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THE BASKET, HAIR, THE GODDESS AND THE WORLD

AN ESSAY ON SOUTH INDIAN SYMBOLISM

“If fleas established a rite, it would be in reference to the dog.”

L. WITTGENSTEIN
Remarks on The Golden Bough by Frazer

“Under the two connected conditions of tropical heat and vertical light, I gathered all creatures, birds, animals, reptiles, trees and plants, customs and spectacles that are commonly found in all tropical regions, and I threw them pell-mell into China or Hindustan.”

Ch. BAUDELAIRE
Les Paradis Artificiels

In the past few years, anthropological research concerned with the ethnographic aspects of ritual practices has renewed its interest in the meaning of ritual symbolism. This research has been possible

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson

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because of a methodological inversion, namely, starting with a descriptive study of the rites rather than analyzing religious beliefs, contrarily to what was the *moraine frontale* of traditional history of religion.

If since then we deem it of prime importance to study these practices the question immediately arises to know what they mean, and that is only possible through access to the ritual symbolism they convey. But what exactly does it mean to study the nature of ritual symbolism? The apparently trivial problem of knowing what ritual symbols mean appears quite complex, and if we postulate that the ritual expresses something, how can we discover what it is?

At first we are tempted to answer that ritual symbolism means what the participants think or believe it means, and the natural inclination, if not ingenuousness, of the ethnologist is to take as gospel truth what his native informant tells him. But we may consider, especially when it is a matter of a literate culture such as that of India, where codification of practices and symbolic rationalization developed, that this data often seems inadequate and sometimes mystifying. It is inadequate because it isolates the society studied by the ethnologist from other forms of cultural organizations by postulating an absolute limpidity of the participants relative to their practices, which Leach rightly denounced: "The social scientist who seeks to understand why a particular ritual sequence possesses the content and form that he observes can get little help from the rationalization of the devout." (1968, 523) It is mystifying because the real holders of symbolic power are constantly manipulating the meanings and turning them to their own profit, at times with dizzying justifications. Until recently, when anthropologists have had compunctions and are giving more attention to popular Hinduism, studies of Indian society in particular have often adopted the point of view that the brahmans themselves gave.

Conscious of the difficulty, Lévi-Strauss endeavored to distinguish, in a heuristic manner, practices from norms; by making a distinction between "experienced orders" and "conceived orders" (I, 58: 367 *et seq.*) he stressed what ineluctably separates the practices of individuals, independently of the conception they have of them, from the norms they invoke to justify their behavior. In

that way Lévi-Strauss again brought up the epistemological question that continues to haunt anthropological work: what status should be given to what the native says?

One of the answers we have today is to refer this information to the social organization and cultural idiom that produces it, trying to analyze the often complex transformations that link the discourse of the “ethnologized” to his social and cultural field. In other words, how do we go from the conceived order, recounted as such, to the experienced order inhabited by him? And what are the modalities of distortion that we cannot fail to notice between the former and the latter? However, it is not enough to juxtapose the order conceived by the native to that of the more lately arrived non-native—the ambiguity subsists in Lévi-Strauss—but to measure the gaps thus occurring between the order conceived from the point of view of the “ethnologized”, what he actually practices in his symbolic actions or ritual montages, and the same orders reconstructed by the anthropologist.

We have made these brief remarks in order to show the essential concern in the interpretation of symbolism come up against the Gordian knot of all anthropology: the situation of the observer faced with his object of study with a train of dubious arguments rising from his formation, knowledge, practices and finally his presence. If, as we have affirmed, the “beliefs” of the participants in rituals can be accepted only with extreme reserve, would it not be because they never devote themselves to this function, must we refer exclusively to the intuitions of anthropology and up to what point? In short, in the search for the meaning of ritual symbolism the crucial question arises of pertinent methodological procedure between the erroneous conscience of the “ethnologized,” which, however, from the anthropological point of views is always correct, and the partial illusions of the observer whose interrogations and problematic do not fail to throw some light.

The rule stated by Radcliffe-Brown may be valid as a general methodological principle: What a symbol means may be verified by the meticulous observation of its different uses, as much in ritual as in a secular context. (1968: 218) However, nothing proves that there is continuity and homogeneity in the use and meaning of the symbol when we go from one register to another. Moreover,

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as has often been noted, the limit of the sacred and the profane in India is very problematical.

Even though his work offers little in the way of example, since it gives priority to myth over rite, Lévi-Strauss was inclined to identify the ritual procedure with the thought process itself. The dramatic aspect of the ritual cuts up the continuum of the visual experience into a series of symbolic categories, nominally labeled, that furnish those interested with a conceptual apparatus on the abstract and metaphysical level for their intellectual operations. In this sense, and in the practical point of view, the ritual is equivalent to a form of symbolic communication, definitively identical to spoken language and its functioning (1962: Ch. I).

In the same vein, Leach interprets ritual as a gestural transformation of a communicational schematic similar to the word, in addition to the practical operation, whose communicated message should not be neglected: "Human actions can serve to do things but human actions can serve to say things" (1968: 523). Each ritual sequence, whether it be dress or gesture, serves as a way of communicating information that the observer should interpret: "All speech is a form of customary behavior but likewise all customary behavior is a form of speech" (*idem.*). Ritual symbolism expresses visually and communicates a configuration of cultural meaning to whoever wants to understand it.

It is in this problematic cadre that we would like to suggest the analysis of a system of meanings inherent in the particular symbols used for making a ritual basket for the devotees of a goddess in south India. The stereotyped manner of grouping the necessary utensils for making this basket for a religious use seems indicative to us, since it shows an expressive complex in a symbolic device, at the same time sibylline and ostentatious. A symbolic complex that expresses a veritable system of representations and beliefs—a local common sense, as Geertz would say (1986: Ch. IV)—that are shared every day or on the occasion of ritual practices and cult gatherings by a more or less large group of the devout who identify with them. While expressing a conception of the world this configuration of symbols authorizes the participants to communicate with each other by displaying not only a general knowledge of life but the correct behavior before it, so that this

symbolic constellation attesting to a presupposed cosmic order projects its images on the level of human experience by giving it an orientation. According to the famous formula of Geertz it is simultaneously a model *of* reality—of what individuals draw up as such—and a model *for* reality—for what they “believe” (1972: 26), that is, a traditional imagery that integrates individuals into a specific universe of representations by giving their attitudes a meaning that is at the same time empirical and supra-sensitive; an idiomatic way of constructing reality and receiving from it practical meaning in the form of a world-view.

If the artisanal confection of this basket is a social construction it means that it is the result of a form of cultural thought, because to think is to construct socially, or the inverse, if you like. The pragmatics of the action, when it results in an artefact that is explicitly for a configuration of symbols, is equal to a projection of the cultural ideation. The world is thus expressed in a basket that itself expresses the world in a sort of hermeneutic circle that is not at all vicious but the condition itself of meaning, of the meaning of this culturally determined world. So that to fit out this basket is to inhabit the world one imagines and in this way express it in a poetic, esthetic, theoretic or practical manner, according to the adopted perspective. The symbolization in the elaboration of the tools needed for the ritual act is at the same time a way of expressing and communicating. If the symbols are the expression of a world, the world is the manifestation of these expressive symbols. In a sort of “parallelism” in the Spinozist manner, symbol and world reciprocally express themselves and are correlative to the interface expression/communication, because they are made socially, culturally constructed and idiomatically conceived.

THE GODDESS

The temple of the goddess Yellamma is situated in a natural excavation in a circular rock about 600 meters in diameter, at the summit of a hill that bears her name, 8 kilometers from the town of Saundatti in the district of Belgaum in the State of Karnāṭaka.

A very popular place of pilgrimage in the region since it draws

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a million devout a year, mostly women from the “untouchable” castes, it owes its fame to the fact that initiation ceremonies of the *deva-dāsī* (slaves of the gods), locally called *jōgati*, take place there, performed by priests (*pūjāri*) of the *liṅgayat-banjiga* caste. These *jōgati* are recognized by the decorated baskets they carry on their heads in the name of the goddess Yellamma to whom they dedicate their lives.

The temple, most often visited on Tuesdays, Fridays and when the moon is full, has crowds of visitors during the two great lunar festivals in December and March. During the first, called *hostila hunnime* (festival of the widow) the goddess loses her divine husband Jamadagni and the *jōgati* identified with her also enter widowhood. In the second (*davananda hunnime*) the divinities are reborn to be married again, as the *jōgati* issue from their widowhood and marry the god of whom they become co-spouses. These two festivals commemorate two episodes in the abundant mythology surrounding the goddess Yellamma-Renukā. The following are short accounts of two of these myths:

a) Yellamma was married to the ascetic-renouncer Jamadagni on the condition that she would daily bring him the water necessary for his ablutions. Her chastity was such that she made the recipient from sand taken from the river bed. She carried it on her head with a coiled serpent as a cushion.

Long after their children had grown up and become ascetics themselves, one day Yellamma surprised the king, Kartavīrya, bathing in the river with his wives. Overcome with strong desire, (*kāma*) she could not succeed in fashioning the water pot and, forgetting the time, returned very late to the hermitage.

Jamadagni became angry with his wife who had become impure and ordered his three sons in turn to kill her. One after the other they refused to carry out their father's order. Incensed, Jamadagni cursed them by transforming them into eunuchs and appealed to his young son Paraśurāma (Rāma with an axe), the most devoted, who immediately obeyed and decapitated his mother. Content, his father promised to satisfy his wishes. Thus it was that Paraśurāma procured that his mother be brought back to life.

b) Learning that Jamadagni possessed Kāmadhenu—the celestial cow that granted all desires—Kartavīrya tried to seize it by invading the hermitage with his warriors. But the cow flew away

to paradise and the furious king assassinated the ascetic by inflicting 21 wounds.

Paraśurāma then in meditation in the Himālaya promised to avenge his father by exterminating the *ksatriya* (warrior) caste which he accomplished by going around the world 21 times.

THE BASKET

Let us pause now to consider those devout (*bhakta*) that are the *jōgati* and comprise, in addition to the women, co-spouses of Jamadagni called *jōgama*, transvestites, *jōgappa*, who are considered the co-spouses of Yellamma. The most ostentatious emblem of the *jōgama* and to a lesser degree the *jōgappa* is the basket, *jaga*, that they carry on their heads as a sign of devotion to the goddess. Because of this, they are designated as *horuvudu*, “those who carry things on their heads.”

Because of the very great difficulty in finding bamboo in the region today, the *jaga* is often replaced with a recipient in copper-plated metal, the *koḍa*. The preparation of this basket or recipient, although bearing the required religious or symbolic ornaments, shows a great creative diversity in the devout who vie with each other in decorating it. It is easy to acquire the various elements in the different shops installed around the temple of the goddess, depending on the means at one’s disposal, of course.

With regard to the *koḍa*, the assembling of these different emblems aims, independently of their number, combination and esthetic nature, at making an image of the goddess, more or less figurative, a divine doll. The great lunar occasions in the calendar of the temple are opportunities for an excess in festive dress.

If the *koḍa* is filled with sacred water into which are thrown some coins and possibly some whitethorn leaves, the *jaga* frequently contains cooked rice and various prepared foods.

The minimal elaboration is simply to attach the sculpted face of the goddess in bronze (*mūrti*) or in silver-plated metal, surmounted by her headdress (*kirit*) to the *koḍa*. But almost always the *mūrti* is fastened to a sort of peacock feather fan in the form of a halo. The face of the goddess may be set off by a tuft of hair separated by a red streak (*sindhur*), painted with the dot on the forehead of

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the same color (*bindu*) that in India traditionally marks the status of a married woman, while the forehead is dusted with saffron powder (*kumkum*). Some devout add either sprigs of whitethorn or leaves—sometimes in silver—of the *kadega* tree to the feathers. Others add a small canopy (*chatri*) over the *mūrti* or a cobra's head in the form of a baldachin, all in silver-plated metal.

In the position of benediction, two upturned silvered hands, with a red dot of *bandhāra* on each palm are slightly raised so that a varying number of green bracelets—matrimonial insignia broken at widowhood—may be put on, and there may be banknotes slipped into them. Around her neck hang various necklaces (*tike*), one of which is the matrimonial emblem *par excellence* that seals the divine union, (the *muttu*). Made of alternating white and red beads on which are hung small gilded coins with the effigy of Yellamma, the *muttu* is transmitted in a matrilinear succession among the *jōgamma*. Depending on the case, two cowrie necklaces may be added, symbolizing the crania of demons vanquished by the goddess; a small bassinet (*totalla*) in a rectangular form; garlands of flowers; and if the *jōgati* are from the lingāyat-vīraśaiva sect—as often happens—the silver capsule (*iṣṭa-liṅga*) containing the small personal *liṅga* that marks this appurtenance.

To complete this decorative montage that symbolizes the goddess and her principal attributes, a piece of cloth is sometimes draped around the *koḍa*, generally a piece of green *sāri*, so as to imitate feminine dress. The circumference of the *jaga* is covered with a cloth that is often multicolored on which at regular intervals are disposed five *kalash* in metal and possibly a serpent (*nāga*) and a *mūrti* of the matricide son, Paraśurāma.

The *jaga* may be of impressive dimensions, since the ensemble of these attributes can be multiplied at leisure according to the decorative desire or the intensity of the devotion. In all cases we can recognize in these baskets, *jaga* or *koḍa*, the *utsavamūrti*, mobile idols of the goddess of a private nature, that is, belonging to families and not to the temple.

In spite of the stereotyped decorative richness of these models, we sometimes find alongside them more rustic baskets, more “primitive,” from which all these attributes are absent. In the place of the metal *mūrti* of the goddess, they contain a rather rough but

very anthropomorphic sculpture of Yellamma in polychrome wood. In addition, these basket carriers do not carry the monochord musical instrument always associated with the *jōgati*, the *suti* or *chaudike*, but a drum, the *dholak*, that they beat with curved wooden sticks. The carriers of these baskets belong to the lowest tribal castes of the Indian social hierarchy and show that the custom of *jōgati* is distributed throughout very different levels of society; without knowing if it is a matter of vestiges of a tribal religion from antiquity or a borrowing of the tribes from Hinduism, we prefer to see in it the confirmation of the sociological continuum of Indian organization from the tribe to the caste.

Whatever the form and the attributes, the basket must normally be put in the dwelling, facing east, so that the devout can worship it twice a day, at sunrise and at sunset and make offerings to it, especially on Tuesdays and Fridays, days consecrated to its use in begging (*jōgwa*). On the morning of these days the basket is refurbished (*kumkum*, *bandhāra*, flowers and so on) during a *pūjā*. In the evening it is undecorated and “put to bed.” Generally, incense and an oil lamp which must be continually burning are placed in front of it; the fact that the basket is handed down from generation to generation in a matrilinear line is designated by the expression, “hand down the family light.”

The installation of this basket in the house sometimes transforms the habitation into a small domestic temple, sumptuous and richly decorated, as we saw when visiting a very poor *jōgappa* of low caste (*sonagar*), whose house was on the outskirts of Dharwar. He told us he had become the *pūjāri* of this temple—*dixit*—at the age of 16, a period during which he realized that his impotence signified his election for the goddess. Since then, every morning and evening he officiates, and every Tuesday and Friday gathers the *jōgamma* and *jōgappa* of the area to perform great *pūjā* and to join with them in songs of devotion accompanying himself on the *chaudike* or dancing to the glory of Yellamma. This does not prevent him from going five times a year in pilgrimage to Saundatti, since he took that vow when he was very young.

If we interrogate the devout about the basket, as we did many times, and with an insistence in which perhaps awkwardness was

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joined by impropriety, the answers we receive are either very uninspired or extraordinarily suggestive. Sometimes the answers are redundant when the native only gives a description of the elements making up the basket. In that case it is just a precise inventory. Sometimes they appear from the allogenic point of view, too global by assigning a general interpretation that, it seems, is without support. In the latter case, they never exert themselves to give the desired analytical arguments that would justify this interpretation. No continuity appears between the simple description and symbolic interpretation. The anthropological perplexity, in fact, resides in this hiatus—which is not one for the devout—between the banal enumeration: bamboo basket, peacock feathers, *mūrti* of Yellamma and this interpretive *coup de force* that is not exempt from ambiguities, since we are called upon to recognize in the basket the goddess, the vehicle of the god or the world! In both cases, however, we find ourselves faced with two kinds of evidence—distinct, for us—but which are equal for the devout. The obscure nature of the interpretation which seems commonplace for them is the result of the trite but consequential fact that we do not share the same language.

But through scraps and accidental scattered information on each of the elements and the basket itself, concerning popular beliefs that are sometimes superannuated, mythological references that are always allusive, practices that are more or less in use, an ensemble of data appears that is comparable to a puzzle. Once the pieces are brought together, compared or contrasted, they fit together in a very coherent way with regard to the idiom and ritual practices involved, to the astonishment of the interpreter. This *bricolage* whose pertinence might be questioned at the epistemological level nevertheless has the effect of progressively filling up the gulf that separates the simple description from the general interpretation. As if the hermeneutic task consisted of showing the significant but often hidden cultural mediations that underlie the rough interpretation. The research thus succeeds in showing the more or less conscious associative links existing in the interrogated person. A circular exercise that, parting from the suggested general orientation or from the complex of the described objects—in both cases we note it from the native account—only finds the missing

links by authorizing the passing from one to the other.

In this sense, the anthropological interpretation is not at all equal to a hermeneutics of the symbol. It aims instead at leveling in an analytical way the implicit cultural associations of the native who considers them as too explicit to be formulated or for whom they have become unconscious. The anthropologist must translate within the cadre of the discourse of the reader he is addressing, the cultural meanings attached to the “forest of symbols” which here are metaphorically crystallized in a ritual object.

THE ROYAL COBRA AND THE PEACOCK

Rather than bring it down to the level of logical contradiction, we have taken the symbolic equivocity seriously and understood the expression literally when the *jōgati* affirm that the basket (*jaga*) is the vehicle (*vahāna*) of the goddess, even when they state simultaneously that it is Yellamma in person. So that at first we looked for the animals among those that, in India, are traditionally the mounts of the divinities.

The probable answer is that it is a peacock, whose feathers disposed in a halo behind the *mūrti* of the goddess creating a diadem for her are the most visible element, and the general aspect of the basket when it is carried on the heads of the *jōgati* suggest the dancing elegance of this superb bird.¹

But this univocal identification leaves aside the fact that a number of *jaga* carry a metal cobra head. So that if we consider the theriomorphic symbolism of the *jaga* we find ourselves in reality before two associated animals: the peacock and the serpent. But to the degree in which these animals are metonymically complementary in the basket and that each divinity has only one mount, we risk the hypothesis that it may be a matter of a condensation of the two creatures into one, keeping only the most characteristic attributes of each: the spread of feathers of the first and the inflated hood of the second. As a vehicle for the goddess

¹ Concerning the symbolism of the peacock in India, we consulted the works of Lal (1973); Nair (1974); Nair (1977); and Mukherjee (1979).

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the basket, in its double synecdoche, cobra and peacock, is equal to the iconic transposition of an imaginary or fabulous animal with which Indian mythology is amply furnished: the *makara*, elephant with a fish tail, the *śarabha*, an eight-footed animal of the mountains, the *timīṅgila*, swallower of fish... Thus a fantastic animal: the “serpeacock,” we could say if the second did not outweigh the first, which can, as the mythological texts say, like the sun encircle the earth.

What definitely authorizes their association and their condensation into one sole animal is the paradigmatic chain of the royal symbolism. In fact, this is what permits, through decapitating (because of Yellamma), this imaginary pairing. The head of the royal cobra replaces the crested one of the peacock. But above all, in a pan-Indian manner, these two animals are often opposed. The peacock is usually associated with the superior cosmic domains, with the celestial regions, as opposed to the serpent, an infernal animal that often incarnates the primordial and malevolent subterranean powers. Counter to the crawling nature of the reptile, the peacock symbolizes the aerial animal that like the gods lives on high, like the divinities who do not touch the earth the peacock lives in the branches of trees. A miraculous fowl that the Books IX and XIII of the *Mahābhārata* call Citrabharin and describe as the favorite son of Garuda, the white kite (?), vehicle of Krishna, god whose crown known by the name of *mora mukuta* has peacock feathers. A divine bird that in mythology carries the deceased metamorphosed into a tenuous body into heaven, acceding to the solar world or to paradise; a conductor of souls that, in the royal ritual of the sacrifice of the horse (*aśvamedha*) was sacrificed to facilitate the voyage of the *equidae* to paradise.

This general opposition opens onto numerous specific differences. If both are animals of “wild” origins, only the peacock has been hunted and domesticated. Its flesh became a very tasty food in the royal Indian courts. If both are linked to a royal symbolism, one refers rather to the attributes of the exercise of power, institutional and formal, the other to the courtly life, in particular the erotic courtesan, since this polygamous fowl with the charm of its dance, its captivating beauty, the musical strangeness of its strident or plaintive cries, is made into the ideal messenger of love

that in miniatures often expresses the separation of lovers. We note the perfect consonance of the peacock with the *jōgati*, the terrestrial prostitutes and divine concubines of the king of the ascetics, Jamadagni. Does not the poet Kālidasa in his work *Meghadūta* celebrate the peacock of amorous pleasures *kriḍa-mayūra*, trained to dance to the sound of clapping hands and the tinkling bracelets of the *yakṣa*, aquatic and vegetal female figures with which the *jōgati* are not without similarity?

If these two animals refer in a contradictory way to the water element, the serpent is under the auspices of underground aquatic worlds or the primordial waters that symbolize Chaos; the peacock under those of the torrential rains of the monsoon. In south India its dance, considered as possession by the god Kārttikey, announces or brings on the beneficial rains of the monsoon, like the unfolding of his blue-green tail feather evokes the fertility of a renascent nature. Even though protesting too much may not be convincing, how can we not see that the obligatory dress of the *jōgati* is either the green *sārī* or the white *sārī*, this latter particularly auspicious as the peacock of this color was in the royal court.

And if the green/white color of its livery suggests at times the waters of the oceans, it is still in the sense of fertile primordial water, then even if associated with a river in transforms it into a *thīrta*, a “redeeming water,” as a legend of the village of Sogal, 19 kilometers from Saundatti, has it. Here the river Malaprabha flows through a magnificent gorge called *naviluthīrta*, and history says that a peacock chased by demons arrived there, too exhausted to go on, much less to fly over the hills that barred his way. Settling on an enormous elevated rock, the peacock began to call piteously for help. The river heard his plaintive cries and split the range of hills in two, thus isolating the bird from his pursuers.

We can also oppose these two animals at the level of thermic values. The trance that seizes the *jōgati* when the *śakti* of the goddess possesses them exhibits an over-excitement comparable for some of the devout to the fluttering of the plumage of the peacock in the mating season. In contrast to the cold nature of the serpent that, although associated with the excitement of the *tapas* of the ascetic, is in reality showing his control and mastery of

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sexual energies. In fact, the *jōgati* often unfurl a fan, the *chauri*, made of a decorated metal handle terminating in “wool/hair” of the yak, intended to cool the irate goddess or the *jōgati* in a trance.

However, the complementary opposition of the two animals appears hierarchized, since the peacock, as popular mythology and folklore repeat, is a serpent-eater whose flesh is thought to have curative powers against poison. Sometimes the luxuriant colors of its plumes are attributed to the absorption of the serpent’s venom.²

We stress the belief that the peacock does not kill the serpent but keeps it under its control by the strange fascinating power of its look, a look with the multiple power carried by its ocellate plumage. Thus one superiority of the peacock represents the bird holding the serpent in its beak or restraining it under its claws. This representation is found in the iconography, like a dominating and victorious warrior—a traditionally Hindu representation that symbolizes maleficent powers thus held under control. Though less well known than the duo mongoose/serpent, the opposition of the peacock and the serpent stresses the hypnotizing power of the first over the second, this time by the bewitching use of its many-eyed livery that petrifies the reptile with its thousand looks. A gaze of divine origin, as the etiological myth of this bird relates:

Rāvana, king of Lanka, one day invaded paradise so as to conquer the empire of the gods. Indra, king of the gods, took refuge under the abundant plumage of a bird. Saved, thanks to this miraculous shelter, Indra thanked it by saying, “I am the possessor of a thousand eyes (*sahasrakṣa*) and, since you have saved my life, your monochrome plumage will from now on be provided with a thousand eyes”.

The hierarchized complementarity of the peacock and the serpent is equal to a first merging: by making the reptile his subject the bird symbolizes the mastery over dark passions (*tamas*) and subjugation of demonic forces. But while he represents the totality of the cosmos by his spread tailfeathers, he himself is merged with or transcended by the goddess, supra-cosmic by definition, who

² We know that the peacock is the mount of Śiva’s son Skanda, who transformed poison into a potion of immortality (*amṛta*).

reigns over the world. Yellamma, etymologically “the Mother of All,” and also called *Jagadamba*, depending on the translation meaning “the Mother of the Basket,” or “The Mother of the World” has absolute mastery over the cosmos because it is her manifestation. Thus some of the devout take pleasure in associating the gleaming diadem-like plumage of the peacock with the glistening *Māyā* of the goddess. In fact, the divinity integrates the different levels of the universe, because she is its origin and through her power (*śakti*) englobes the totality of the world. If the peacock alone is considered in south India as the mount of certain masculine divinities, such as Maruṇ, Subramanya or Kārttikeya³, it also serves as a mount for the feminine divinity Kaumārī, one of the “Seven Mothers” (*Sapta Matrikā*) who in the form of *Mayūra Puruṣa*, that is, *Śakta Devī*, incarnates creative strength and power.

We will end at this point by remarking that peacock and serpent, in their complementary opposition, as recapitulated in Figure I, each by a movement that belongs to it—slow vertical elevation and sudden horizontal display—are through their common dynamics particularly apt for visualizing the unfolding of the world which is none other than the energy of the goddess in action.

³ These are the names of the god Skanda in south India (Clothey, 1978: 181-183). We note that the goddess Sarasvati is traditionally represented as riding a peacock.

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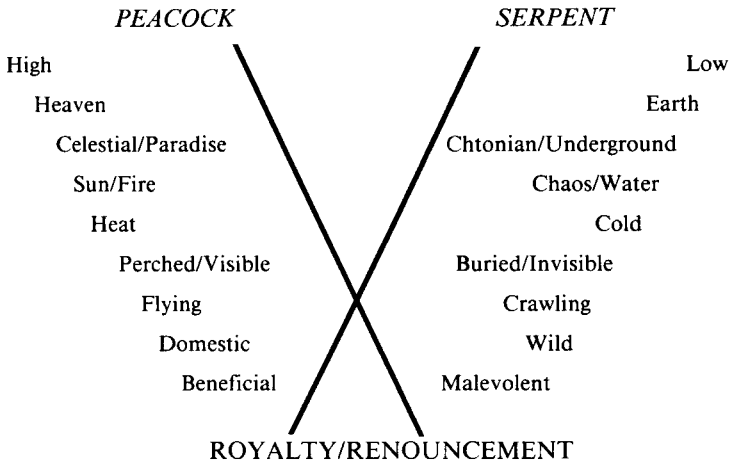


Fig. 1

The Hair of the Jōgati

The most demonstrative attribute of the costume of the *jōgati* is their long and abundant hair, or if we dare to say as an anti-phrase, their inextricably tangles “*coiffure*”, called *jate*, whose origin the devout attribute to the power of the goddess.

Although all the *jōgati* do not wear it, tradition demands that they let grow what may become an impressive tuft. Never combed or untangled, not even washed, it thus acquires the aspect of sheep’s wool whose dimensions may be an obstacle to sleep, all the more because the powdering with *kumḥum* and *bandhāra* makes this long capillary mass unrecognizable as hair still more rigid and resembling hempen waste. Left in the open air under the veil of the *sārī* after the red streak (*sindhur*) that marks the status of a married woman has been applied, or introduced into a long cloth case, the hair may reach down to the ankles. Some *jōgappa* conforming to the ophidian symbolism associated with the explicitly formulated hairdress of the god Siva, coil the hair in a snake-like manner around their heads.

In the low castes concerned, the “miraculous” appearance of this type of hair, often before puberty, is a sign of election by the goddess, who thus manifests the exigency to see the child dedicated

to her. In reality it seems to be a matter of a fungus that easily proliferates in greasy hair: women of the economically-deprived lower castes wash their hair only once a month, after menstruation. In spite of denials, it seems that it is the people interested in the oblation of the young girl to the divinity, particularly the older *jōgati* concerned with the perpetuation of this tradition, who secretly put this fungus in the hair of the one who has been chosen. These elderly *deva-dāsī* serve as recruiting intermediaries between the urban agencies of prostitution and the poor families, who in this way do not directly meet, in liaison with the *pūjāri* charged to bring a surplus of sacralization through a ceremony of initiation (*dīkṣā*), these women work to bring together the different participants in this practice, which is remunerative for each of them. The old *deva-dāsī* never fail to wear this “horrible fodder” or this “aromatic forest”—according to the point of view of the custom, one would choose to adopt the Claudelian or Baudelairian metaphor—to testify to the omnipotence of the goddess, all the more because according to local beliefs the auspicious nature and the prolific power of the *jōgati* is estimated in proportion to the length and abundance of their thick head of hair. Another often-formulated belief stresses the idea that the growth of hair is parallel to the growth of the moon up until the night it is full, a privileged period for the manifestation of the goddess’s powers. Even if belief has it that a *jōgati* who oils her hair, dresses it or untangles it will soon die, fall ill or bring misfortune to her family, there is still a possibility to get rid of this mop of hair. With the authorization of a *pūjāri* obtained at a high price, it seems, the *jōgati* can have their heads shaved before the goddess Yellamma outside the temple by a *liṅgāyat* barber of the *haḍapad* caste who is installed nearby.

This barber also officiates on the occasion of visits of the families of the devout who come to the temple for the ceremony of the first tonsure of their first-born, boy or girl, around the age of one year.

It sometimes happens that this rigid mass of hair breaks: the *jōgati* then keep these locks to give them as an offering to the goddess. To do this, they place them, accompanied by one or more cowrie shell necklace that they must normally renew each year, in the small basket (*paḍḍalage*) that is the required recipient for gifts

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to the divinity. The basket containing this “head plant” is then left in what the devout call the “garden of the goddess,” a plot of land below the temple of Paraśurāma in which have recently been planted some *kadege* trees, the plant of Yellamma; its leaves in the form of long sword blades, of which copies in silvered metal are made, are sometimes used to decorate the idol in the temple. They are then placed all around the face of the goddess in a sort of halo of rapiers or headdress of swords.

This gift of hair to the goddess is usually preceded by a *pūjā* carried out near a small serpent (*nāga*) sanctuary called Karevva, located at the edge of the garden. We add that bridegrooms have the custom of placing garlands of flowers there, hanging them on tree branches or on the highest leaves of plants. This rite, occurring normally during the first year of marriage, is intended to favor the fertility of the wife and the engendering of a male descendance.

Two complementary associations, explicitly formulated by the devout, deserve to be mentioned.

The first links this arborescent hairdress to a sort of wild vegetation that evokes an untamed and virtually dangerous nature. Such as the capillary lianes that originally covered the site where Yellamma installed herself, they tell us, away from all habitations and all organized life, at the eminently symbolic conjunction of a mountain and a stream.

The second recalls a particular episode of the myth referring to the goddess. We recall that the chaste and devout wife of Jamadagni daily brought the necessary water from the river for his morning ablutions. She used a characteristic support on her head, called *simbi*, for carrying the recipient. It was a serpent that, when Yellamma at the sight of the amorous frolics of the king and his wives was stricken with impure thoughts, fled for refuge to the ascetic Jamadagni, the incarnation of Śiva. Today we can see the Shivaite animal *par excellence* literally petrified, a short distance from the sanctuary of Jamadagni, in the form of a raised stone serpent testifying to this mythological sequence. The flight of the serpent shows its link with chastity or rather the control of sexuality that characterizes the renouncer (*sannyāsin*). The paradox of the *jōgati* is that while being prostitutes they incarnate these values of renunciation recalling the ophidian representation in the basket.

Although the way a simple equivalence between hairdress and genitality has been established seems hazardous to us,⁴ another association relates the proliferation of hair and the absence of sexuality to the degree in which the *jōgamma*, completely devoted to the divinity, are kinds of renouncers and in which the *jōgappa* willingly admit to being eunuchs or impotent.

If it is a well-known Indian fact that this type of hairdress indicates the liminal state of the renouncer liberated from worldly obligations, detached from human ties and sexual passions, we note that the *jōgati* we interrogated rather evoke a kind of transactional logic between humans and the divine. If the goddess becomes mistress of their sexual power, in exchange she gives back an extraordinary capillary vitality. And it is just this exchange of sexuality for hair that signals the divine election in the eyes of the devout.

In this sense, to see the negation of castration⁵ in these hirsute displays and the reversion of sexuality, then the rise of the divine phallus idealized in the form of the *śakti*—possibly by the ascension of the *kundalini* traversing the *cakra*—seems to us a hypothesis that is as plausible as it is unfalsifiable, in any case over-interpreted with regard to the collected material.

We believe there is greater interest in the questioning of the equivocity between norms and practices, since the *jōgati*, while some of them live by prostitution, incarnate the ideal of devotion (*bhakti*) and the values of renunciation (*saṅnyāsa*). But there is no contradiction in that, due to the transaction that custom installs between human and divine levels. By affirming celibacy and social non-attachment (*asakti*) the activity of prostitution appears insignificant with regard to the matrimonial tie—held as the only essential—of the *jōgati* to the divinity. The hierogamic relationship, of a mystical or rather devotional nature, supplants the mercantile exercise of prostitution. Even if socially today the tendency is to downgrade the *jōgati* to a “whore,” on the level of

⁴ As Herschman (1974) tends to do. The Best discussion of psycho-analytica reductionism in anthropology is led by Leach (1980: 321-361).

⁵ The first thesis is defended by Obeyesekere (1981: 33 *et seq.*) who presents interesting material on the ties between feminine asceticism and tangled hair. The second is developed by O’Flaherty (1973: 169).

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symbolism and values, the temple slave subsists in her.

The fact that the baskets, certainly older than the *koda*, are called *jaga* seems to us revelatory of their symbolic significance, since this term means “world” in kannada. That the enthroned goddess at the center of this “basket-world” symbolizes—in conformance with a commonplace of Hindu thought—the ontological and theological foundation of the cosmos seems almost to go without saying. The idea that Yellamma, the primordial energy (*Ādiśakti*), is the mother of all (*ella-amma*) and the mother of the world (*jaga-damba*) is a widely-shared belief, propagated with insistence by the devout. In this sense, the *jōgati* do nothing other than literally carry about on their heads the world or the goddess, as is expressed in a polysemic but this time non-equivocal way by *Jagadamba huruvudu* (carry the Mother-World on the head). Analogically, to the world posed on the serpent *śesa*, which here means the tangled locks (*jate*) of their hair, a thousand locks are the thousand heads of the divine reptile. Analogically to the goddess who deambulates in her vehicle, here the ocellate plumes of the peacock are the thousand eyes of the divine bird.

We have frequently brought up the ophidian symbolism of the hair, but we have dwelt less on the one that links it to the peacock. In fact, alongside the obvious phonetic proximity for the speakers of Dravidian tongues between the two words—in kannada “hair” is *naviru* and “peacock” *naval*, *navila* or *navalu*—the very ancient symbolism of the Veda associates peacock feathers and hair by attributing to the steeds of the king of the gods, Indra, manes (*mayūrōman*) and tails (*mayūrasepa*) analogous to the plumage of this celestial bird.

How can the polarized characteristics of the *jōgati* through the symbolic conjunction of this bestiary be better expressed? Through the peacock, first, according to the duality of eroticism and fertility, since as a temple slave her activities orient her toward desire (*kāma*) and as “always-auspicious-woman” (*nityasumangali*)⁶ she presides over the fertility of vegetation and prolificity of

⁶ For a textual study of this notion see Kersenboom (1984). We see that following a thorough inquiry on the *deva-dāsī* “re-treated” by Puri, Marglin (1985) in collaboration with Carman (1985) gave a re-evaluation of the notion of “auspiciousness.”

livestock and families. Then by the serpent that symbolizes the possibility of liberation (*mokṣa*), since the *jōgati* completely dedicated to devotion (*bhakti*) of her god, is a renouncer, as is indicated by the etymology of her name, derived from the Sanskrit *yoga*.

How better express through ritual and in a more condensed way a complex of beliefs and symbolic associations as shown by our second diagram: from the hair to the basket, do we not find ourselves before a veritable symbolic conception of the cosmos that, in stratifying the worlds, hierarchizes and presents its values?

BASKET	WORLD
peacock goddess serpent hair	celestial terrestrial subterranean

Fig. 2

Faithful to the profound intuition in Hinduism of the divine omnipresence expressed in the ancient Vedic religion, paradoxically the multiplicity of the figured representations of the goddess, manifested in many baskets, does not at all encumber. Of course there is a hierarchy in the figuration of the gods in India, and the *mūrti* in the temple—the closest to Yellamma—further condenses the divine energy, more than the baskets do. Do not the devout repeat that with respect to her terrible power (*śakti*) all conjugal and domestic life is impossible at the site of the temple? But in spite of the deceptive appearance the anthropomorphic representation in the basket is never an idolatrous figuration. Instead we recognize in it the concentrated presence of the “ungraspable divine fluidity,” a sort of “coagulation” of the divine (Malamoud, 1968: 80) provisional and deambulatory at the same time. As if it were the nature of the goddess to divide and recompose herself continually, to be one and multiple at the same time. By fragmenting herself into a multiplicity of pieces of which each figure is the image of a totality, the divinity is rendered present everywhere and visible to all.

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The use of this ritual basket has essentially the function of recalling that fact. Placed in the house to serve as a small altar to which a cult is rendered, it sanctifies and protects the family and lineage against misfortune. Carried during the processions it signals that no one escapes from the second coming of Yellamma—sometimes benevolent but fundamentally ambivalent—and reveals that nothing can escape her jurisdiction. Mounted on the head during the divinatory dances of possession, it symbolizes the descent of the divine to the devout, called to submit to her injunctions. Placed in such a way that it supervises the cults of food gifts assembled in the small baskets (*padḍalage*) it diffuses its magic efficacy. Carried in pilgrimage to Saundatti where hundreds of baskets converge to be recharged with sanctity it testifies, at the same time, to the one and multiple divine omnipresence.

Finally, the symbolism of the basket expresses, in a local imagery that sets up values and communicates ideas, the condition of ritual efficacy. The use of this basket amounts to making a constellation of symbols without which the rite could not take place. If the basket is the moving force of the rites, these in return only show the symbols it encloses. In sum, the symbolization conditions the ritual and the ritualization manipulates the symbols.

There are other indigenous etymological explanations that we have not given. They are in the main fantastic but they help to corroborate the symbolic identification of the basket, the world and the goddess. Certain devouts derive the words *jaga* from the term *bhaga*, meaning “delta” and by extension “the nourishing land.” Others claim that it comes from the term *baṭṭa* or *baṭṭala*, the “circle” or “all that is round” and of “concave form.” In both cases, they operate to associate with the *yoni*, the primordial vulva symbolized by the *jaga*.

We will not give excessive leeway to the metaphoric-metonymic indigenous interpretations of this “basket-world” of a goddess—beheaded, in addition—that is carried on the head. However it is symbolically plausible to see a coincidence in this basket acting as a microcosm with the site, though remarkably circular, of Saundatti that the faithful and pilgrims consider the navel of the world. As if the basket, Saundatti and the World in conformity

with the dynamic of Hindu theology, by expanding and retracting, made up the three symbolic circles of the religious universe of the devout and the goddess Yellamma.

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