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You may cite this version as :

Fuller, C. (1993). Only Siva can worship Siva : ritual mistakes and their correction in a South Indian temple [online]. London: LSE Research Online.

Available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/archive/00000464>

This is an electronic version of an Article published in Contributions to Indian sociology, 27 (2). pp. 169-189 © 1993 SAGE Publications.

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'ONLY SIVA CAN WORSHIP SIVA':

RITUAL MISTAKES AND THEIR CORRECTION IN A SOUTH INDIAN TEMPLE

C.J. Fuller

The Great Temple at Madurai, Tamilnadu, formally known as the Arulmiku ('grace-bestowing') Minaksi-Sundaresvara Tirukkoyil ('temple'), is dedicated to the goddess Minaksi and her husband, the god Sundaresvara, who is a form of Siva. In Madurai, the goddess rather than the god is pre-eminent, and their temple is popularly called the 'Minaksi temple'. The Minaksi temple has a very complex festival cycle, but it includes only a few relatively minor events held solely or mainly for Sundaresvara; most festivals are celebrated for Minaksi and Sundaresvara jointly, or for the goddess alone. The most notable of Sundaresvara's own festivals is the Pavitra festival, the subject of this article. Although this festival is untypical of ritual activity in the Minaksi temple, it does raise questions of wider significance about ritual mistakes and the relationship between Siva and his priests, which I shall be examining.

The Pavitra festival

A Pavitra festival is celebrated annually in large temples of Siva and Visnu in Tamilnadu.¹ The festival's purpose is to correct mistakes made in rituals during the previous year, and to make complete what has been incomplete owing to those mistakes and any other associated faults on the part of the performers.

In Saiva temples, however, it is said that all this is achieved only because Siva practises ascetic austerities (tapas, Tamil tavam) in order to correct the mistakes made by his priests and other officiants. It is not those men, but the god himself, who has to undergo privation because of their mistakes, and in this article I shall discuss this ostensibly bizarre allocation of responsibility for rectifying incompetence and carelessness.

The Pavitra festival in the Minaksi temple lasts five days and ends on full-moon day in the Tamil solar month of aippaci (October-November). On the evening of the first day, the priest (Tamil pattar) in charge of the festival, accompanied by the 'Veda priest' (Tamil attiyana pattar) who chants the mantras and a musician who plays the mridangam, enters the ante-chamber (ardhamandapa) of Sundaresvara's main sanctum (garbhagrha).² On a platform inside the ante-chamber, a piece of cloth has been placed and round its edge is a loop of thread, the pavitra. On top of the cloth are nineteen items: seven made of iron, seven of wood and five of cotton, to which must be added the cloth itself and the thread to make seven in each group. The twenty-one items are said to be the accoutrements of a Saiva ascetic renouncer.³

The priest briefly does worship (puja) for the twenty-one items in the usual way by offering them food and waving a lamp. The priest and the Veda priest then go to a shrine in the hall (mahamandapa) next to the ante-chamber, which houses the movable, 'festival images' (utsava murti) of Candrasekhara, a form of Siva, and his consort. The priest ties a protective cord

(raksabandhana, Tamil kappu) round Candrasekhara's right wrist and another round his consort's left wrist, which is a standard procedure for any image about to play a leading part in a temple festival. The priest and the Veda priest, who is carrying a box of loops of thread (the pavitras), are now joined by the musician, and the three men walk to the outer, eastern gateway of the temple that opens towards Minaksi's main sanctum. The priest puts a thread across the left shoulder of the image of Vinayaka (Ganesa) to one side of the gateway, and then another on an image of Subrahmanya (Skanda) on the other side. Afterwards, he does the same for all the most important images in the temple, including Minaksi's main image and the movable images of Candrasekhara and his consort; he also places a thread over the main linga of Sundaresvara in his sanctum. Meanwhile, another priest puts threads on all the subsidiary images standing in the halls and corridors around Sundaresvara's sanctum. Once this task has been completed, the images of Candrasekhara and his consort are moved to the entrance of the mahamandapa. From there, they are carried in procession along the outer corridor round Sundaresvara's sanctum. At the end of the procession, the images are taken back to their shrine.

On the second, third and fourth days of the Pavitra festival, in the evening, the twenty-one items are worshipped and Candrasekhara and his consort are taken in procession, just as on the first day. On the last day, in the morning, the priest and the Veda priest walk round the temple collecting all the threads

from the images. In the mahamandapa, worship is offered to the threads before they are consigned to a sacrificial fire. The twenty-one items are then worshipped, before they are taken by the priest who is entitled to keep them for himself. On the evening of the last day, a procession of Candrasekhara and his consort closes the festival.

As a rather minor event, most of the Pavitra festival attracts little concern from devotees in the temple, although Candrasekhara's procession - like any procession - catches the attention of people in the vicinity when it takes place. It is safe to say, though, that the Pavitra festival, unlike more important events, really matters only to the priests and other temple officiants, and even they were unable to provide me with copious information about it. However, its purpose, as already mentioned, is plainly said to be the correction of all ritual mistakes made during the previous year. The priests did not claim that it allowed them carelessly to make mistakes, but despite suggestions that the Pavitra festival should be performed with special punctiliousness, it was actually done with no more care than any other comparable event when I observed it in 1976. The pavitra ritual is distinguished both from an ordinary reparation (or expiation) ritual (prayascitta), which should follow the known occurrence of a serious, specific error, and from an utsava santi ('festival pacification') ritual, which is held after each major festival and includes a plea to the deities to forgive mistakes made during it. Informants also stated

plainly that during the Pavitra festival, Siva himself is thought to be practising ascetic austerities in the forest in order to rectify the faults of his human ministrants and to efface their consequent 'sin' (Tamil pavam). The Tamil word pavam can also connote the misfortune likely to be caused by transgression, but it rarely implies any notion of personal guilt attached to what is, roughly, a venial rather than a mortal sin. In any case, though, as the priests recognise, it is not they who correct their ritual mistakes and atone for their sins, but Siva the ascetic whose accoutrements are worshipped. Moreover, partly because the mistakes and sins concern only those who serve in the temple, the issues to be discussed below are unknown to the vast majority of ordinary devotees. Hence this article is mainly about a restricted priestly discourse although, as I shall try to show, it does raise more general questions.

Priests' statements about the meaning and purpose of the Pavitra festival are broadly consistent with those in the Agamic texts. The Agamas (which will be discussed in more detail below) are medieval Sanskrit texts believed to contain Siva's own directions for his worship, and in Saiva temples all rituals should therefore be performed according to Agamic prescription. In the Minaksi temple (as in other Saiva temples in Tamilnadu), the Kamikagama is said to be authoritative, though some reference may be made to the Karanagama; the twelfth-century manual (paddhati) of Aghorasiva is also treated as authoritative. Aghorasiva's manual depends heavily on an earlier manual by

Somasambhu, which has been translated with a commentary by Brunner-Lachaux; strictly, Somasambhu's manual does not refer to temple worship, but Brunner-Lachaux's commentary (1968) on its description of the Pavitra festival is nonetheless pertinent.

An annual Pavitra festival is described in all the Agamas (Brunner-Lachaux 1968: vii), where it is generally referred to as pavitrarohana (ibid.: 2), 'putting on, offering of pavitra', which means much the same as the alternative name pavitraropana. The Agamic texts, like the Minaksi temple priests, make a clear distinction between the Pavitra festival and a reparation ritual (prayascitta). The latter is normally performed as and when required in response to a known fault, whereas the festival, which occurs at a fixed time each year, corrects all mistakes, known or unknown, and also perfects rituals that have not been done as well as they should have been (ibid.: vii). A Pavitra festival, with the same purpose, is also described as an important annual event in the Pancaratra Vaisnava texts governing ritual in many of Visnu's Tamil temples (H.D. Smith 1982: 30-1). The festival is not mentioned, however, in a major Vaikhanasa Vaisnava text (Goudriaan 1965), although the Kutal Alakar, Kallalakar and Parthasarathi temples (see note 1) all follow Vaikhanasa rules.

Kane (1974b: 339-40), in a brief note on pavitraropana, equates the pavitra with the 'sacred thread' (yajnopavita) of Brahman or twice-born adult males, but Brunner-Lachaux argues that this is incorrect, at least for Saivas. In particular,

whereas men wear their sacred threads all the time, the deities wear their pavitras only during the festival, and on many occasions deities actually are offered sacred threads, which are not confused with pavitras (1968: viii). In the Minaksi temple, the pavitras are yellow - ideally ochre, like the other cotton items - and they are therefore the threads of ascetics, not ordinary Brahmans, whose sacred threads are white. Yet informants in the temple readily compared the two kinds of thread and noted that the pavitras were placed on images exactly like sacred threads. Furthermore, the five-day Pavitra festival in Vaisnava temples in the Madurai area - Kutal Alakar, Kallalakar at Alagarkoil, and the smaller Krsna temple in the city - is timed to conclude on full-moon day in avani (August-September), which is when most Tamil Brahmans annually change their sacred threads.⁴ In the Krsna temple, the pavitras are in fact identical to ordinary sacred threads. An explicit purpose of the Brahmans's annual replacement of sacred threads is to efface the sins of the preceding year, including those ensuing from ritual mistakes (Stevenson 1920: 308), and there is thus a unambiguous similarity between thread changing and the Pavitra festival.⁵ Although we cannot treat the Pavitra festival in the Minaksi temple as if it were a Vaisnava event, officiants in both kinds of temple explain the purpose of Pavitra festivals in the same way, so that it is reasonable to underline the parallels between them and the annual renewal of the Brahmans' sacred threads.

Although the priests emphasise Siva's asceticism during the

Pavitra festival, the ritual representation of his state is actually ambivalent. The twenty-one iron, wood and cotton items are plainly offered to Siva for his use during the five days of the festival. Nonetheless, although the items are said to be the accoutrements of an ascetic renouncer, some of them appear rather inappropriate, such as the blowpipe to make a fire or the combs and scissors to do his hair; these items, at least by implication, are generally not permitted to ascetics by textual authorities (Kane 1974a: 931-8). In the Agamic texts, on the other hand, it is not uncommon to include items for Siva which will make his life more pleasant, rather than more austere, although the explanation for this apparent anomaly is not entirely clear, as Brunner-Lachaux (1968: 90-2) remarks. In the Minaksi temple, however, the most striking feature is that Candrasekhara and his consort take part in the Pavitra festival, whereas the movable image of Bhiksatana - Siva as a lone, naked beggar - does not appear, although it is used in several other festival processions to represent the god as an ascetic in the pine forest. In the temple, Candrasekhara is treated as Sundaresvara's principal representative or 'deputy' at minor festivals in which Sundaresvara himself does not actually appear. Hence Candrasekhara's participation in the Pavitra festival indicates that Sundaresvara, the presiding god of the temple, is the form of Siva who is involved, alongside his consort, in the processions. Significantly, each day's rituals and the festival as a whole close with the procession of the god and goddess

together, and this mirrors the pattern developed at festivals celebrated for Minaksi alone. Thus in the Pavitra festival, the lone god must finally be re-united with his wife, just like the lone goddess joins her husband at the end of her festivals; the prime condition is consistently portrayed as the marital unity of Minaksi and Sundaesvara (Fuller 1980). So strongly does Tamil temple Saivism represent Siva as the goddess's husband and lover that even in a festival in which he assumes the guise of an ascetic, he cannot remain in this state for long.⁶

If the involvement of the goddess in the Minaksi temple's Pavitra festival represents one significant departure from the Agamic model, in which she has no role, another deviation is marked by the absence of any suggestion that the priests themselves join their god in his temporary asceticism. Wearing the pavitra itself signifies observance of a vow, and the priests recognise that Siva is undertaking votive asceticism on their behalf. Yet Agamic texts say that officiants should also observe restrictions as a sign of their votive asceticism, and that the pavitras must be given not only to all other deities (as occurs in the Minaksi temple), but also to the patron of the temple, the priests and other ritual servants. The threads should be worn throughout the festival and removed at the end to mark completion of the vow jointly observed by the god and those who serve him (Brunner-Lachaux 1968: ix-x, 156, 164-8).

Concerning the priests' non-participation in Siva's austerities, Brunner-Lachaux argues that contemporary practice in

south Indian temples is

a degeneration of a more modest religious rite whose essential element was [the] purification of the officiant through severe privation, which he undertook to observe for a given time - the threads offered to God being no more than the sign of this promise. For, if it is necessary to have one's errors and omissions pardoned, is it not more natural to impose a discipline on oneself, rather than to offer an expensive ritual to God to persuade him? (ibid.: 168)

Brunner-Lachaux's argument reflects her belief that temple Hinduism in modern south India represents a sad decline from the higher standards set out in medieval Agamic texts. Thus, for example, she argues elsewhere (Brunner 1988: 160) that contemporary temple priests, mostly 'functionaries of the worst sort', are a far cry from the spiritual masters of the past, and she insists that the texts themselves show that these men were not just mythical figures. Since my own data on Minaksi temple priests (Fuller 1984: 131-3) are cited in support of her argument, I should say that I do not subscribe to it. No doubt, in medieval times there were, as there are today, a minority of exemplary religious personages. The Agamic texts themselves, however, provide no evidence either that the general standard of religious observance used to be higher, or that the gap between Agamic prescription and temple practice was once narrower than it is today. More pertinently, the Pavitra festival now celebrated

in the Minaksi temple cannot be satisfactorily analysed by dismissing it as scripturally degenerate. Instead, the festival has to be understood in its own contemporary context. That requires us to examine in more detail the relationship between Siva and his priests, so that we can see why he must correct their mistakes in the festival.

Siva, the priests and the Agamas

In Tamil temple Hinduism, which is pervaded by the ethos of devotion or bhakti, the idea that the deities, through their grace, save their devotees from sin and misfortune is absolutely central. Devotion to god can be expressed in a multitude of ways, but one important form - especially when redemption and release from suffering are sought - is the observance of a 'vow' (vrata). A vow typically involves some kind of ascetical privation like that undertaken at the annual festival of Mahasivaratri ('Great Siva's night'), when devotees fast and worship Siva throughout the night. At Mahasivaratri, aptly described by Long (1982) as a Saiva 'festival of repentance' that is simultaneously a vow, release from sin and its consequences is a principal objective. Moreover, as is well-known, quasi-ascetic vows in contemporary popular and devotional Hinduism are a partial continuation of the classical idea that asceticism itself is the principal means of eliminating sin and its taint or pollution, which are destroyed by the 'heat' (tapas) generated by

ascetic austerities (Kaelber 1979: 208-10). In Hindu mythology, a celebrated illustration of this idea is the myth of Siva's kapalika ('skull-bearer') vow, when he wandered as an ascetic beggar, performing tapas, to expiate the sin of brahmanicide. Siva committed this sin when he cut off one of Brahma's heads, whose skull stuck to his hand until he reached Benares. Frequently, this myth forms part of the myth of the pine forest, which Siva enters as Kapalika or Bhiksatana (O'Flaherty 1973: 123-4; 1976: 277-86).

In general terms, the Pavitra festival resonates with pervasive Hindu themes: that deities save their devotees from sin and misfortune, that the latter can be overcome by ascetical vows, and that Siva himself practises asceticism to expiate sin. The special peculiarity of the festival, though, which also marks it out from all other religious activity in the Minaksi temple, is that Siva becomes an ascetic for the sake of his priests; he does not effortlessly shower his redemptive grace upon them as he so often does for his devotees, and the priests do not have to observe any kind of votive asceticism, as is typically expected from penitents. The implication, therefore, is that Siva is somehow culpable and bears responsibility for the mistakes and sins of his priests, even though nothing in the Pavitra festival hints at any crime like brahmanicide. Let me now turn to the question of Siva's culpability.

There is a pair of notable Agamic precepts, well-known to Minaksi temple priests, which say that 'one must become Siva to

worship Siva' and that 'only Siva can worship Siva' (Brunner-Lachaux 1963: xxxviii, 130). I shall briefly discuss the implications of these precepts as they appear in Agamic theology, before turning to the priests' own understanding of them.

The Minaksi temple priests, like all Saiva priests in Tamilnadu, are Adisaivas. Adisaivas form an endogamous subcaste that is generally regarded as Brahman, but is ranked below other, non-priestly Brahman subcastes. The priests' position in the caste system is, however, irrelevant here and it is more important that, according to the Agamas, the Adisaivas - 'first Saivas' - are the lineal descendants of five sages who emerged from Sadasiva.⁷ A central tenet of south Indian Agamic Saivism is that the spiritual progress of a soul (atman) towards liberation (moksa, mukti), marked by and partly achieved through a series of three initiations (diksa), culminates in the soul's emergence into its true 'state of Siva' or 'Siva-ness' (sivatva) (Brunner-Lachaux 1977: xi; Davis 1991: 84-5). With some restrictions, any man (but not a woman) can undergo the initiations and perform 'private' worship of Siva on his own behalf (atmarthapuja). In contrast, 'public' worship on behalf of others (pararthapuja) as conducted in temples can be carried out only by Adisaivas. Moreover, an Adisaiva man, after taking the three initiations, must also be consecrated by a senior Adisaiva, his guru, and only after the consecration (acaryabhiseka) does he become qualified to perform public worship in Saiva temples. Because he has been fully initiated,

an Adisaiva priest is in principle filled with 'Siva-ness', and the consecration gives him the additional power to act as Siva in public worship of the god (Brunner 1988: 146).

South Indian Agamic Saivism is doctrinally dualist, so that even the liberated soul who is identical to Siva is still 'a' Siva who is distinct from the god himself and was liberated by his grace (Brunner-Lachaux 1977: xi). Nevertheless, insists Brunner-Lachaux, the final objective is 'to become Siva' (ibid.: xii), whereas Davis, always stressing Agamic dualism, renders the second precept as 'only a Siva can worship Siva' (1991: 52) and entitles his chapter 3 'Becoming a Siva'. Including the English 'a' does draw attention to the dualist doctrine, but it arguably overstates its significance and I follow Brunner-Lachaux in omitting the indefinite article. Moreover, the theological difference between dualism and monism (in which the liberated soul is completely undifferentiated from god) is largely irrelevant to most ordinary Hindus, including Minaksi temple priests.

The Agamas, as we know, contain Siva's own directions for his worship. According to the texts themselves:

the knowledge contained in the agamas comes originally from the mouth of Siva, who knows all. . . . By an act of grace, Siva transmits the various agamas to appropriate divinities, who in turn allow the most eminent sages to hear the teachings, and these sages then pass the agamas on to other human auditors. Saivas call this

the tantravatara, the "descent" of the agama texts from Siva to the Saiva community. (Davis 1991: 29)

The community is limited to people who have been properly initiated, including Adisaiva priests, and Agamic teaching must not be transmitted to others (ibid.: 12). The Agamas also insist that the knowledge contained in them is superior to other forms of divinely created knowledge, including the Vedas, and this is because it 'results originally from the omniscience of its source, Siva' (ibid.: 29).

Although the Agamas (like other Hindu scriptures) were written down and preserved in manuscript form, they have always been primarily transmitted orally from teacher to pupil, as they still are today in Agamic schools (pathasala) where students mainly learn by memorising what their guru recites to them. In principle, therefore, today's student hears and learns exactly the 'word of god'. As is well-known, in the Hindu tradition hearing and memorisation are the indispensable means by which sacred knowledge is transmitted down the generations through the 'succession of teachers' (guruparampara). Generally in Hinduism, oral scripture has primacy over any written version of it and in this respect the Agamas are entirely typical. Nevertheless, it is often recognised that for a variety of reasons the accurate oral transmission of texts cannot always be guaranteed, despite the extraordinary skills of mnemonical memorisation developed among Hindus, so that recourse to written texts may sometimes be desirable, as Parry (1985: 207) observes in a different context.

Yet defective transmission in itself is not necessarily the most serious problem confronting human auditors of the word of god. Far worse, at least for those trying to comply with Siva's instructions on ritual, is that human beings lack divine omniscience; as the Agamas proclaim, 'only Siva knows everything [and] only the knowledge spoken by him can claim to be truly complete' (Davis 1991: 30). People are born with 'fetters' (pasa) in ignorance, and although the liberated soul finally attains Siva's own omniscient power of knowledge (ibid.: 27; Brunner-Lachaux 1977: xi), anyone else is inevitably deficient in it. Thus the precept that 'only Siva can worship Siva' also implies that only Siva (and liberated souls) can fully understand his own directions for worship, and in general the Agamas are clear that ritual action and knowledge are mutually interdependent: 'Without correct knowledge, one's ritual practice will be shaky and finally fruitless' (Davis 1991: 35).

Among Minaksi temple priests, the Agamic precepts are taken to mean that a priest must become a form of Siva before he can worship him; this transformation is first achieved when a priest is initiated and consecrated by his guru, and it is repeated thereafter when the priest invokes Siva in himself before starting a ritual (Fuller 1979: 467-8; 1984: 14-15, 28-30). Much the same outlook is found among priests in the great Saiva temple of Tiruvannamalai, for whom the 'often repeated' statement that '"the arccakar [priest] is Siva", is therefore nothing but a simple formula' (Reiniche 1989: 82). In popular Hinduism, the

permeability between the divine and human is commonplace; the priest who becomes a form of Siva is but one of countless instances of the same general phenomenon wherein a person assumes a divine form, and it is itself a logical corollary of the religion's fluid polytheism. Yet for ordinary people, as opposed to Agamic or other theologians who postulate the possibility of fully attaining divine qualities, the difference between deities - especially transcendent deities like Siva - and human beings is patent, and never dissolves the ineradicable distinction between immortal deities and mortal people (Fuller 1992: 30-1).

Consistently with this realist perception, for the temple priests initiation and consecration have less to do with spiritual progress towards liberation than qualification for priestly office (Fuller 1984: 30; 1985), although the emphasis on qualification (as I note below) has probably been reinforced in recent times. Thus the priests recognise at one level that initiation and consecration make them into forms of Siva, but they do not pretend that they share his omniscience as liberated souls and they also know full well that they remain men who are distinct from Siva, the transcendent god whom they worship.

Nonetheless, even if a priest is only a human, inferior form of Siva, the Agamic precepts still imply that any mistakes made by a priest are made by a form of Siva, who is consequently tainted by them. Thus Siva, in insisting through the Agamas that his priests be forms of himself, has to accept a share of their culpability. Moreover - and this implication is more patent to

the priests - if only Siva can worship Siva, his worship by anyone else cannot be proper worship. Hence priests, because they are still men with ordinary human failings, cannot worship the god perfectly and cannot avoid making mistakes; the fundamental reason for this is that omniscient Siva is the sole being who can fully understand his own instructions for worship, and how and why he is pleased by it. All this, as we have already seen, is consistent with the Agamic view that without full knowledge, ritual practice must be defective.

At this point, the problem of ritual error needs to be considered in a little more detail. Among Indologists, the problem has recently been taken up by Brian K. Smith in a critical discussion of theories of Vedic ritualism. Smith (1989: 38-40) is particularly severe on Staal's theory of the 'meaninglessness of ritual' (1979), in which ritual is said to be self-contained and performed for its own sake without reference to external functions, aims or goals. In ritual, according to Staal: 'Not only have we established the rules ourselves, so that we are completely in control; we are also assured of its success. If one rite goes wrong, another takes its place' (ibid.: 10). Patently, since Agamic ritual (like much ritual) is for its practitioners governed by rules established by god, Staal's claim makes no interpretative sense. Admittedly, Staal adopts an extreme position on ritual meaninglessness compared with Heesterman, whom Smith also criticises, and Heesterman (1985: 88) does acknowledge that the 'ritual order' can be impaired by the

external fact of human error. Developing this point, Smith stresses the significance of ritual imperfection amongst human beings; he writes:

The history of Vedic ritualism ... is partly impelled by the fact that, even in ritual, perfection is impossible in this life. Ritual manuals or prayogas, which attempt with ever increasing specificity to account for all eventualities, for all the minute details of performing the ritual, were continuously produced through the millennia right up to the present. The enterprise is doomed to failure ... but the tragically heroic attempt is one underexposed aspect of the destiny of the Vedic sacrifice in Indian history.
(B.K. Smith 1989: 45)

Indeed, as Smith also shows, early post-Vedic sacrificial texts acknowledge inevitable failure because human beings fundamentally differ from deities in being imperfect and unsuccessful; 'The perfection of the gods, acquired by and realized in their ability to perform the ritual without error, was for humans an ideal rather than a realistic goal' (ibid.: 107). Moreover, however completely a human being performs a ritual, 'one can never be certain that ritual perfection - the timely and correct performance of every minute detail - has ever been achieved' (ibid.: 108).

Despite the sharper distinction between divine and human beings found in Vedism compared with later Hinduism (ibid.: 118),

Smith's argument is relevant to our material as well. Agamic manuals can also be understood as ultimately vain responses to the problem of ritual imperfection, rather than just as further refinements of the theory and practice of Saiva ritualism. In the manuals' lengthy descriptions of reparation rituals (prayascitta), as well as their frequent references to the permissibility of rituals of 'inferior quality', there is a tacit admission that not everything can always be done perfectly, especially in the current degenerate era.⁸ The early texts referred to by Smith, which recognise that perfect ritual is not a realistic human goal, may evince a hard-headed realism less apparent in later texts that presuppose the possibility of liberated souls attaining divine qualities. Whether or not this is true, however, Brunner-Lachaux asks if the Pavitra festival, being easier to conduct than innumerable separate reparation rituals, could be a response to 'human feebleness', and she immediately concludes that that is 'difficult to believe' (1968: vii). In insisting throughout her work that Saiva ritualism is rational and meaningful, and that it has a function and purpose, Brunner-Lachaux is certainly persuasive. Nonetheless, for her the imagined practitioner of the Agamic rituals that she analyses is an accomplished master who seems to have overcome all ordinary human failings, and this is even more apparent in the work of Davis, who writes: 'Though by definition still fettered and limited in knowledge and action, the worshiper can temporarily free himself from these limitations within the sphere of puja'

(1991: 163).

In the light of Smith's comments on ritual manuals, it is debatable whether the Agamic texts should be analysed in such a consistently 'perfectionist' way, and Brunner-Lachaux may have dismissed too hastily the possibility that they do implicitly recognise the factor of human feebleness. It is also revealing that Davis, who sees the impact of Tamil devotionalism as particularly crucial in partly severing Agamic ritual texts from their medieval 'theological moorings' (ibid.: 18), should suggest that this separation lies behind the 'theological disarray' of the Minaksi temple priests as described by me (ibid.: 169, n. 32). Davis is right that the priests' 'disarray' is related to the uneasy conjunction between ritualism and devotionalism, because the latter tends to diminish the importance accorded to ritual exactitude (Fuller 1984: 141-2). But that is not the only cause; the priests' state of mind owes just as much to their own recognition that they, unlike the imagined masters of Davis's own analysis, are ordinary men who cannot worship Siva as he alone can do, because they can never overcome all human limitations. Theological disarray, surely, is and was the normal condition among almost all worshippers of Siva and even scholarly analysis of the texts as meaningful discourse needs to take this into account. To analyse texts solely from the perspective of their own internal coherence is to ignore their relationship with most of the people to whom they were and are intendedly addressed - namely ordinary priests and other Saivas who know full well that

they lack divine power and omniscience.

Given the perennial existence of human fallibility, of which an omniscient god must be fully aware, it follows that Siva once again bears part of the responsibility for his priests' mistakes, because he has not made himself clear enough to them. Although I never heard them phrase it so directly, the Minaksi temple priests sometimes came close to criticising Siva for leaving them in the dark. Thus some priests, when exasperated by questions about ritual which they could not answer, would tell me to go and ask Siva himself; how was anyone else supposed to know what the rituals meant? Sometimes my questions were fairly difficult; for example, I remember baffling several priests by uncomprehendingly asking them why precautions had to be taken to protect Siva against minor evil spirits when he was surely capable of destroying them at will. But sometimes, my questions were much more straightforward. For example, everyone knows that Siva delights in elaborate bathing rituals (abhiseka) and it is, after all, an Indian custom to be bathed in perfumed oils. But who, I asked, wants to be bathed in squashed plantains, sugar-cane juice or boiled rice? Siva does, we know he does and we know the Agamas say so, but as to why, admitted the priests, we cannot tell you. Obviously, on such occasions, I was irritating my informants with questions that nobody usually asks. When I had not exhausted their patience, they would generally insist that the right answers to my perplexing questions were indeed to be found in the Agamas, so that I ought to look them up or consult

an expert familiar with them. That sounds like reasonable advice, but in fact it only returns us to the problem of whether Siva's directions can be properly followed by his priests.

A minority of priests have attended Agamic schools, and I shall shortly discuss the impact of this education on their outlook. The majority of priests, however, have had no significant Agamic training and their knowledge of the texts' contents is superficial. Nonetheless, all priests, educated or not, flatly insist that the Agamas do contain ritual directions that they ought to follow. Yet the idea of exact adherence to Agamic prescription is illusory. As I have previously shown in more detail (1984: 139-42), neither the Agamas nor the manuals based on them (such as the authoritative Aghorasiva's) include explicit, detailed instructions about how to perform all the rituals in particular temples, as they are widely thought to do. Thus, for instance, although the Agamas list the substances to be used in bathing rituals for Siva (including items like sugar-cane juice) (Brunner-Lachaux 1963: 200), they do not state precisely which substances should be used to bathe which images on which occasions, and they do not explain why Siva likes to be bathed in sticky juice or food. Further, any attempt to conform to the general instructions which are reasonably explicit would normally impose completely impractical demands on the priests' time and patience. Finally, because the Agamas are as concerned with immaterial transformations achieved through mental and spiritual means, as they are with physical rituals, nobody could deduce

from observation of the rituals whether Agamic directions were completely adhered to or not. Hence the most salient fact about the demand that all rituals should be performed correctly according to Siva's Agamic instructions is that it could never be fully and verifiably met.

The ritual mistakes corrected at the Pavitra festival are therefore not quite what they seem. When priests admit, as they often do, that they have not followed Agamic rules when performing a ritual, they are really saying that they have not done what they think they should do with reference to what they think the Agamas say (cf. Fuller 1984: 145). In reality, a large proportion of the rules belong to the Minaksi temple's own ritual tradition. Even for priests educated in Agamic schools, their presumptive knowledge of the rules is mainly based on a grasp of largely inherited practical knowledge, not on familiarity with Agamic texts. Clearly, in the light of this body of knowledge, the priests (or others) may decide that they have done a ritual 'incorrectly', but such a decision is hardly ever made - or normally even could be made - by specific reference to Siva's own words as set out in the Agamas.

No priest would ever accept this line of argument, of course, precisely because they do insist that the Agamas contain instructions that they should follow. Moreover, even though priests misconceive Agamic rules, it does not follow that there are no standards by which their ritual performance may be judged. Carrying out rituals at the wrong time or chanting the deities'

names incompletely, to mention but two common examples, are plainly faults with respect to both what the Agamas say and what priests think they say. Indeed, because such faults - as recognised by the priests themselves - are persistently committed in the temple, some priests worry that an angry Siva may eventually take revenge on them. More usually, though, the priests shift much of the blame on to the temple's administrative officials, and they also commonly assert that their devotion to Minaksi and Sundaresvara will protect them (ibid.: 146). Yet in spite of their insistence that they should adhere to Agamic directions so that they do not misperform rituals, the priests, as we have seen, also accept that they cannot fully comprehend what Siva has told them and why. In the final analysis, the dogmatic assertion that Siva's instructions must be followed exactly is inconsistent with the priests' acknowledgement that only Siva can worship himself, as well as the implicit corollary that the god bears part of the responsibility for their misunderstandings and mistakes. Placed in relation to that corollary, the Pavitra festival in the Minaksi temple can be understood as a meaningful ritual which is consistent with the priests' understanding of the Agamic precept that only Siva can worship Siva, even though it appears to subvert their obligation to adhere precisely to Agamic prescription.

Plainly, too, Siva himself must correct the priests' ritual mistakes at the Pavitra festival. On the one hand, if he did not do so and left the work to them, it would merely lead to more

mistakes in the festival itself and make it futile, and on the other hand, since Siva alone can know exactly what mistakes have been made and how much sin has been committed, only he can efface the sins of both himself and the priests. If the Pavitra festival is to make complete what has been incomplete, Siva himself must take charge. Maybe the festival would conform more closely to Agamic doctrine if the priests also undertook votive austerities, but logically it would make no difference to the presumptive efficacy of the festival. The festival is neither inconsistent nor incoherent because the priests avoid privation; to avoid endless regression, Siva alone must assume the duty of correcting ritual mistakes and annulling their consequences effectively, and that is exactly what he is said to do in the Minaksi temple's Pavitra festival.

Agamic education and reformist criticism

In 1925, the government of Madras established the Hindu Religious Endowments (HRE) Board. The Board was given the power to control temple trustees' committees, which were widely believed to be corrupt and inefficient. Within a relatively short time, however, the Board was concerned about ritual misperformance and the alleged incompetence of temple priests uneducated in the Agamas. This concern - shared by the Board's more powerful successor, the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (HRCE) Department set up in 1951 - has motivated all official efforts to

reform or 'purify' temple Hinduism in Tamilnadu (Presler 1987: ch. 7), which themselves form part of the much wider reformist movement in contemporary Hinduism. Saiva temple priests have probably always insisted that rituals should conform to Agamic rules, but systematic criticism of their incompetence by outsiders is undoubtedly a mainly modern development. For reformists - such as officials in the HRE Board and HRCE Department - it is self-evident that priests should be properly trained in the Agamas so that they can do their work competently. The reformists' desire to see temple rituals performed to high standards is, in itself, coherent and reasonable, but their assumption that the Agamas contain clear and specific prescriptive rules defining those standards is false, as I have already shown. Yet because the priests do not dissent from that assumption, they cannot defend themselves by arguing that an insistence on Agamic exactitude is misconceived. Instead, the priests have largely internalised reformist criticism, so that they too think that their lack of proficiency can be resolved by Agamic education (Fuller 1984: ch. 6).

The majority of priests in the Minaksi temple have only a superficial knowledge of the Agamic texts, as I stated above. In 1980, out of 56 priests then working more or less regularly in the temple, two priests - one elderly and one middle-aged - were reputed to be reasonably knowledgeable about the content of the Agamas, although neither of them had had any formal education in them. Several other priests were said to have taken short

training courses, but only one young priest (a son of the elderly knowledgeable priest) had completed a full-time, six-year course at an Agamic school (ibid.: 138-9). By 1991, after dipping slightly in the mid-1980s, the number of working priests had risen to 72. The elder of the two knowledgeable priests just mentioned was semi-retired, and the other priest, despite the doctorate awarded to him by a Sanskrit college in 1988, was facing something of a challenge to his reputation from the elder man's son. The latter, now about forty years old, has been followed into the temple by four other priests who have also spent five or six years at an Agamic school, and a fifth who has had eighteen months' personal tuition from an Agamic teacher. To these five may be added several more who have had shorter periods of Agamic education. It is also relevant that whereas in 1980 only one priest had a B.Sc. degree and one had reached the pre-university certificate level, by 1991, one priest had an M.A., three more had a B.Sc., one had a B.Com., and two others had reached the pre-university level. The priest with the M.A. and one with a B.Sc. are among those who have undertaken long-term Agamic education.

Although the absolute numbers are small, this alteration in the priests' educational profile is significant; it also represents a more determined attempt to deal with reformist criticism of priestly incompetence than I had previously thought likely (ibid.: 139).⁹ In 1991, unlike a decade earlier, there was a core group of mainly young priests who had had lengthy

Agamic education, college education, or both; compared with their elders, these men tend to display a more self-confident, articulate understanding of temple Hinduism and their role in it. Moreover, the cohort of men recruited since 1980 now makes up almost half the total complement of priests working in the Minaksi temple and most of them, even those who did not complete their school education, are better educated than their fathers. For this younger generation, the core group of highly-educated priests are spokesmen who attach far more importance to formal education, including Agamic education, than the older generation.

The first priest to receive an Agamic education attended the school at Allur, a village near Tirucchirappalli (ibid.: 137-8), and two others have since been there; another went to the school in Pillaiyarpatti village near Karaikkudi, which is financially supported by Natukkottai Chettiyars, and another to the school attached to the Palani Murukan temple. In these schools, the students spend much of their time memorising Agamic verses, mantras and namavalis (deities' names), and they also receive some tuition in the Vedas and the Tamil devotionalist canon. Although I have not carried out detailed research on the Agamic schools, I know that they are almost entirely traditional in their pedagogical organisation, much like the Vedic schools in Tamilnadu described by Subramaniam (1974: 59-67). In the Agamic schools, most of the students' time is taken up with the rote-learning of Sanskrit passages recited to them by the guru, and enormous emphasis is placed on exact memorisation. In contrast,

explanation and comprehension - the ideal goals of modern education - are given much less weight.¹⁰ Unfortunately, I lack adequate data on exactly what the students are taught, which textual passages they learn, and how the relationship between the texts and ritual practice is presented to them. A significant feature, however, is that students acquire practical experience as well, especially in Pillaiyarpatti school. When the schools' gurus are invited to carry out temple renovation and consecration rituals (kumbhabhiseka) or other special rituals, students accompany them as assistants, and senior students are sometimes sent away to perform such rituals by themselves. Priests who have been educated in Agamic schools insist on the importance of oral learning and memorisation, on which they are examined at the end of the course, but they stress the value of practical work as well. Moreover, although they recognise the distinctively religious character of their education, they also describe it as a professional training that qualifies them for the priesthood, rather like medical education provides a professional qualification for doctors. This view has almost certainly reinforced the already widespread perception among the priests that the main function of their own consecration is to qualify them for their work. Consistently with such an outlook, graduates of the Agamic schools - who title themselves 'man of learning in the Saiva Agamas' (Tamil civakama cironmani) - tend to conceptualise the Agamas as difficult but nonetheless exact technical texts that can be learnt and put into practice with

good training. Although I have never heard any priest suggest that Agamic education could be pursued by studying books, the educated priests - rather like the judges who have decided cases with reference to the Agamas (Fuller 1984: 156-8) - tend to take a positivist attitude towards the texts and textual knowledge. In their eyes, therefore, it is a lack of education and training, rather than a human want of omniscient intelligence, that prevents uneducated priests from grasping and following Siva's instructions.¹¹

This positivist attitude is probably encouraged by increased participation in the secular educational system. Priests who have been to Agamic schools consistently emphasise the value of secular education as well because, they say, it trains people to think intelligently about a range of issues, so that priests can understand their own vocation better and can explain the value and purpose of ritual to others, including temple administrative officials and ordinary devotees. An ability to argue cogently about the rights and wrongs of ritual practice with administrative officials is perceived as especially valuable in resisting their interference in priestly responsibilities. In the long run, some educated priests optimistically believe, their educational standing will progressively raise the esteem of priests in the eyes of the general public, which will cease to see them as unlearned and incompetent. According to the younger educated priests, most of their older colleagues not only lack professional qualifications; they are also ignorantly

inarticulate about the religious tradition to which they belong. To that extent, the younger men echo reformist criticism of the temple priesthood, but they generally exempt themselves from it. In public, younger priests are deferentially polite to their seniors, although they criticise them behind their backs, and older priests assent to the value of education, which is consistent with their acknowledgement of reformist criticism. The older priests are, of course, aware of their younger colleagues' attitude, but they are not overly impressed. Predictably enough, they tend to insist that long experience is more important than formal training, and they also point out that younger priests, even the best-educated ones, do not normally carry out rituals any more scrupulously than they do.

Furthermore, the younger educated priests' outlook is a departure from the implication of the Agamic precept that only Siva can worship Siva owing to human lack of divine knowledge, because they are claiming that Agamic education can give them the professional competence needed to perform rituals in accordance with the god's directions. In Agamic theology, as we have seen, the worship of Siva in his temples can be properly carried out only by Adisaivas who are filled with 'Siva-ness' and have been given the power to act as Siva. Becoming Siva entails a difficult religious transformation that is completely distinct from the acquisition of a professional priestly qualification through Agamic education. Admittedly, no priest thinks that education turns a man into a god and strips him of his human

failings. Yet the positivist idea that priests can be trained in a body of knowledge to become professionally qualified is, at least potentially, less consistent with Agamic logic than the more traditional assumption that priests, as fallible human beings who cannot attain god's omniscience, can never conduct Siva's worship perfectly. Agamic education, when treated as a form of professional training, tends to undermine the fundamental axiom that the Agamas, being Siva's revelation, can be completely understood only by Siva and liberated souls who have become him.

Nonetheless, even the best-trained younger priests in the Minaksi temple accept that they do not perform Siva's rituals inerrantly, and that in practice they still deviate frequently from what are presumed to be Agamic rules. None of them is likely to suggest that in the future the Pavitra festival - which is after all prescribed by the Agamas - can be discontinued because Siva will no longer have to make complete what has been left incomplete. For younger educated priests, reflecting reformist thinking, imperfection in ritual may ideally be overcome, whereas older priests tend to regard it as intrinsic to the human condition. Until perfection is attained, however, the precept that 'only Siva can worship Siva' will remain true for all his priests.

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Acknowledgements: Research in Madurai was carried out for 12 months in 1976-77 (supported by the Social Science Research Council), 2 months in 1980 (supported by the British Academy), and 2 weeks each in 1984, 1988 and 1991 (supported by the London School of Economics). For comments on earlier drafts of this article, I thank Johnny Parry and participants at university seminars in London, Oxford, Edinburgh, St Andrews, Heidelberg, Princeton and Harvard.

Notes

1. Besides the Minaksi temple, a Pavitra festival is known to be held in the Nellaiyappar (Siva) temple in Tirunelveli, and in the Vaisnava temples of Kutal Alakar in Madurai, Kallalakar in Alagarkoil (near Madurai), Varadarajasvami in Kanchipuram (Raman 1975: 105), Parthasarathi in Madras (Martin 1982: 63, 69), and also Venkatesvara in Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh (Sitapati 1972: 145-7). Were more data available, this list of temples would probably be considerably longer.

2. For more data on the Minaksi temple's structure, shrines and images, and on its priests and other officiants, see Fuller (1984: chs. 1 & 2).

3. The items are: iron: blade to trim fingernails, tweezers to remove nasal hair, implement to remove thorns from feet, comb,

scissors, container for black eye pigment, blowpipe for making fire; wood: sandals, club, staff, crutch to support neck, comb, fine comb to remove lice, pot for vibhuti (sacred ash); cotton: bag for vibhuti, small shoulder-bag, loin-cloth, rope for deer, turban, cloth, pavitra.

4. The solar month avani corresponds to the lunar month sravana, on whose full-moon day most Brahmans outside Tamilnadu change their sacred threads, although sravana (July-August) actually falls approximately four weeks before avani.

5. In his brief description, Underhill (1991: 132-4) also reports that both the renewal of the sacred thread and the pavitraropana festival occur on sravana full-moon day. From Underhill and Kane (1974b: 340), it appears that the Pavitra festival is held in Maharashtra, but with the data available it is impossible even to guess how widely it is celebrated in different regions of India.

6. Compare Yocum's analysis (1986) of the presence of the goddess in an unusual Tamil temple at Avadayarkoil that is dedicated to an ascetic form of Siva.

7. For more on Adisaivas and their status, see Fuller (1984: chs. 2 & 3) and Reiniche (1989: chs. 3 & 6).

8. A long section of Somasambhu's manual (Brunner-Lachaux 1968:

pt. 3) lists numerous faults with reparation rituals to correct them, including one to correct a failure to make the annual offering of pavitras! (ibid.: 258). Comparable reparation rituals are detailed at length in a Vaikhanasa ritual text (Goudriaan 1965: chs. 92-103). Lists of graded rituals or ritual items are ubiquitous in the manuals; a minor but typical example is the statement that in previous eras, pavitras were made of gold, silver or copper, but in the current kali era they are made of cotton or else of anything that can be used (Brunner-Lachaux 1968: 20).

9. One relevant factor in the priests' reaction to reformist criticism is their renewed optimism about the present Tamilnadu government's policy towards temples. The government of Ms Jayalalitha, elected in 1991, has ambitious plans for renovating the state's temples and improving the condition of the priests, and these include better training facilities for them. By 1992, about 750 temple priests had been selected for a one-year 'refresher course' which apparently proved 'to be tremendously popular with priests' (India Today, 30 November 1992, p. 84). The same report quoted one young priest's characteristically mechanistic comment: "The course is like a battery charger. For our generation of priests the battery is a bit low with regard to both theory and practice."

10. The parallel with traditional Quranic schools in Morocco is

striking; there too there was a 'lack of explicit explanation of memorized material' (Eickelman 1978: 493). In the Quranic schools, 'an informal attempt to explain meaning was considered blasphemy and simply did not occur', which is not true in Agamic schools, but Eickelman's observation that 'the measure of understanding was implicit and consisted of the ability to use particular Quranic verses in appropriate contexts' (ibid.: 494) is salient, because educated priests often try to explain the form and purpose of rituals by citing purportedly relevant Agamic passages, even when they cannot provide an explicit connection between the ritual and the quoted verses.

11. The reformist movement, of course, is a vehicle for religious rationalisation in Weber's sense, inasmuch as it takes the Agamic texts to be a systematic body of divine revelation, seeks to ensure that ritual action is consistent with the texts, and tries to ensure that properly-trained priests display a 'motivational commitment' (Parsons 1964: xxxiii) to both Agamic doctrine and ritual practice. In this respect, it is significant that for reformists the Agamas, although still transmitted orally in the schools, tend to be treated like scriptures fixed by writing, so that they fulfil the paradigmatic role of a 'written tradition'. Commenting on Weber, Parsons writes: 'Written tradition provides a basis for further differentiation of the [religious] system precisely because it is a focus of stability which can be made independent of complete traditionalization of the status of

concrete groups, notably priestly groups' (ibid.: xxxviii). Thus for reformists, the Agamas can become a 'focus for stability' - or purported stability - that allows them to challenge the priestly status group and its 'traditionalist' understanding of Agamic temple ritual. In recent years, at least in the Minaksi temple, younger educated priests have partly begun to participate in the challenge as well.