is the Tēr that I have followed most frequently. This allows me to briefly outline the changes which this procession has undergone – changes which reveal another important aspect of religious phenomena: they are elastic and therefore very adaptable. As Richard Bauman puts it, a procession is not just a literary artefact, but a communicative practice that is adapted to a contemporary context (2012: 103).

While the young second generation of Tamil Hindus are not very interested in the theological or mythological explanation behind the procession, nor in its possible transformative and purifying effects, the first generation are. Most of the second generation of participants do not totally reject the intrinsic religious perspectives, because in some way these perspectives help to give the actual procession “the weight” of tradition, but this is not what they focused on when talking to me.

The procession around Srī Sithy Vināyakar Temple, August 2016

The Tēr procession, which takes place on the 9th day of Srī Sithy Vināyakar's ten-day Mahotsava or Thiruvizha, is the culmination of the festival. In days gone by long pūjās were performed inside the temple with ārtī (“offerings of light”) and abhishekam (“bathing” of the god statuettes). These rituals are primarily intended as preparatory rituals for the Tēr procession, and are performed by the temple priests. The whole ten-day festival is initiated by a flag ritual (dhvajāroha), with the flag being hoisted on the first day and taken down again on the tenth. The flag ceremony and the flag

itself are an important symbol, but also a signal to the worshippers and the surroundings that something special is happening or that a special space is being created.

The actual Tēr event began at noon. Most of the participants had arrived by then, but there had been activity at the temple since the early morning, with the priests performing a lengthy ceremony both for the gods in the temple and for the mobile god representations (uchavars or utsava mūrtis in Sanskrit)¹³, who are now treated as rulers and are ready to be carried out of the temple on sedan chairs. First comes this temple's main god, Vināyakar (Ganeśa), followed by his brother Murukan (Kārttikeya) with his two wives Valli and Deivayanai (two different forms of śakti). Finally, the mythological figure and demi-god Sandeswarar follows them. The bearers of the royal chairs are all men who have been specially selected for the task, which gives prestige. They all are shirtless and are wearing a traditional vetti around their hips. The use of this traditional religious clothing indicates to themselves, to others and to the gods that they are following all the precepts for the task they are now going to perform.

When the group comes outside, they are met by the waiting crowd of well over 1,000 people. They wait with flower petals, which they sacrifice to the gods by throwing them into the air. This can be read as a kind of welcoming gesture to the gods as they enter the human or profane domain outside the temple.

The chariots, which are normally kept in a corner of the temple, have been taken out and are now beautifully decorated with banana leaves, flowers and beautiful fabrics, waiting for the gods to be installed in them. According to Paul Younger (1995, 2002), these chariots should look like a temple and not just a chariot, which means that they can create a sacred space and thus give the gods protection against the unclean, profane world they are now entering.

The audience, who are singing devotional songs, watch carefully as the gods are installed in their temporary temples, and as soon as they are installed with the priests by their side, the actual Tēr procession can begin. It starts with the offerings of coconuts by more than 100 participants, who throw them on the ground in front of the chariots.

The movement in circulation around the clock then starts, and it follows a precise and coordinated pattern that has grown closer to Tēr processions in Sri Lanka and South India over the years. The important thing is that in order for the circulation to take place at all, laymen have to get

¹³ The stationary god statues are not lifted out of the temple, and are replaced by mobile figures that stand on a particular altar each day. According to the South Indian regulations, they must consist of five different metals.

involved. This contrasts with other festivals during the year, which take place in the temple with laymen mostly being spectators. This emphasises the performative and participatory aspects emphasised by Rappaport in relation to his definition of rituals.

The procession is led by a group of women carrying a tray with a camphor candle decorated with flowers. The camphor is meant to clean the air, but it also communicates to the group and the surroundings that the gods are on their way. At the same time, these women are especially chosen to take the lead, giving them prestige. Immediately after the women there are a couple of men with a heavy altar (*kavatī*) on their shoulders, walking or dancing. This is a sacrificial act in which they, as a promise (*vrata*), thank the god for a prayer that has been heard. Or, alternatively, they hope that their prayer will be heard, now that they have performed *kavatī*. By performing or literally embodying the tradition, they also communicate a strong relationship of faith to all the others present.

In Sri Lanka and in Tamil Nadu and among other Tamil diaspora groups (Germany, England, Mauritius, Malaysia), the *kavatī* dancers also pierce themselves with the spell of God Murukan through their tongues and cheeks. This tradition, as far as I know, has not yet come to Denmark – there have only been so-called “hookers” (Tamil: *Cetilattam*) in connection with *Tēr* at the Abirāmi Temple in Brande, where they are suspended from a tower with hooks attached to their chest muscles.

After the dancers comes a large orchestra consisting of drums and various instruments that highlight the coming of gods. Then come the three chariots, the first and largest of which carries *Vināyakar* and is drawn by laymen using two long ropes called *Tēr vadam*. There is a struggle to help pull the chariots, as this is a merit-giving action. At the same time, participation communicates a religious commitment to all those present. Everyone who pulls the rope must have purified themselves, they must be wearing traditional clothes, and they must be barefoot – not only to show respect to the gods, but also to make a *darśan* of the gods possible both for themselves and for the audience.

After the first chariot comes a large group of women singing worshipping songs to the gods, and then the two smaller chariots with *Murukan*¹⁴ and his two wives and *Sandeswarar*, respectively. The last two are pushed instead of pulled. At the back of the procession, yet another group of laymen who have chosen to show penance comes. First a group of men, who sacrifice their

¹⁴ Most of the eight Sri Lankan Tamil temples in Denmark are dedicated to *Murukan*.

body by rolling on the ground throughout the entire circulation - this action is called anka-p-piratatinam. Then comes a group of women who by kneeling at every third step and touch the ground with their forehead every time are showing a strong form of devotionism but also sacrifice - this is called ati piratatinam.

The circumambulation of the temple echoes the movement that is essential inside the temple, where the devotees always move clockwise around the shrines during pūjā. But whereas the circumambulation inside the temple does not usually take more than half an hour, this circumambulation of the temple lasts a couple of hours. In one respect, the religious meaning is the same: to worship and sanctify what is being circumambulated. The difference is that the Tēr circumambulation sanctifies both the temple (the dwelling place of the gods) and the surroundings, which the gods are now visiting. Consequently, at short intervals the chariots stop and the devotees can make offerings. A ladder is taken to the carriage, so that laymen can bring their offerings of fruit and incense, which they get back later when it has become prasada (blessed food). These stops for offerings are a relatively new addition during the Tēr festival in Denmark, but they are an ordinary feature of Tēr processions in Sri Lanka. The difference is that the procession in Sri Lanka visits the neighbourhood around the temple so individual households can make offerings and thereby gain a blessing for their household. This new addition in Denmark shows how the procession resembles the pattern known from Sri Lanka on the one hand, but has been adapted to the Danish cultural landscape on the other because it remains within the temple ground.

The circumambulation ends where it began, and the god representatives are now taken down from the chariots and carried back into the temple. The day ends with a large common meal that is consumed in the temple by all those who attend. It is now time to talk to those you have not seen for a long time, which is something many of the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus have been looking forward to. As one of them said, “Now that I have moved to Aarhus to study, it is rare that I see all my old friends and my family. I have an opportunity here and it is so cosy” (22-year-old woman).

The procession itself is of course the centre of the event, but there are many other events as well. The temple grounds are almost transformed into a marketplace where there are small food and snack bars, and more people can enjoy talking to each other than the number that can participate in the procession itself. The social and cultural element is thus just as central as the religious element for many of the participants. In particular, the bazaar or marketplace has grown in size over the last few years, as has the range of goods on offer. “It’s a welcome opportunity to buy some of the spices that are hard to get in Frederikshavn, where we come from,” an elderly woman

told me. In addition, the bazaar helps to attract children to the festival, because a lot of toys and sweets can be bought there.

The tenth day's festival ends the day after, where the gods is sent away or drowned in a bowl of water, whereby the temporary god's representation is now only a statue again.¹⁵

Concluding remarks

Hinduism is a religion concerned with places or sacred spaces that possess powers to fulfil wishes, to purify the mind or bad conduct, to heal and not least to get a glimpse of transcendental powers. In India and in Sri Lanka these places are established in the countryside – not least along rivers, which become tīrthas ('crossovers' and places for pilgrimage) if they are kept sacred. As a result, most of India as well as Sri Lanka is regarded as sacred geography, and many of the sacred narratives or myths are connected to this geography. So are the temples that are built in places where the divine spirit somehow seems to have manifested itself. This cannot be the case when building temples in diaspora, because they are built wherever possible. So, the divine spirit has to be invited to the temple, not vice versa. This may be one of the reasons for emphasising a very precise ritualistic conduct. Another, and possibly more important reason is that it is through rituals and through participating in rituals that group identity is kept. Or as expressed by Durkheim (1912) and later Rappaport (1974, 1999), ritual is *the* basic social act.

In my case study the consecrated Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu temples in Denmark become the accepted framework around a sacred space in which rituals can be conducted according to the tradition, and where participation in rituals somehow becomes not only the social signifier of an acceptance of belonging, but also the place where the new generation can be introduced to and become part of the group. In this way, the rituals conducted in the temple have to follow special codified patterns that are recognisable for the participants and can be taught to newcomers. Which is why rituals become the primary tradition bearer.

And because it is the performance or the participation, the form or the act, that is the crucial part of a ritual and not necessarily the theological meaning, it becomes easy to give new meaning or multiple meanings to a ritual in a new migratory setting. Which is why this paper is called: "Alike but different".

¹⁵ In Sri Lanka, the devotees would go to the sea when the god is sent away.

In other words, it can be argued that a diaspora situation has not only started a process of mobilisation, but also increased awareness about what should be kept as important tradition bearers in a new setting and under new circumstances. Therefore, some elements within what can be understood as a shared tradition are either slowly disappearing or are given a form that makes them more transmittable in the new setting, adapting them to suit the society in which they are now situated. In the case of the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus in Denmark, rituals of transition (such as different *samskāras*: name giving, and marriage) have moved from the private sphere to the temple, and the festivals and temple rituals are growing closer to orthopraxis on the one hand, while being adapted to the Danish calendar and the Danish working week on the other.

As hopefully shown in this article the day of Tēr is a huge attraction for many of the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus. It is both a day for socialising, meeting new and old friends, but it is also a day for recalling what is “Sri Lankan Tamilness”. They wear special Tamil clothes, eat Sri Lankan Tamil food together, sing Tamil songs and they can buy Sri Lankan spices, clothes or pictures of the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu gods at one of the many stalls lined up outside the temple. And they take part in some of the on-going rituals, which are the main or legitimizing reason for coming. In that way, the ritual becomes the pivot for meeting at all.

The most important part of the day is the circumambulation around the temple together with the gods. From a religious perspective, this is perceived as a way in which the gods can bless the surroundings but also purify the temple premises for the next year to come. From a communicative perspective, it is not only an example of auto- and allo-communication, but also an example of a visible statement or outer-communication to the surroundings.

As my case study hopefully has shown, institutional rituals form a common meeting point for most first- and second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus in Denmark. First of all because participation in rituals communicates belonging not only to others in the group, but also to individuals and society at large. It is participation and not what kind of meaning a person attaches to a ritual (a ritual produces multiple meanings) that is important, so such rituals become the cornerstone for social cohesion and collective memory in a migratory setting.

This does not mean that there is no religious diversity among Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus in the Danish diaspora. In particular, the theological understanding of the religion is changing from the first to the second generations. Instead my case study demonstrates that there is a need for some kind of common ground that binds a group together or at least communicates some kind of common shared belonging. This can be called a collective memory (Assmann 2006 and

Danièle Hervieu-Léger 2000: 124-125) that not only looking back in time, but are also securing the transmission of belonging in the future. This is where rituals and the participating in rituals in a migration setting becomes important. The ritual is therefore not just a none-reflexive reconstruction of former practice it is also a storing place of a collective meaning that can be transmitted to the next generations in the future. What interests me is therefore not so much the maintenance of symbolic universes, but rather the recalling or awareness of symbolic universes that can be used in the formation or establishment of this common source of idea or reference that is forming a group identity. And here rituals play a crucial role.

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