to Zofia -
my daughter who makes things possible

Contents

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Note on transliteration

Tamil and Sanskrit concepts are transcribed by removing their diacritical marks. The terms are put in italics, and longer vowels of Tamil words are spelt as 'aa' and 'ee'. Standard Anglo-Indian spelling accepted locally for individual names and places has been employed in most cases, and such words are used without italics. This includes the term kolam (which otherwise would be written as *kōlam,* or *koolam*) in order to not cause unnecessary disruption in the flow of reading.

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Chapter I

Introduction

</div>

The kolam practice

The chilly village streets lay embedded in dark silence. In the vague light of a distant lamp post, Priya prepares the ground outside her house for the drawing of the morning kolam. Although she has just splashed cold water on her face and brushed her teeth, the darkness makes awakening slow. Priya walks across the street and collects fresh cow dung at the back of the house where her neighbour keeps a few cattle. The dung is mixed with water in a large aluminium bowl. With one hand Priya holds the bowl steady against her hip. With the other, she sprinkles the liquid over the ground from the front wall of the house up to the middle of the street. The liquid is left to sink in for a while, until the dust becomes one with the ground. After sweeping this damp area thoroughly, Priya brings a half coconut shell filled with white powder which she keeps at hand just inside the door. With this powder she will draw an image on the street, the kolam. Facing the entrance of the house, she bends her back and takes a handful of powder. This is made to trickle down between her thumb and index finger into a grid of dots. With swift rhythmical hand movements, she draws a thin line which twists and turns around the dots. When the dots are joined properly, the end of the line meets its beginning. The symmetrical image shines brightly on the damp soil in front of the door. By drawing vertical lines and a couple of small geometrical forms on the step and threshold, Priya completes the act. As she stretches her back, she exchanges a few words with the neighbouring women who are yet working on their morning kolams. They are in a hurry to finish before the other daily responsibilities have to be attended to. Priya longs for the coming temple festival when time is given to create large, elaborate kolams in which she can experiment with new ideas and combine the white powder with colours. Still, she is confident that the gods and goddesses will accept today's small kolam as her offering and invitation to them. They will appreciate her effort in beautifying and completing the appearance of the house. Priya believes that at the break of dawn, the goddess Mariyamman will walk the village streets. Satisfied with Priya's invitation, the goddess enters the house and gives divine

blessings. Mariyamman thus increases the prosperity of Priya's family members and their home.

Before sunrise and sunset every day, the majority of women in Tamilnadu, South India, perform the kolam practice outside their homes in a similar way to Priya. The invitation to the deities through the kolam is part of women's work for the well-being of their family members and surrounding community, and it also provides space for individual creativity. In addition to the daily street performance, kolams are drawn regularly in front of deities and temples. It is mainly an act of Hindu worship, but many Catholic women have incorporated the practice into their religious devotion. Few Protestants and very rarely Muslims are involved. Social and religious ideas and meanings are embodied in the practice, and importantly, it is also constitutive of ideas and meanings in a continuous process of change. Throughout most of India, women enact related practices of drawing images on the ground or on walls (Jayakar 1980, Kramrisch 1994 [1968], Rossi 1998). They vary regionally and are named differently in the particular local language.[1] But it is only in Tamilnadu, and the bordering states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka[2], that the practice is done on a daily basis.

As the short description above shows, the kolam practice consists of both a performance and an image. However, my first encounter with the kolam directed me towards the performance. It was through a brief mention in a text written by the art historian Stella Kramrisch (Kramrisch 1994 [1968]), during my search for female artistic practice in India. I was fascinated by the disappearing character of the image and the effort put into the seemingly endless act of repetition. When I left for fieldwork in 2005, my thoughts were influenced by Tim Ingold's suggestion 'to place the emphasis on the skilled character of the form-generating process rather than upon the final form of the object produced' (Ingold 2000: 290). But the kolam makers I came to engage with led me to the importance of the final object. They made me realize that the appearance of the image, in addition to the enactment of the performance, was related to the identity of the practitioner. The power of the image is further expressed in today's Pentecostal church in the area of my fieldwork which condemns the kolam outside the house as 'the work of the devil'. The two facets of image and practice have been incorporated in the perspective of my research and its presentation in this study.

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[1] For example, in Andhra Pradesh they are known as *muggu*, in Karnataka as *rangavalli*, in Rajastan as *mandana*, in Gujarat as *rangoli*, in Bengal as *alpana* (Jayakar 1980, Rossi 1998).
[2] The border between these states was drawn as recently as 1956 (Stein 1998) and consequentially many local practices transgress it.

The study is an exploration of the kolam, as image and practice, of how it is perceived and what its efficacy[3] achieves. The kolam is the foreground through which notions of relationships between object, person and environment are investigated. The aim is to relate the seen to the unseen, the visual to the experiential and the reflective. The study will not give a complete account of the kolam and its regional and religious differences, but will rather endeavour to comprehend and convey a few aspects on a deeper level from the point of view of Hindu practitioners. Hopefully, this will contribute to anthropological understandings of and approaches to images, aesthetics and artistic practice.

I have chosen to term the kolam as artistic practice, and the ethnographic material is treated from anthropological perspectives on art and gender identity. The aim is not to make a definite categorization of the kolam as art, and thereby position the study within the discourse where a final product is objectified and judged as either art or craft. During conversations in the field however, several women claimed that the kolam is art. Against the backdrop of the power relations on national and international institutionalised art scenes where women's creative work related to the private sphere historically have been excluded, I regard it as important to give voice to this claim and consider why it is used. The term artistic is less categorical than art in the definition of the practice, and therefore leaves it more open to various voices. Artistic practice is also chosen in order to encompass both performance and image.

Earlier research and history

The kolam is ubiquitous in the everyday life of Tamils. Even though you are not a practitioner, you will most likely experience its presence walking down a street, visiting a temple, or working at your office. Their common existence can be compared to the omnipresence of mass produced prints of Hindu deities, and they often accompany each other. Both types of images constitute a historical continuation of Hindu worship, and simultaneously, they are constantly changing in relation to other visual practices surrounding them. Kolams exist in an ongoing dialogue between photography, cinema, commercials, fine art, religious festivals, mass produced calendar and bazaar art. As acknowledged by the historian Sumathi Ramaswamy, 'no visual image is self-sufficient, bounded, insulated; instead it is open, porous, permeable, and ever available for appropriation' (Ramaswamy 2003: xvi). The kolam

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[3] The term efficacy is used as a synonym for images' power, following Pinney in his emphasis on the question of images' capacity to 'do' (Pinney 2004: 8).

practice is part of a 'popular culture' which is private as well as public[4], and Christopher Pinney suggests that 'contemporary India cannot be understood if one excludes from one's analysis popular visual culture. It is in this visual culture … that many contemporary Indians debate their present and their future' (Pinney 2006 [2001]: 28).

The large amount of diverse scholarly work on Tamilnadu has rarely paid any attention to the kolam. As will be delineated below, anthropological studies on the subject are few and have a narrow outlook. Ramaswamy's dialogical perspective which allows for change is relatively new. Instead, scholars have described the kolam, with reference both to its image and practice aspects, in terms of degeneration and a need for preservation. Historical accounts are difficult to make as knowledge on the practice has been transferred visually and orally across generations. There are no historical references as to how its performance or types of designs have developed. However, more recent interests have tried to link it to ancient Tamil history. The kolam has not been discussed in terms of artistic practice, and it has not been recognized that visual practices in popular space interact with activities on the fine art scene. This study will pay attention to the fact that art is a porous category, and that contemporary art is an activity practised in popular public space. The scholarly perspective that detaches art from everyday life, and thus has excluded the kolam, is informed by European ideas of aesthetic judgement shaped in the eighteenth century, which were imposed on India by the British a century later (Guha-Thakurta 1992). According to George Marcus and Fred Myers, aesthetic judgements cannot be separated from their links to power in the form of gender politics, nationalism and the expansion of the market (Marcus and Myers 1995). In their discussion of art practice, the phenomenon is yet something that is acknowledged on the institutionalised art scene. This study holds that it is gender politics which have informed the invisibility of the kolam in earlier research.

The notions of degeneration in descriptions of the kolam have central historical implications. They refer to processes founded in Indo-European romanticism and the Orientalist discourses, which later were counteracted by Indian nationalists. Based on linguistic findings in the eighteenth century, European scholars held that the 'Aryans', inhabiting North India, were closely related to the Europeans. They were assumed to have degenerated through mixing with indigenous groups who spoke Dravidian languages, unrelated to Sanskrit and the Sanskrit derived languages of the north. This mixing was argued

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[4] Appadurai and Breckenridge has proposed the term 'public culture' to escape the dichotomy between high versus low culture in order to enable more nuanced discussions on modern India (Appaduarai and Breckenridge 1988). But as the kolam is also a part of the private, the term popular is used here.

to have taken place due to an Aryan conquest whereby the Dravidians were pushed south. During the colonial period, positivist scientists transformed these categories into races, where the Aryans were considered as whiter and more 'civilized' (Arvidsson 2000). India became a site for anthropometrical studies in which photography was one of the tools utilised to classify individuals' group belonging. The depicted outer form was understood as visual evidence of an inner moral character, but the character defined a caste or occupational type, never a particular subject (Pinney 1997). The theory of the 'Aryan-Dravidian' divide included identifications of the former group as Brahmins and the latter as non-Brahmins. This hierarchical categorisation strongly influenced the political non-Brahmin movement during the twentieth century, and it continues to be part of how Tamil identities are constituted (Pandiyan 2007). European and early Indian scholars related the kolams to an ancient Sanskrit-based Indian culture, while later interests have emphasized a particular Tamil heritage as differentiated from North India.[5]

The condemnation of Indian culture as degenerated legitimised the British colonisation of the sub-continent, and formed Orientalist discourses (Pandian 2007). Visual practices were judged as 'monstrous', and reformation began through the establishment of fine art educations. The new imposed realism was related to progress, and abstract native art to superstition (Guha-Thakurta 1992). During the Victorian era in Britain, the asymmetrical relationship between women's artistic practices made for love in the private sphere, and men's artistic practices made for money in the public sphere was constructed (Parker 1984). European scholars were directed towards temple architecture and sculptures (Asher and Metcalf 1994), and the hierarchy that preferred the male public have most likely influenced why practices such as the kolam were mainly ignored.[6]

In the British colonial officers' enumerations of Indian art and craft traditions, neither the kolam nor its regional versions are mentioned (Sengupta 1997). However, in their

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[5] Discourses on cultural heritage emerged in the West during the Enlightenment period, with the rise of science and progress and the decline of religion (Butler 2006). Beverly Butler, who is part of the interdisciplinary Material Culture Studies' approach to the relation between humans and objects, describes how a sense of nostalgia, developed through experiences of modernity's ruptures, was conceptualised as authenticity. This concept was posed against the copy, and became an important part of heritage discourse and its engagement with roots and origin framed in a science of conservation and preservation, for instance in the museum context. According to Butler, the desire to revive what is perceived as lost traditions is increasingly emphasized in the non-West as a consequence of contemporary globalisation (Butler 2006:473). In spite of recent incorporations of immaterial heritage such as social practices, Butler criticizes the mainstream heritage discourse, as defined by UNESCO, of being ingrained by ethnocentric values. On UNESCO's web site, the concept World Heritage is described as exceptional in that it has a universal application. Further, 'World Heritage sites belong to all the peoples of the world, irrespective of the territory on which they are located' http://whc.unesco.org/en/about/.

[6] The lack of academic research in the home space has been discussed at length by Rebecca Maria Ellis (Ellis 2001).

account of the average middle class house in *Madras District Gazetteer of South Arcot* from 1906, the kolam before the threshold is observed. The description is vague: 'the origin and meaning [of the kolam] of which is so obscure and the absence of which is a sign of mourning' (Francis 1906 [1878]: 90). A study on social life in Madras published in 1938 cites a Census Report from 1901 where the explanation is somewhat extended: 'A small place in front of the doorway is swept clean, sprinkled with cow dung water and (except during days of mourning or misfortune) ornamented with patterns cleverly drawn by the women with chunam and powdered rice' (Ranson 1938: 15). According to the author, the report is accurate for the description of the average middle class home in any village or small town in Madras Presidency[7], and in the city itself. In Edgar Thurston's ethnographic work on South India, also produced during the colonial period, the kolam is not mentioned. With one exception as far as my research shows, it is neither represented in the colonial collections of photographs and drawings held in British libraries.

An early attempt to define the meaning of the kolam, often referred to in later studies, was made by the anthropologist John Layard[8]. He perceived the kolam designs as labyrinths, and it was his extensive work on labyrinths in Malakula, Melanesia, and a general interest in this form and its diffusion, which brought him to make conclusions on the kolam. The Malakulan designs are drawn by women and guard the entrance to the land of the dead, and similarly he argues that the kolam is protective of the entrance and closely connected with death (Layard 1937: 123). As far as Layard knew, kolams were only made during the Tamil month Margali when evil forces are more prevalent, which may have influenced his interpretation. In addition to particular studies on the kolam, Alfred Gell and Tim Ingold incorporate the kolam and some of Layard's ideas in their respective discussions of mazes and their capacity to trap malevolent influences (Gell 1998, Ingold 2007). Interestingly, in relation to the attention given to his article, Layard had never been in India. His main sources were two books on designs used by kolam makers in Madras, two books of hand-drawn tattoo design, and a Mysore Census from 1901 (Layard 1937: 119). There are similarities between some designs, but instead of seeing the kolams in themselves, he argued that they were 'already so degraded that, without the Malekulan evidence, the labyrinthine origin of these designs would not be traceable at all' (Layard 1937: 135).

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[7] The colonial constitution of what today are the states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamilnadu.
[8] Placed on a Melanesian island 1914 by his supervisor Rivers, Layard was one of the earliest anthropologists involved in long term fieldwork, and actively involved in possibilities of using photography in fieldwork. He contributed extensively to the Haddon Photographic Collection (Geismar 2006).

One of the early references to Layard was made by the religious scholar Gustaf Diehl in his account of South Indian rituals. Apart from focusing on the same protective capacity, he positions the kolam in a degenerating process from religiously meaningful to 'purely ornamental' (Diehl 1956: 275). Although perceptions of the practice may vary both historically and regionally, this study will show that the protective function of the kolam must be put in relation to how the actual kolam maker reasons on this issue.

Kramrisch brought the kolams into Western art discourse, and she describes the kolam as part of an ancient Indian tradition of making paintings on the floor, *dhuli chitra* (Skrt. dust painting). She defines the paintings as 'ritual art' and 'diagrams with magical powers', and contends that 'they do not form abstract patterns for they are forms of conceptions' (Kramrisch 1994 [1968]: 106). Thus, the images are not mere decorations but recognized as imbued with religious meanings. But she does not convey much about the relationships between the ancient paintings and contemporary practices. According to the historian Tapati Guha-Thakurta, Kramrisch's writings elaborated on her colleague A.K. Coomaraswamy's ideas of spiritual symbolism and ancient history in Indian art in a second Orientalist discourse. This discourse shows appreciation, but continuously defines the subject as an exotic Other (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 183).

The new European appreciation of Indian art and its spirituality, as opposed to European materialism, became a reason for pride within the early nationalist movement in India. The Bengali artist Abanindranath Tagore played an important role in mobilising art in the nationalist cause. The degeneration process was now defined as caused by an intruder from outside, the West. In the search for a reconnection with a glorious past, Tagore defined folk arts and village craft as 'the best repositories of tradition in contemporary India' (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 202). He wrote an early account of the Bengali version of the kolam, and described it as a pure and unspoilt artistic tradition. Indian women were linked to the nationalist agenda and, like the village traditions, defined as 'the spiritual Other of the Modern West'. Tagore's painting of a woman as the Motherland, 'Bharat-Mata', became, and continues to be, a central icon in Indian imagery (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 191).

In Kramrisch's article, as well as in works produced by representatives of Government supported craft councils (Jayakar 1980, Archana 1989) and folk art museums (Fisher 1995), the kolam has been categorized as part of India's village traditions. As a continuation of the nationalist ideology, the kolam is presented as an authentic symbol of

a romanticised village community.[9] This perspective was promoted by the All India Handicraft Board, established in 1952, which held that 'urban Indians had a duty to support Indian handicrafts'. It was a means to separate India from further influences of Western culture (Tarlo 1996: 322).[10] The study by the artist Archana centres on inherent symbolic meanings of kolam designs (Archana 1989). In the foreword to her book Sharomani Sharma writes: 'In these days of deteriorating values and qualitative change in the character and perception of life, a book of this nature will be of great assistance in understanding "the perceptions of life in the distant past, where the cosmic forces at work were looked at with awe and reverence, fear and hope"' (Sharma 1989: 2). Similarly, Pupul Jayakar tries to situate the kolam, along with other objects defined as craft, as continuations of ancient history. In her interpretation, the kolam can be traced to megalithic rock art and seals from the ancient city Mohenjo-Daro (Jayakar 1980: 121). The indologist Ralph Steinmann importantly links the kolam with the identity of its maker, but otherwise expresses worries about 'symptoms of decadence due to urban life' in this 'ritual folk art' (Steinmann 1989: 491).

The interest in preservation and protection from degenerating changes has later been criticised. Joytindra Jain, director of the Crafts Museum in Delhi, links the notion of the authentic folk artist with the separation of art and craft during the colonial period. Folk artists are supposed to reproduce a collective tradition, whereas the expression of personal intentions is the privilege of practitioners of fine art. Jain rejects the idea that craft makers and tribal artists need to be saved from modern materialistic culture, and tries to make space for 'contemporary folk and tribal artists in India who neither see themselves as belonging to an imaginary "traditional" society nor as waiting outside the precincts of the world of "modern" art to be absorbed and recognised on the latter's terms at the first available opportunity' (Jain 1998: 14). As will be shown, there are kolam makers who adhere to this perspective, while others share the protectionist view.

The first extensive ethnographic study of the kolam practice was conducted by Vijaya Nagarajan. It resulted in a PhD thesis presented at Berkeley, California (Nagarajan 1998), and two articles (Nagarajan 1995, 2001). The voices of the kolam makers are finally heard, and Nagarajan positions the kolam more firmly in its social and religious context than previous scholars. According to Nagarajan, her informants perceive the medieval poet saint Antal as the first kolam maker. In her ninth century poem *Naachiyar Tirumoli*, Antal writes

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[9] Personnel whom I met at the Craft Council in Chennai did not view the kolam as 'real' craft, but they had a copy of Archana's book.
[10] Among the urban elite who tried to combine the Western and the Indian, the modern and the traditional, one outcome was the 'ethnic chic' fashion (Tarlo 1996: 325).

that she has swept outside her house and made *mandalas*[11] in sand as part of her worship of the god Krishna (Nagarajan 1998: 139, cited from Dehejia 1990: 75). In the introduction to her thesis, Nagarajan describes that her informants come from diverse categories (Nagarajan 1998: 4). But compared to my own findings, the connection to Antal has mainly a Brahmin perspective. In Tamilnadu, the Brahmins constitute a minority contested as the elite, and this study will discuss how their relationships with other social categories interact in the kolam practice.

During fieldwork I met Ramaa Narayanan, reader at Stella Maris College, Chennai, who showed me her unpublished research on the kolam. She was mainly interested in various designs, but had also looked for historical traces. Like Nagarajan, she asserted the link to *Naachiyar Tirumoli*, although Narayanan translates Antal's images as 'curious drawings', not *mandalas*. According to another informant, the Tamil scholar Shaktivel stresses that Antal uses the word kolam. Narayanan referred to the poem *Minakshi Ammai Pillai Kuram*, written in the seventeenth century, as the first historical mentioning of the kolam as drawings on the ground. The poet Kumara Gurubarar writes about a woman[12] who cleans the floor and makes a kolam on it (*tarai mezhugi koolammittu*), as part of her worship of the god Vinayakan.

In Mary Hancock's study of Brahmin women in Chennai, the kolam is connected to the definition of social space. She mentions that there is a spatial hierarchy in the home which is linked to caste and class belonging among kolam makers (Hancock 1999: 84, 89). The art historian Renate Dohmen interprets the kolam practice in three articles (2001a, 2001b, 2004). She has a similar interest to Hancock in how space is defined through practice, and she suggests that the kolam practice should be understood as 'qualitative space-making', related to Tamil conceptions of temporal aspects (2004: 22). Her conclusions are more relevant for the perspective of this study than her methods. Dohmen criticises the oversight among scholars of the kolam with reference to gendered discourses (Dohmen 2001a), but at the same time she dismisses the kolam makers as uneducated and unable to express themselves verbally (Dohmen 2001b: 13, 2004: 23).

In two monographs on Tamilnadu where the practice has not been part of the actual study, the kolam is used as an image. In Margaret Trawick's work on kinship, kolam designs figure as representations of the formal symmetries of the ideal patterns of bilateral cross-cousin marriage (Trawick 1996: 185). When Cecilia Van Hollen describes her analysis

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[11] This term will be related to the kolam in Chapter IV.
[12] The poem describes her as a Kurava woman, a group later categorized as a Scheduled Tribe (ST).

of how women experience the relationship between modernity and maternity, she uses the kolam as a mental image. The dots in the drawing represent the different aspects of her study, and the encircling line how they are intertwined in a web (Van Hollen 2003: 5).

The most recent academic publication on the kolam is by Amar Mall (2007). His anthropological study focuses on technical aspects of drawing. He concludes that the creative aspects of the kolam lie within the act of drawing, not in inventing new designs beforehand. He bases this argument on the many changes and additions, both on the number of dots and how the lines were drawn, his interviewees made as ad hoc solutions during the process. I have not seen women draw kolams in the way Mall describes. As will be shown, women hold that if the image is based on a grid of dots, it is crucial to focus on and complete the intended design. Afterwards, additions can be made in the form of small designs.

The 'pictorial turn' (Mitchell 1996)[13] and the 'visual turn' (Jay 2002) in the humanities and social sciences have engendered several academic works on popular visual culture in India (Brosius and Butcher 1999, Davis 1997, 2007, Dickey 1993, 2008, Jain 2007, Pinney 2003, 2004, Dwyer and Pinney 2006 [2001], Ramaswamy 2003). Many studies are interdisciplinary and include the works of scholars in anthropology, history, art history, religion, visual culture and visual arts. This new research approach has dismissed the ideas of degeneration and preservation. Ramaswamy emphasizes the importance of this turn in modern Indian studies as a means to understanding how powerful images and visual practices are in shaping communities and selves. She argues that 'it is the image's public presence that enables its pedagogic function of training the eye to see in particular ways, of producing particular forms of visual knowledge and practices, and of generating a society's codes and habits of seeing and being seen, its ideologies of visuality' (Ramaswamy 2003). The present study holds that the broader perspective among contemporary scholars provides a larger space for the kolam practice to thrive. For the time being, the kolam continues to be part of what the majority of inhabitants in Tamilnadu experience and interact with every day. As Dohmen rightly points out, and Mall cites: 'in terms of sheer numbers of practitioners and households actively engaged in the practice, it could … be said to be one of the most popular forms of visual practice in contemporary Tamil Nadu' (Dohmen 2001a: 134, cited by Mall 2007: 55).

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[13] Mitchell emphasizes that to understand visual aspects of culture, we need to look at 'the social field of the visual, the everyday processes of looking at others and being looked at', and realise that this process mediates social relations and is thus constitutive of our social reality (Mitchell 1996: 82).

Multisensoriality, aesthetics and agency

The constantly present kolam image, and the enactment of the practice, has an efficacy that makes it influence and shape people and their surroundings. To explore how this efficacy can be talked about and understood, this study will make use of the concepts multisensoriality, aesthetics and agency. In the following, working definitions of these interrelated concepts will be outlined.

Multisensoriality and aesthetics

Contemporary anthropologists focused on visual aspects of culture increasingly engage with multisensorial experience. A 'sensorial turn' has been suggested as an addition to the visual turns mentioned above (Howes 2003: 29). Paul Stoller, who has been prominent in paving the way for an anthropology of the senses, argues for a 'sensuous scholarship' where the anthropologist engages his or her body as a whole, and thus combines the intelligible and the sensible in practices as well as representations (Stoller 1997: xv). Influenced by the phenomenological perspective of Michael Jackson, Stoller holds that this approach enables anthropologists to comprehend various cultural epistemologies more fully than analytical models based in linguistic and textual frameworks. A reappropriation of the concept aesthetics and a questioning of a need for a rehabilitation of the concept visual are included in the sensorial perspective. Furthermore, there is an increasing interest in experimentation with non-verbal research methods and representations (Classen 1998, Grasseni 2007, Grimshaw and Ravetz 2005, MacDougall 2006, Pink 2006, Schneider and Wright 2006, Schneider 2008, Stoller 1997, Taussig 1993). Apart from synaesthetic processes, that is how an experience through one sense generates experiences in other senses, the discussions of aesthetics include social and relational aspects of the term, and a social agency of objects. This interest shows a convergence between anthropology and art, with both theoretical and practical implications (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2005, Schneider and Wright 2006, Westermann 2005). The main issues in these changes which concern an understanding of the kolam are how aesthetics relate to social relationships in everyday life, and that vision cannot be separated from other sensorial experiences.

Visuality in India goes far beyond the idea of ocularcentrism and that ways of seeing merely concern gazes. In the Hindu context, the close relationship between the visual and other senses are realized in the central conceptions of *darshan* and *drishti*. *Darshan,* 'vision', refers to forms of knowledge, and an act of exchanging gazes, especially between the devotee and the divine. This act brings about a contact experienced as 'touching' (Babb 1981,

Eck 1985 [1981]). The main object of this contact is to accomplish a merging between the deity and the devotee, which is constantly sought in Hindu worship.[14] The deities are considered to be present in material objects and images, and the closeness is enabled through people's interaction with these objects. *Drishti*, 'evil eye', is understood as a negative form of seeing, and is no less important, particularly in the daily lives of South Indians (Daniel 1984, Fuller 1992). To be seen by an inauspicious person who carries thoughts of envy can cause you physical harm, and even death.

In order to analytically grasp the interaction between the visual and the corporeal in Hindus' relationships with religious images, Pinney suggests the term 'corpothetics'. He defines this concept as 'the sensory embrace of' and 'the bodily engagement with' images (Pinney 2001: 158, 2003). It refers to 'embodied, corporeal aesthetics - as opposed to 'disinterested' representation' (Pinney 2004: 8). Thus, corpothetics makes it possible to describe the effects of images beyond a mere focus on the perception of vision and a Kantian aesthetic focused on a sublime beauty differentiated from everyday life.

The relevance of the concept aesthetics in cross-cultural studies has been debated within anthropology for a longer period (Coote and Shelton 1994, Ingold 2001). The criticisms have referred to 'a disinterested, Kantian, theoretically universal appreciation of beauty warranted by deeply ingrained Western standards' (Westermann 2005: xii). When Gottlieb Baumgarten gave birth to the concept in the eighteenth century, it signalled the European decontextualisation of art from social life. Immanuel Kant's development has been questioned as an elitist concept intertwined with rationalist Enlightenment and a modernist notion of bourgeois art involved with judgement and discrimination (Ingold ed 2001: 260). Implied in these discussions is the Western hierarchy of the senses, where the visual followed by the aural have been the highest. To feel something for an image has been regarded as an activity of the lower popular classes, women and 'primitive' people. The art historian David Freedburg argues that we need to reinstate emotion as part of cognition to understand responses to images. He criticises investigations of our perception of images as a separate domain, and suggests that our responses to them may be of the same order as our responses to any other phenomena in reality (Freedberg 1989).

In her criticism of European aesthetics as a numbing of the senses and 'a cause for anaesthesia', the philosopher and social theorist Susan Buck-Morss reclaims the Greek

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[14] Christiane Brosius extends the devotional aspirations of *darshan* to Hawkins who holds that *darshan* is also 'a means of creating worldly knowledge and power.' Brosius links this with Foucault's notion of panopticism 'in which vision is perceived as a tool of social discipline and order' (Brosius 2003: 275).

word *aisthitiko*s (Buck-Morss 1992). According to her, the original meaning defined a broader domain of sensory experience, and the multisensorial experience it refers to was located in reality. It is this latter meaning that Pinney uses to develop his term. He differentiates between an elite and a popular aesthetic and places these on a continuum. The elite is traced to the 'colonial mimicry' produced in the British schools for fine art in Calcutta, and Pinney contends that these ideals are reproduced through anaesthetizing, numbing, discourses (Pinney 2001: 161). Popular aesthetics, at the other end of the continuum, are the sensory practices, corpothetics, which does not judge images through formal analysis, but engages with them. Further, Pinney connects corpothetics to the consumers, and the anaesthetizing discourses to the producers, of religious prints (Pinney 2001: 171).

The kolam practice cannot easily be placed on this continuum as both the producers and consumers transgress the popular-elite divide. The kolam practice has probably developed during what the art historian Hans Belting calls an 'era before art' (Belting 1994), but today women of various classes are aware that the kolam is attributed a higher value if it is called art. They do not talk about aesthetic judgement, but in particular contexts they judge the way the kolam image looks. Simultaneously, the image is produced and consumed through sensorial engagement.

Aesthetic perceptions in India are thus historically intertwined with European values, but there is also an Indian theory of aesthetics, *rasa*, which may influence local perceptions. The *rasa* theory originated in the fifth century and concerned the emotional experiences generated by dance and theatre (Taylor 2005: 206). It has also been used to define religious and literary experience. The emphasis on emotions brings this theory closer to the Greek definition than to Kant's. The aesthetic discourses referred to this far are concerned with particular responses in an individual. To understand the efficacy of the ubiquitous kolam, aesthetics as a multisensorial experience needs to be integrated with social relationships.

Whereas Mitchell gives centrality to the visual field, David MacDougall is concerned with a 'social aesthetic field' (MacDougall 2006). This field is both our physical material world, and the performances of human activities within it. MacDougall's aesthetics is built on the Greek concept and refers to sensory experience and response in our everyday life. This understanding of aesthetics is thus not specifically related to art. MacDougall suggests that our sensory experiences of the world are culturally organised through 'social aesthetics'. We assimilate this order which in turn regulates our consciousness and our engagement with the world. Our responses have a capacity to change a particular social aesthetics. MacDougall argues that this dimension of human existence is as central as political power and religious

belief in investigations of the relationships between individual and society (MacDougall 2006: 95, 98).

Aesthetics as an experience of art objects detached from social life has been criticised in art theory as well as in anthropology. Many contemporary artists investigate the sociability of art practice, and interact directly with their audience in activities which do not necessarily produce objects. In accordance with this change, the art critic Nicolas Bourriaud defines art as 'an activity consisting in producing relationships with the world with the help of signs, forms, actions and objects'. Being a critic, he discusses how these activities can be judged. He argues that a valuation should be based on to what extent art activities are able to produce intersubjectivity, and he terms this judgement 'relational aesthetics' (Bourriaud 2002: 17f, 107).

In this study, vision is incorporated into a multisensorial experience of the world, and therefore theories of the gaze (developed within feminist film theory) have been excluded. As part of everyday life, the kolam can be perceived as situated in a social aesthetic field. Moreover, the practice constitutes social and religious relationships. The analysis will therefore try to build on MacDougall's social aesthetics, as well as Bourriaud's relational aesthetics.

Agency

The analysis of the kolam in this study concerns where its efficacy or agency can be located, and what kind of effects experiences of it may have. Certain scholars focus on an agency within objects, others on an agency within processes, and to maintain the exploration of the kolam as both image and practice, a few of these scholars will be discussed.

According to Gell, art objects are social actors that mediate in social relationships, not vehicles for symbols and inherently meaningful (Gell 1998). He made a 'drastic reformulation' of the anthropology of art when he argued against linguistic and semiotic interpretations of objects, and rendered approaches based in aesthetics and art history as irrelevant for anthropological analysis (Thomas 2001). Gell held that the agency of art objects which acts on and within social relationships is attributed by human beings. A subject transfers an intention of the mind to objects in the vicinity, so that the agency of the subject becomes embodied in the object. This process, engendered by the production and circulation, makes the object indexically associated with, primarily, its owner's or maker's capacity. The art object, index, is the result of, or tool for a social agent (Gell 1998: 16). Gell emphasized skill and technology as important parts of the agency of art object. Through 'captivation',

a spectator is considered to become overwhelmed by the capacity of the artistic agency within the object, and hereby positioned lower in a hierarchical relationship (Gell 1998: 71). Gell's use of the kolam as an example of captivation will be discussed in Chapter III. According to his theory of indexical relationships, a kolam image would have its agency, its possibility to affect, from its maker. As will be shown through the ethnography, this perspective has relevance in certain contexts.

Pinney shares Gell's emphasis on the agency of objects, and the idea that this agency stems from human subjects. In the case of religious prints Pinney contends that 'it is the devotee's visual and bodily performances which contribute crucially to the potential power – one might say completion – of the image' (Pinney 2001:167). Further, he suggests that the stress on practice, corpothetics, enables us to pose questions of what images 'do', not how they 'look'. It is the continuous practice that gives the images their 'meaning', and helps them to get what they 'want' (Pinney 2001: 21, 162).

Pinney's interest in what images want is a shift in focus suggested by WJT Mitchell. Instead of locating the efficacy of an image in the producer or consumer, Mitchell explores the possibility of an efficacy within the image itself. The move away from what images express as vehicles of meaning, or do as instruments of power, to what they desire, is part of his 'pictorial turn' (Mitchell 1996). Mitchell argues that even if we as modern and rational persons do not perceive images as persons, we allow certain exceptions. We may perceive an actual presence in the image of a dead parent, and we allow advertisements to direct our behaviour. Mitchell suggests that his thought experiment may be a means to understanding the subjectivity of objects, the phenomenon that we are able to experience things as persons. This perspective is quite different from Gell's, who as we have seen argue that the agency of an image is transferred from a human subject.

Bruno Latour explores the agency of objects, not images in particular, but his discussion, however, comes closer to Mitchell than Gell. Latour argues that things make a difference, and therefore they are actors and participants with their own agency (Latour 2005: 71). From his perspective, the distinction between human intentional action and material causality, divided between the social and natural sciences, does not hold if we want to understand what keeps society together and maintains its hierarchy (Latour 2005: 84). According to Latour, all entities around us are associated and need to be taken into consideration in our analysis. A material object does not determine an action, but it may for instance influence, render possible, block or reinforce a social skill enacted by a human subject. Humans and objects are not the same, but they can work together in the same action.

In their discussion of agency and creativity, Tim Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam criticise Gell's focus on an intentional agency in the minds of individuals which causes effects through material objects. Ingold and Hallam hold that we ought to give attention to the process of making, and they term the emphasis on the agency of the completed object a 'backward reading' of creativity (Hallam and Ingold 2007: 3). This backward reading has produced too much concern with an agency that causes change, as opposed to continuity. We should understand creativity as part of how we engage with tradition in our movements of everyday life, not as individual innovation. There is always a sense of creative improvisation when we adjust and respond to cultural forms, and this reproduction does not have to be perceived as imitation which stands in opposition to the creation of something completely new.

Ingold and Hallam exemplify their perspective with the ongoing creation of a building. Instead of focusing on the innovation of an architect, we can understand creativity by paying attention to the builders, and then all beings that constantly recreate the house by inhabiting it (Hallam and Ingold 2007: 4). This can be related to the everyday making of the kolam image, and how it for instance continuously remakes a house into a home. But as argued at the beginning of this chapter, the remaining image is considered as making a difference, and therefore both the agency of the process and that of the object need to be taken into account.

We have already seen that a gendered discourse has influenced a scholarly neglect of the kolam practice. This study aims to add a gender perspective to earlier research, without losing the focus on the two facets image and practice. The agency of the kolam image is related to the identity of its maker, and all kolam makers are regarded as female beings. Through the act of drawing, the creative female capacity of the performer becomes embodied in the image. As will be shown, the identity of the maker as female can be regarded as constituted and reinforced through the daily repetitions of making the kolam. In the feminist philosopher Judith Butler's performativity theory, gender is constructed through the continuous reiteration of certain performances.[15] Individuals are changed through performative acts, not through internal convictions (Butler 1999). The kolam practice can thus be an example of the reiterative performances Butler discusses. However, her conception of

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[15] This study's employment of performative theory, rather than earlier performance theory within anthropology, relates to a concern with the efficacy of performance as actions that are part of everyday life, not as singular events with fixed meanings. This is applicable to the kolam practice, as it is constitutive, for instance, of gender in a continuous process (cf Morris 1995).

the body as ontologically non-existent outside discourse is problematic in the context of this study. The women I engaged with had a concrete relationship with their bodies, and described how the body interacted with the mind in the kolam making. Butler's notion of agency, that each repetition provides a space for subversive acts that can be used to question dominating gender discourses, is not relevant either for the kolam. Change is built into the daily practice as the maker consciously draws different designs. Larger changes appear in interaction with changes in the social context, not against them.

In her analysis of gender in a fishing village in Kerala, Cecilia Busby has used a framework of 'gender performance' (Busby 2000). She combines a 'categorical' bodily perspective, built on informants' perceptions of gender as evidenced by genitals, with a 'processual' performative perspective, built both on Bourdieu's concept of habitus and Butler's theory on performativity. According to Busby, the villagers' everyday performances reinforce or undermine a gendered capacity inherent in their male or female bodies (Busby 2000: 21). She contends that Butler's theory is suitable to account for how gender is re-enacted and reinforced in a continuous process, but that it needs to be combined with a theory which takes the Indian emphasis on the existence of a material body into account. Thus, she argues for the importance of Bourdieu's notion of how dispositions are learned, embodied and naturalised through everyday practices. Busby's perspective embraces a concreteness of the body which she holds that Butler's constructivist ideas lack. The present study takes Busby's combination as its base, and explores its relevance for the kolam practice as a gender performance.

The outline above concerns this study's aim to comprehend how the sensory experience of the kolam practice and image influences how humans and deities interact in their everyday lives. The exploration of these issues will mainly combine MacDougall's notion of a culturally organised aesthetics, Bourriaud's focus on art (as activity) as generative of social relationships, Ingold's interest in creativity as part of everyday life, Gell's emphasis on the social agency of art (as object) indexically connected to human subjects, and Latour's suggestion of an agency inherent in all objects. Within a relational, socially grounded aesthetic, the multisensorial efficacy of the kolam incorporates both its production and response.

Fieldwork and methods

In the field, my interest in the kolam practice almost always created joyful responses. Women in particular share a pride in the kolam, which my attention and great distance away from

family members definitely did not lessen. The main period of fieldwork was conducted for approximately a year beginning in July 2005. Since then, short annual return visits have been made. As the main subject of this study is to comprehend the kolam practice, the everyday lives of its performers have been central in my fieldwork. Due to unforeseen events rather than actual planning, research has been conducted in several places. My initial aim was to gain understanding in the traditional anthropological approach of qualitative, not quantitative, research, and it did not seem sensible to do this in numerous places during my first experience as a fieldworker. But as my work proceeded, it came to involve various environments.

I moved between a rural area in the north eastern part of Tiruvannamalai district, and central Chennai (formerly Madras), the largest city in Tamilnadu. As the kolam is omnipresent in this state, the choice of the first village was not based on where to find the practice but on personal contacts. During my stay, my network extended and I followed the new paths it provided. In the rural area I spent five months in three villages, Pelasur, Tennampattu and Hariyarapakkam,[16] and in Chennai I worked for almost the same amount of time. The first six and two final weeks were spent in Puducherry, a former French colony on the coast south of Chennai. Here I participated in a Tamil course, and did preliminary fieldwork which provides some additional data in this study. The choice of conducting and representing fieldwork in multiple sites emerged as an ethnographic method during the 1980s. This development entails a critique of the holistic perspective which has structured much of earlier ethnographies around a main subject matter of an isolated people. George Marcus has been at the forefront in this criticism, and he argues that anthropologists need to give more complex accounts than the single-sited study (Marcus 1986, 1998). Cultural identities and activities are constructed through networks that cross-cut various peoples and places, increasingly in simultaneous processes in different places. Marcus contends that an expanded perspective is required to explore and compare the multiplicity of interconnections, and to provide nuanced translations and representations rather than a micro/macro or them/us framework (Marcus 1998: 83f). My research has produced data which is partly disparate, but brought together and compared I contend that its concern with multiple sites makes the understanding of the contemporary state of the kolam more relevant, which I hope will be revealed in the following.

To some extent, my methods differed between the two main field sites. In the city, I lived in a guest house in one area and did interviews in five different neighbourhoods,

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[16] To warrant the integrity of the people I have engaged with, the names of villages and individuals in this study are pseudonyms. Acknowledged artists are exceptions, as they will be recognised locally by their profession.

some of which I did not participate directly in everyday life. In the three villages, which were not visibly separated, I became more immersed in daily activities and the social organisation. The first period I lived with a local family, the second in a rented house with my interpreter, and the last in a rented room with the same person. Because of the more intense participation in village life, the ethnographic accounts will be thicker from this area. In addition to the necessity of multi-sited fieldwork in order to grasp the kolam practice from a wider perspective, the change of places is related to my lack of fluency in Tamil, and the difficulty in finding an interpreter. I had decided that it was essential to engage a woman for this task, and it turned out to be the most complicated issue of my research. Educated women with good knowledge in both English and Tamil were unwilling to stay in a village, male family members were reluctant to allow women to work outside the home with a foreigner, and many were too busy with household work. In the end, three young women worked with me during different periods, of which one continued to provide transcriptions of taped conversations. At times when I lacked an interpreter, I often walked the streets in the mornings and made initial contacts using my camera and basic Tamil with women during their kolam making. Although a following interview might have been formally decided, conversations remained informal. Before I left for fieldwork, I intended to learn how to make kolams as a means to gaining a deeper understanding. This proved to be a fruitful decision. Like women in the field, I sometimes practiced in notebooks, and those I carried with me became as full of our joint efforts in making designs as of my textual ethnographic notes.

Conducting ethnographic fieldwork in India, I had the preconception that my research had to include references to caste. But one of the first things I was taught was that it is considered offensive to ask about someone's caste belonging[17]. As a stranger and under fifty years old, you have to wait until people feel ready to tell you. Simultaneously, certain behaviour can be observed, for example if or what kind of meat a person eats, and how s/he interacts with others. Caste related behaviour needs knowledge to be apprehended, such as giving a newspaper with your left and unclean hand to someone in order to show that you are superior. Or when a high caste priest hands out holy ashes, *vibuuti*, in the temple, and makes sure he does not touch the receiving hand if it belongs to a person of low caste. Delicate caste issues were described in whispering voices, for instance penalties for couples who had married across caste borders, and some issues are only communicated by gestures. It was never my intention to outline the exact number of castes and their representatives, but as my

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[17] Caste has been perceived as an obstacle to progress, and officially condemned as a symbol of traditional decadence (Fuller 1996).

research developed I came to understand the most relevant issues concerning caste categories, and importantly, how they are interrelated with class and gender.

My relationships with the fields and its inhabitants, as well as with my sense of self, were affected by the choices of dress I made. The different environments I interacted with also called for adjusted choices that had to be figured out.[18] I started by wearing a *chudidar*: long trousers, a long shirt with short sleeves, and a scarf, which is the most common dress for unmarried women, sometimes extended to married status among higher classes. In the rural area where adult women wear saris, I increasingly felt awkward in the *chudidar* which was unfit for my status as a mother. Comments about another Western woman they knew who always wore saris, questions about my view of this dress etc, led me to make a change. The difference it made surprised me. The respect shown by both men and women clearly increased as they perceived my choice as a respectful act towards them. As I appeared more like the women around me, I was aware of the fact that the effort I had to make in negotiating my space as a single woman may have increased, but on the other hand new possibilities opened up. For instance, my hostess started to bring me along with her friends to the temple on Fridays. Her assistance in making it possible for me to interact with the complex sari brought us closer to each other and across linguistic difficulties. Back in Chennai I returned to the *chudidar* attire, but kept other important details as bangles and the red *pottu* between my eyebrows. I felt at ease during most encounters, but on an occasion where I met young upper class women this appearance provoked distrust. Within this group, the items I wore connoted backwardness and they preferred to wear dresses inspired by Western ideals. As a Western woman, they held that I would do the same.

Social relationships developed together with experiences of new physical environments. Walking barefoot in the different consistencies of the mud embankments between rice fields, finding out how to move the body within intense traffic, and feeling the sometimes unkind touch of air warmer than your interior body, are some of the instances in everyday life that produced close relationships with the surroundings. The people I engaged with were concerned about the different environments I put myself into and how they would affect my person. It was central to them that I kept in mind to balance the heat[19], which I was unaccustomed to, with food that had cooling capacities. To ensure that people stayed in good health was part of women's responsibilities.

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[18] 'The problem of what to wear' and the importance of the right choice to gain respect has been accounted for in anthropological studies on the sari (Tarlo 1996, Banerjee and Miller 2003).
[19] The importance of this balance will be further discussed in Chapter IV.

Photography, as method and presentation

Before my academic studies, I have been trained in and worked with images for many years, oscillating between art practice and commercial assignments. My background has influenced this study in several ways. It has made me attentive to relationships between the seen and the unseen, as well as to political and ethical issues concerning how subjects are represented. It has made it self-evident to use the camera during fieldwork, and to present some of the photographs in the thesis. This is what most anthropologists do, but they sometimes show unawareness of how much the subject doing the photographing influences his or her pictures, and also of the capacity of images to reveal the unseen and engender reflection. My background has thus positioned me at odds with much of the anthropological ideas of photography. In anthropological representations, the ambiguity of photographic images has been hidden in textual frames and discourses about 'document' and 'illustration'. In art works however, photographers have questioned these discourses and embraced the same ambiguity in order to investigate how it may be used. In art works, ideas of objectivity, staged photography, authorship, and the general status of photographic images have been criticized. It has been recognized that our perception of images varies according to history and context, and no more than other phenomena around us do images embody a stable meaning. The artist and anthropologist Amanda Ravetz has brought these different approaches to the fore, and she contends that: 'While some artists were enthusiastically embracing the image's propensity to suggest untruths and then celebrate its ability to lie, this same possibility had produced anxiety in anthropological circles, forcing photography in anthropological fieldwork into retreat' (Ravetz 2007: 256). Rather than suppress the ambiguity of images, Ravetz works with this issue in practice and teaches students in visual anthropology to pose similar questions as artists do, and to explore to what extent this can be productive for anthropological knowledge (Ravetz 2007). Similarly, Susan Edwards draws her argument on photography's usefulness in anthropology on contemporary photographic criticism where the image as document is questioned. If we as anthropologists make the viewer conscious of the ambiguity of the image, rather than presenting it as 'this-is-how-it-was', the viewer is more able to reflect on, for instance, metaphorical connections, and how the signifier is related to the signified (Edwards 1999 [1997]: 59). We need to recognize that art and document are interrelated phenomena, and through photography's potential to tell in a different voice we can further explore the relationship between intellect and intuition.

Method

In the same way as when we speak to people and want to ask questions, the making of photographs requires consent and respect, and it is just as important to create an atmosphere where you as an intruder give space to the other in the encounter. I deliberately use the verb to 'make' photographs rather than to 'take' them, as a means to emphasize the way I use my camera in interaction with the subjects. I try to make the encounter into collaboration where decisions and authority can be investigated, negotiated, and played around with.

To make a photograph is often perceived as though you find an occasion valuable and worth remembering. In the areas of my fieldwork, people do not keep photographic albums with images of everyday life, but of the celebration of auspicious occasions such as their daughters' first period and their marriage. Participants in the events are dressed in their finest clothes and jewellery, and there are certain rites such as the giving of gifts which are always photographed in established poses. People were content with having their kolam making photographed, but at the beginning they found it utterly strange that I was interested in making photos of them when they were engaged in ordinary activities such as washing up. This became a means for me to convey that the aim of my study was to engage in their everyday lives, and that I found all kinds of activities and statements interesting. Thus, the making of photographs interacted with other ways of showing and telling people about the perspective of my research.

Visual methods can also provide knowledge. Through the use of my camera, I have learned more about how people perceive the kolam practice. As already mentioned, I was initially more interested in the act of drawing than the material result. But if I made a photograph of a woman drawing, without making one of the finished result, she was always disappointed. If I made a photograph of an image that had faded away during the day, this was not appreciated either. The completed image was important to memorize. This is part of what redirected my research towards incorporating the kolam both as an image and as practice.

My interest in the kolam and in photography often led people to bring forth other pictures in their homes, such as embroidered images of the deities, posters with film stars and photographic albums. This has increased my awareness of how much we interact with material objects, and that photographs belong to this category. Further, to let people stage photographs, as well as to talk about the result, is to learn about how people perceive images of themselves, both mental and physical.

Direct participation in the kolam practice was part of my learning process in the field. It made me realise more directly the necessity of finding one's own rhythm of drawing,

the need for concentration, and the importance of coordination between mind and body to get the design right. The movements have to be disciplined, and my engagement in the practice increased my ability to grasp and mimic how controlled a woman's everyday life movements ought to be. It was not about mere looking and copying.

When we discuss vision and looking, I find it important to recognise how the visual sense interacts with all others. In the photographing situation, we perceive a subject in a context, with all our senses. As a photographer, you engage with the subject and try to make sense of who this person is. If you only look, and then raise a camera between yourself and the person, you are likely to end up with a detached picture where the person shows no sign of presence. When MacDougall writes on the relationship between the photographer or filmmaker and his or her subjects he holds that: 'Paying attention is not a matter of projecting oneself onto things-in-themselves but of freeing one's consciousness to perceive them.' And that it takes 'an affection of the senses' to accomplish this (MacDougall 2006: 7).

Presentation

The photographs presented in this study are positioned in an analogical relationship with the kolam image. Just as the kolam invites, the photographs want to invite the readers into the text, and into a sense of presence in the places where the fieldwork was conducted. Rather than having a text that directs the readers' responses to the photos, I want to invite the readers to make their own reflections. The photographs want to establish a close relationship with the reader, and mediate some of the intimacy and ambiguity of everyday life in which knowledge during my fieldwork was produced. Pictures have no definite meaning but are open to various interpretations, and hereby the ambiguities of being are embodied in them. Through the interconnectedness between the visual and other senses, photographs have the capacity to mediate a sensorial experience of being present. The photographs are neither meant to illustrate, nor to document events in a positivist sense, but to complement the analytical text. Like the kolam makes the image of the house complete, the photographs offers this study a larger sense of completeness in presenting how it came about. The text is inhabited by traces of the kolam, and the stories of places and people. The photographs cannot make them present, but they invite the reader into a closer relationship with them. Images have the capacity to engender a sense of difference as well as familiarity, and if we focus on the latter capacity, photographs can represent culture as unbounded. MacDougall emphasizes that film and photography have this capacity, and thus an ability to engender a transcultural sense of being human (MacDougall 1998). If we recognize ourselves in the photograph of the other,

this other becomes familiar as a form of general humanity. The photographs can thus be a bridge between the otherness of the places and people described in the text, and those who read it.

The presentation of my photographs is an attempt to experiment with the dynamic between the picture and how it is perceived, as well as that between the text and the pictures. The 'Writing Culture' critique by James Clifford, George Marcus, and Michael Fischer during the eighties, opened up possibilities for new experiments with ethnographic representation, but works in visual media have mainly continued to be analysed and presented as texts, for example as a film with a linear narrative or a photographic document that may illustrate the text (Schneider 2008). Christopher Wright and Arnd Schneider suggest collaborations with artists to explore and develop new anthropological strategies of representation. There is a site of overlap among contemporary practitioners where critical engagement may be productive for both disciplines (Schneider and Wright 2006). Such collaborations can explore how highly contextualised and stable works can be combined with, not opposed to, the performative and the unstable, how representations that engender emotions can supplement analytical explanations. Interdisciplinary methods may result in larger understanding and increased knowledge about whether there are phenomena which discourse cannot contain, and would thus enrich anthropology. Increased collaboration with art practice can make the tension between intimacy and distance, between the sensory and the discursive, productive. Whether we want to define the presentation of the photographs in this study as art or not, its open-endedness adds other aspects of the research than the formal text. They continue the conversations initiated in the field, without giving a precise interpretation of how to understand them.

Outline of thesis

Chapter II gives a background to the context in which this particular study of the kolam practice has taken place. Chapter III delineates the relationship between kolams, women and auspiciousness from a religious perspective. It describes how the kolam makes the image of the house complete, and facilitates movements between inside and outside. Chapter IV is concerned with how material and form influences the efficacy of the kolam image. Chapter V discusses how the organisation of the kolam practice is related to social hierarchies. Chapter VI describes how the kolam practice generates and reproduces temporal and spatial rhythms. Chapter VII explores social positions of individual women, and to what extent the kolam may be used to negotiate their positions. It further discusses the kolam as constitutive of female

gender. Chapter VIII summarises and discusses the efficacy of the kolam, the capacity and constitution of its agency, both as image and practice. While chapters III and VI emphasize continuity, chapters IV, V and VII incorporate more contemporary changes.

Each following chapter (except the last one) begins with a photographic essay where a thematic content complements the textual theme. The pictures in Chapter II are concerned with kolam images as constitutive of social space, in Chapter III with kolam makers and their life cycle, in Chapter IV with relationships between material, form, and colour, in Chapter V with whom the kolams are made for, in Chapter VI with rhythms of everyday life, and in Chapter VII with extra-ordinary designs.

P. Esther Jancy Rani

Chapter II

Background: the organisation of landscapes and their inhabitants

The kolam image defines a space as an inhabited place, and the practice is part of how everyday life is organised. This chapter intends to enable the reader to grasp the local setting, through both visual and non-visual aspects. The landscape[20], understood as dwelling places and their naturally as well as culturally formed surroundings, will be described, followed by the organisation and identities of its inhabitants. Their relation to caste, class, and gender, and how they are situated in a field where the social, religious and political interact, will be broadly outlined.

Local landscapes

Arriving on the worn out main road from the east, Pelasur village reveals itself behind a large grove at the ending of an outstretched slope. The road continues through Pelasur towards Tennampattu and Hariyarapakkam, the yellow signs with each village name written in both Tamil and English being their only visible borders. Views among the inhabitants vary on whether it was one village separated into three because of conflict, or three coming together because of an expanding population. The three villages are enclosed by vast fields, sometimes interrupted by single rows of planted palm trees. Low embankments divide the fields into small rectangular areas for cultivation, and constitute paths where the agricultural labourers make their way to work.

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[20] In his problematisation of the concept landscape, Eric Hirsch identifies two connected poles concerning how people relate to their physical environment (Hirsch 1995: 4). The first pole concerns our closer environment and relates for instance to foreground, inside and place. The second pole relates to background, outside and space. The relative distance between a person and the second pole builds on the idea of landscape that emerged as an art genre during the seventeenth century. During this period the urban West separated itself from nature and the everyday life of rural inhabitants, and came to desire them as painted objects (Hirsch 1995: 6). Hirsch emphasizes that landscape is a process, and that the relationships between the two poles vary historically and contextually. In the present study, landscape is a broad term which encompasses both inhabited places and the surrounding naturally and culturally formed environment. The term social landscape refers to particular places inhabited by humans. Along with Hirsch's two poles, I relate space and place to this definition. I use space as a broader concept where the environment can be ambiguous and less organised, or as referring to something abstract. Place entails a higher level of organisation and auspiciousness, where people locally argue that evil forces do not reside. But there is no clear cut separation between these terms, there are porous pockets of space within a place (for instance an unattended part of a house as described in Chapter VI) and vice versa.

This area, my primary field of study, transformed considerably between my comings and goings. During my first short visit in July, it was like a desert. The embankments did not make sense to me, they looked like remains of brick buildings in an archaeological excavation. Except for a couple of very small irrigated areas, the sun had burned the soil into aridity. In September, a few heavy rainfalls with raging thunder had made thin layers of green work their way over the brownness. The villagers told that there had not been a single drop of rain for three years, but this autumn the monsoon was more intense than most people could remember. It had not been this extensive for fifty years. Instead of passing over in a couple of weeks, it kept on raining for over two months. It brought calamity in cities and areas further south, but the villagers were relieved. When I arrived for the third time at the beginning of December, the monsoon had turned the holes in the road into craters. The bus driver kept the usual speed, and the ride was like being on a little boat crashing across waves stirred up by a tanker. The abundance making its way in the bright green rice fields was breathtaking. The villagers almost immediately wanted to bring me to the nearby lake. With immense joy, they showed a pond that had taken the shape of something ocean-like. A flooding of the lake means three rice harvests instead of the normal two. When the rain finally stopped washed clothes dried again, and the mould disappeared from the walls. During January, and my last stay in March, people were constantly busy with agricultural work. Morning after morning the main road was filled with newly harvested rice which the passing vehicles helped to prepare by separating the grains from the husk. The air was musty, and on windy days eyes had to be covered from the swirling husks. Harvests of lentils, ground nuts and sugar cane were plentiful. Cattle taken grazing on pockets of untilled land were gaining weight. The village councils decided to keep the taps where the households collect water open longer. Long faded hopes were reconsidered.

Within each village, small shops, tea stalls, phone booths and wine bars are centred on both sides of the main road. Colourful signs and goods hung up outside the shops are partly veiled by dust. Inside them, there is not room for much more than the seller. The lack of storage facilities makes the availability of goods limited and seasonal. When possible, people do their shopping in town. It is cheaper as the goods need less transportation, and there is less risk of getting items on which the expiry date has passed.

Buyers do their errands and get on with the next. Except in Mari's shop on the main road. He has extended the roof, and between the phone booth and the sacks of staple goods he has placed a bench which gives people the opportunity for a few minutes of rest.

Housewives able to avoid shopping during the late afternoon rush sit and gossip while Mari weighs the merchandise, and counts the received money or writes down additional credit.

In the late afternoon when people get back from work and do the shopping on the way home, the main road area is busy. Bus drivers signal their arrival by lying on the horn as their vehicles storm towards the bus stands, one stop for each village. To get off and on the crowded buses takes experience and strength. Students come home from engineering colleges, which are mushrooming outside towns and cities. People working in the service sector get back from urban areas. Several of these only come at weekends, or even monthly. Agricultural workers come from the fields, and construction workers from building sites. Women in groups carrying their tools and their groceries just purchased for dinner, and men driving their oxcarts. School children have already been home for a couple of hours. Those who can afford to, send their children to tuition classes in the afternoon, while poorer children have to help out with household chores and errands. Only a few young children play in the street, and always only after their duties are completed.

Moving away from the main road, commotion is rare. The streets in Pelasur are lined with old one storey buildings. Fading whitewash on mud huts with thatched roofs stands next to ochre, pale green and pink plastered onto brick houses with tiled roofs. Verandas directly facing the street are cool places for early afternoon chats among neighbourhood women, and sleeping places during hot summer nights. It is also a place for work, like mending baskets and sorting lentils. After breakfast, Gayatri's husband brings out his accountant books and makes their veranda into his office. His income has made it possible for them to extend their house towards the back. They have constructed a new kitchen and an indoor toilet beyond the inner courtyard, and a roof terrace. The terrace has replaced the street as a place for drying grains and spices, and when conditions are good, the elevation enables her son to get a connection on his mobile. It is an aim among the villagers to tear down one's old house and put up a terraced house in concrete. Like most of the families, Gayatri's has access to cable TV in their home. However, many miss the cinema which used to be situated on the main road in Tennampattu. People's love of Tamil films has not diminished, but the cinema owner lost too much profit due to the increase in private TVs, and then the theatre was closed and the building torn down.

Walking through Pelasur into Tennampattu and Hariyarapakkam, one usually takes the smaller streets on the left side off the main road. The border between the first two villages had to be pointed out to me. They are in direct line with each other and neither buildings nor inhabitants appear particularly different. The beginning of the third village is

clearer. Tennampattu turns into Hariyarapakkam where the huts end and brick houses increasingly have been replaced by new terraced constructions. Building site are frequent, both where old houses have been torn down and on newly appropriated grounds. Many of the new houses are two storey buildings painted in bright colours. Although there are around twice as many households in Pelasur compared to Hariyarapakkam, the latter has the appearance of a small town. There is a large square in the middle of the village, surrounded by shops and honoured with statues of prominent political leaders. Hand painted signs are accompanied by digital print outs. Whereas an oxcart or a two wheeler run on diesel are the usual private vehicles in the area, a couple of families in Hariyarapakkam drive brand new jeeps. Married women can be seen wearing *chudidar* instead of sari, a practice taken on by girls who have been able to get higher education in a city.

There is a constant movement between the villages and the nearby towns and cities. Farmers fill their bullock carts with their harvest and deliver it to town, employees make the daily journey to their work places, students make their way to colleges, and people visit their relatives and particular temples in neighbouring areas. Occasionally, one has to take the bus to town to be attended to at the hospital or other governmental facilities. Lorries are sent from urban areas to distribute goods, and to collect items produced in the villages, such as saris, newly picked flowers, or sacks of rice from large landowners. During droughts when the ground water level is too low, the municipality in Chennai engages tanks which bring water from certain rural areas and sell it to the urban citizens. For those who do not move physically or get reports from relatives and neighbours, lives in other places are selectively mediated through cable TV and news papers.[21]

The journey from the three villages to Chennai, my second area of study, can mainly be made in two quite different ways. One is by local bus, which is the common way for villagers to travel, the other is by car and made only by a few wealthy families. The two types of vehicles usually approach the city on different routes which express and constitute diverse norms and standards of living.

Travelling to the city by bus, one is in a squeezed and sweaty condition. To limit the discomfort, people who have other errands avoid the morning hours when many inhabitants daily go back and fourth to jobs and educational establishments. Bus-drivers

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[21] In her study from a nearby region, Isabel Nabokov uses a road metaphor to describe the relationship between people and other entities they perceive around them. She characterizes the Hindu world of human existence as 'a road, on which the gods, the demons, and the dead all travel at different speeds, sometimes getting stuck, sometimes making wrong turns, sometimes making terminal exits, but always aspiring to get back on' (Nabokov 2000: 184).

attack the roads with excessive bravery, and as their vehicles are among the larger ones they are high in the hierarchy of the highway. People who can spend a few more rupies on the fare try to take the private buses, which are in a better condition with more comfortable seats and the shocks of the holes in the road are partly absorbed by the vehicle. For the pleasure of most passengers, Tamil film songs are often played at high volume, and if one is lucky there is a DVD player in the front showing a film as well. A crucial issue inside the bus is to find one's right place in the gendered division between the back and the front seats. In a hectic town in the adjacent district, the passengers must change to another bus. This bus takes its passengers on increasingly crowded and seemingly chaotic suburban streets. Drivers to a large extent communicate with loud horns. The intensity and fast pace that the villagers who had moved to Chennai talked about on weekend return visits begin to take over. This part of the journey ends at the main bus-stand for regional traffic, and local city buses continue the transport downtown. After one hour's drive through the inner suburbs, there is yet another hour till the city centre is finally reached. A relief when sitting on a bus is the high level of your seat which brings you above the thickest fumes. Blocks in the city are often differentiated by the types of items produced and/or sold; in a few streets all the shops deal in tyres, in others furniture, silver, groceries etc. Outside temples and mosques, religiously related items are sold. Vendors without shops occupy pockets of free space on the pavements and sides of streets. As in the village, people do not renovate old buildings. It has the same sense of status to tear down the old and build a new house in concrete. The new edifices are built with more storeys, and the additional floors provide areas which can be rented and thus increase one's income. By the narrow streets in the older parts of the city, buildings that seem to be falling apart try to breathe next to the swelling new ones.

The car ride is one of cool clean smoothness. As this vehicle does not have to pass the main bus-stand, the driver takes different roads into the urban area which are wider and straighter. The surfaces both inside and outside the car, on the road, and the buildings are smooth. The AC system allows the passengers to arrive in a fresh condition. Compared to the bus journey, the latter ride can also be defined as a state of isolation from the world. From this perspective, the approaching city presents itself in a modern manner with high standards of living. The landscape increasingly becomes covered in gigantic commercial posters, digitally printed in bright colours and fixed onto rougher buildings as well as to greenery. Many apartments are shaded as the images enclose their windows. Silk saris, golden jewellery, Italian furniture, mobile phones, cars, private business education and real estate are advertised as the ideals of a good life. Participation of famous actors and actresses, as well as the number

of decades a company has existed, increase the effect of the messages. The advertised items are part of the lives enacted in the popular TV serials watched daily by the majority of my informants. For a newcomer, it was almost like sitting in front of a TV without any breaks between the commercials. The uppermost class who live in the richest parts in South Chennai slide past the high pace commotion of the city centre and arrive in spacious newlybuilt houses or flats, often secluded by gates and attended by guards. The roads where the huge advertisements are placed are well chosen, it is the people travelling by car who are the consumers of the desirable products.

Identities and belongings

As in the two examples of the journeys to Chennai, class differences are often intensely apparent in Tamil society. People's identities are also constituted by their caste, but this is less obvious to perceive. Caste belonging is defined by birth, but the implication of this belonging is subject to an on-going process related to socio-political changes. The context dependent caste hierarchy makes it possible for people to apply for a changed position along criteria established by the Government. A caste often consists of different classes, which enables people to move between categories of class. A person's position in a local hierarchy is further related to his or her spatial position in the community. At the sites of my fieldwork, recent changes in people's positions were more comprehensible in the villages.

Several of the streets in Pelasur are named by caste groups. According to my host in this village, the inhabitants' caste belonging corresponded to the street names until a couple of decades ago. Only Brahmins lived on Brahmin Street, and the high non-Brahmin Mudaliars (a Vellalar sub-caste) and Chettiyars lived on Vellalar Street, the Kammalars or Acharias on Kammala Street etc. People of lower castes, Vanniyars and Vannans as well as a couple of tribal families, Kattu Naickers, lived outside these central streets and the lowest, the Paraiyars, who is the largest community among the Dalits in Pelasur, in a separate area. The higher castes owned the land surrounding the villages on which the low castes worked as daily wage takers, *kulis*. The Vanniyars worked for the Brahmins, and the Paraiyars for the non-Brahmin high castes. According to the Brahmin emphasis on the hierarchy based on the ritual purity of a caste, the Paraiyars were too low to work for (touch the land of) the Brahmins. The spatial separation concerned both religious events and everyday practices. When the lower castes celebrated their annual festivals of their main deities in street processions, they were not allowed to enter Brahmin Street. Meeting a Brahmin on any occasion, they had to cross to the other side of the street and look down.

Since then, the relationships between the caste groups have changed significantly. Desires for a better life through higher education and well-paid jobs in the cities increased, and the Brahmins instigated a move towards the urban areas. Members of other high castes such as Chettiars and Mudeliars followed. As the majority of the high castes sold their land in order to begin new prosperous lives in Chennai or the US, and as the anti-Brahmin movement decreased the stability of Brahmin power, the lower castes were able to get hold of their own land. The Vanniyars, who used to dominate in number[22], are today also dominant in social and political power. At every election they bring forth a representative for each of the larger Tamil political parties, and they hold the dominant posts in local political bodies. There is one official council in the village, the *panchayat*, which is concerned with health, water, roads, schools, and one unofficial council, the elder's *panchayat* to which people turn for advice in private family matters.

Whereas the streets named by particular castes are now inhabited by diverse communities, the separation of the Dalits from the rest of the villagers is a condition which has not yet changed. While the three villages stand close together, the area where the Dalits live is clearly detached. Looking towards the south on the border of Pelasur, one barely sees the Dalit dwellings through the trees and unruly bushes. Around a fifth of the inhabitants of Pelasur live in this area, whereas Tennampattu and Hariyarapakkam do not have any Dalit population. The villagers call the Dalits 'SC' (Scheduled Castes)[23] or 'low class', and their habitation is referred to as 'the colony'. In all cases the English terms are used. The Dalits call their area Ambedkar Nagar in reference to their political leader[24], and sometimes describe themselves as Adi Dravidas, the first Dravidians[25]. It is only recently that any of them have been able to afford to reconstruct their homes. Spacious brick houses have never been an option, but today several families have replaced their huts by small concrete houses.

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[22] The Vanniyars are the largest single caste in Tamilnadu, comprising 12% of the population (Gorringe 2007).

[23] Dalit means 'broken' and 'downtrodden', and people of the 'untouchable' communities begun to use this term during their political movements in the mid twentieth century (Michael 2007 [1999]: 120). While Scheduled Caste is the official term used by Government bodies, Dalit connotes the struggles and sufferings of these groups. The Paraiyars are the largest Dalit community in Tamilnadu (Gorringe 2007).

[24] Dr. B.R. Ambedkar fought strongly against the oppression of the Dalits, and among them Ambedkar is perceived as a symbol of 'a vision of freedom from social and economic injustice' (Michael 2007 [1999]: 108). Further, he played an important role in writing the Indian constitution, and as an outcome of his criticism of untouchability, Hinduism and the Brahmins, he converted to Buddhism.

[25] Many Dalits in Tamilnadu call themselves Adi Dravidas, which means the first Dravidians. In Pandian's interpretation, this has been enabled through a 1990s historical rewriting by the publicist Kamalanathan, in which today's Dalits, not as previously all non-Brahmins, are described as the descendants of the original Dravidians. Kamalanathan depicts the non-Brahmins as Brahmin collaborators and facilitators of the spread of Aryan culture which led to the inferiorization of the Dalits (Pandian 2007: 240).

The increase in economic standard, communicated for instance by the type of house, is related to the quotas in favour of the lower castes in higher education and jobs in governmental institutions. The non-Brahmin communities are divided into Backward Castes (BC), Most Backward Castes (MBC), Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), and they are given a percentage of quotas according to their belonging in these categories. Due to the quotas, many within these groups have been able to get well paid 'white collar' jobs and move upwards socially through divisions of class and gain larger access to public space. Yet, they express a remaining barrier to their position along the lines of caste.

The majority of the Vanniyars in Pelasur and Tennampattu work in agriculture. Their vulnerability due to their dependence on rain had come to the fore as a consequence of the last years' drought. Rice is the main crop, followed by sugar cane, lentils and ground nuts.[26] The plots the Vanniyars have been able to secure are usually smaller than what is possible to make a living from, between a half and six acres, and therefore their economic conditions continues to be wanting. During high seasons they work on each other's land, as well as employing Paraiyars. The second main occupation within these two groups is construction work. Both men and women work within these professions, but with different tasks. When the conditions in the fields are unfavourable, many villagers are without any form of income.

In Hariyarapakkam, the Mudaliars constitute the largest and dominating caste. They hold the power in their *panchayat* as the Vanniyars do in Pelasur and Tennampattu. Through the employment of the Vanniyars in this village, they have developed a thriving business in the weaving industry. Silk almost has replaced cotton in the production, and since then the owners' economic means have risen tremendously. In addition, the Mudaliars own large amounts of land surrounding the villages which secure good incomes. This caste is more oriented towards what is perceived as city life. They can afford higher education for their children, and the majority of the women are either housewives or employed as teachers.

The instability and constant negotiation over power and space was expressed in mutual criticism between the different communities. Inhabitants of Pelasur and Tennampattu were critical of the weaving business of the Mudaliars and claimed that they were exploiting their employees. Rumours were rife that their economic transactions were improper. I was

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[26] Some generations ago, *ragi*, a type of millet, was the main crop. It requires less water and is thus more adapted to the dry land of this region than the rice and sugar cane cultivated today. *Ragi* continues to be important among the villagers in their religious practices. During festivals of local deities it forms the base of a gruel prepared at the temple. After it has been blessed by the deity, it is given to the worshippers outside the temple and is considered to improve people's health considerably.

told that the owners sometimes give salary in advance, and as the workers are not able to repay in time, the only solution is to make the children work off their parents' debts. A sense of hostility and suspicion was expressed towards those who had climbed upwards economically at a pace that was regarded as too fast. Women in Pelasur perceived a certain tension between the dominating men of Pelasur and Hariyarapakkam respectively. The men in Hariyarapakkam considered themselves as superior, both according to caste and class, whereas the Vanniyars had an inferiority complex due to lack of ability to come forward and make money themselves. My host in Pelasur who is a Mudeliar and thus one of the castes who has lost in power in this area, told in a slightly bitter voice that to criticise the dominant Vanniyars may lead to fines in the elder's council.

The villagers who depend on small scale agriculture share an anxiety over possibilities to survive. They strive for the same material assets as those of higher class, and thus money lenders have a strong grip on many. For some, the only outcome has been suicide. Alcohol abuse is on the rise among the male population, and according to their wives the newly opened second wine shop in Pelasur made the men drink even more. It is the State Government who runs these shops, and the women showed anger towards the state's gain in tax on behalf of the survival of their own children. The younger generation within all castes is dissatisfied with their situation and increasingly directed towards the urban areas.

The majority of the people I engaged with perceived the division between Brahmin and non-Brahmin castes as self-evident. Malliga, a Vanniyar woman in her late thirties who had received education and a job as a teacher through the MBC quotas voiced the lower castes' strong view against the Brahmins:

> If there are three people and there comes a fourth man who is a Brahmin, then that Brahmin will make you listen to him and then he will pull you down and make you stay in the lowest place, he will beat on your head and make you sit (*mattam tatti ukkara veppan*). The Brahmin learned the Vedas, and he learned to suppress others with it… he belongs to the race which eat without dirtying his nails. For us… we had to toil the land and we had to weave… we had to be constantly aware of our place./…/When we go to their marriages and other functions, we feel alienated as their rituals are quite different. We feel like… we are having our dignity taken away from us.

However, the Dalits articulated another view of who the oppressors were. Whereas the Vanniyars have transformed from being the *kuli* workers of the Brahmins into

the dominant caste in Pelasur, the Dalits are continuously inferior and forbidden to live inside the village. The Dalits spoke about harassment and being held back by the Vanniyars. During the last three years, up to shortly before my arrival, a conflict between these two communities had been part of everyday life.[27] It was expressed in violent clashes, and according to the Dalits they called the police authorities for protection. Their former closeness in rank stands in contrast to the recent changes in power relations in Pelasur where the Dalits were kept behind. The discontent was increased by a strong sense of pride on both sides. Murughamma, a Dalit construction worker, recalled when the Vanniyar women within the village made fun of her and other SC women as they passed by the village streets during the conflict. She had answered:

> We are SC people only, are you as clean (*cuttam*) as us? Do you have jewellery like us? What comes out if you are pierced or stabbed, the same blood as ours! What is caste (*jaati*) in this world? In the present there is one *jaati* called man (*aan*), and the other *jaati* is woman (*penn*)… only in this village people talk about *jaati*! Look at the towns like Cheyyar and Kanchipuram, can you see any difference among the people there? [There] all the Mudaliar[28] and the SC are together and united!

The conflict was not publicly expressed during my stay, and the threats from both sides on eventual interference had stopped. The Dalits did not seem to have gained anything as they remained in their separate area, and were not allowed to enter the newly built community hall inside Pelasur. According to some of the Vanniyars, they were ready to accept the Dalits if they became educated and changed their unclean habits. The Vanniyar teacher continued:

> But many things are changing… we should learn… then only can we become accustomed to different behaviour. When a rich low caste family had their wedding, people from all communities attended, even high caste doctors and teachers. Their economic growth made the difference./…/ I pay respect to those who belong to a caste higher than mine. I still have to sit at a lower level when I go to a Brahmin's house. I know the past so I behave like this. But our children are not like that. My daughter, she pays respect to her superiors only. The present generation doesn't know anything so they don't have any differentiation. Society is definitely changing. When the uneducated become educated, everybody welcomes them and they are friends of many.

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[27] The contemporary conflict between Vanniyars and Dalits arose in the mid 1990s, and is reported in detail by the Frontline journalist Viswanathan (Viswanathan 2005).

[28] Mudaliars are higher than the Vanniyars, which is why the woman's demand for equal treatment is even larger.

The higher castes were not part of the Vanniyar - Dalit conflict. For instance, while the Vanniyars in Pelasur refused to allow the Dalits to perform their traditional task of drumming during the festivals in the village and did it themselves, this was unacceptable for the Mudaliars and Brahmins in Hariyarapakkam according to their rules on ritual purity.

While Murughamma, the SC woman in Pelasur, regarded urban areas as less discriminating against castes, many residents in Chennai expressed a similar attitude to that in the villages. The view of the divide between Brahmins and non-Brahmins was just as self-evident. Wealthy Brahmins, who were at the opposite end of the majority of the inhabitants in Pelasur and the lower urban castes, voiced an anxiety over a lost status position. Dhanalakshmi, a middle aged socially-engaged woman in the Brahmin neighbourhood, described how the male members of her family had stopped their daily use of the *naamam* (red and white image of sectarian belonging drawn on the forehead) due to harassment by non-Brahmin men. Part of the social work of her community was to teach groups of Dalit boys proper conduct, which was regarded as difficult due to their 'innate' disabilities. Brahmins were concerned about a loss of power over people they regarded as lower by birth, and lower castes accused Brahmins of misusing their power and keeping workers as slaves. Brahmins (Vaishnavas) felt lower since the state governed by non-Brahmins had taken over the responsibility of the temples. They had some faith in Jayalalitha when she was the Chief Minister (CM) in Tamilnadu (she belongs to the same community and is the leader of All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, AIADMK) but feel concerned about the present government led by Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) which they perceive as consisting of uneducated crooks.

The urban field sites of this study are positioned in the centre of Chennai and contain more varied and complex categories than the three villages. Two of the urban fields are inhabited by Dalits and are regarded as slum areas, one is populated by orthodox Brahmins of which the majority is wealthy, one is inhabited by upper middle class and higher castes, and one consists of middle class and middle caste as well as a large number of Muslims.

While the villagers mainly lead their lives from day to day, I met more historically engaged people in Chennai. They were well educated and described how several villages had grown into this intense and crowded city. People of the upper castes and classes took pride in defining their own neighbourhood as the oldest 'village' in the area. Spatial differentiations according to caste are to some extent a continuation of how these villages

were laid out. Wealthy Brahmins continuously live near big temples, and the slums are to a large extent those areas which were Dalit dwellings on the outskirts of the old villages (de Wit 1993). The geographical separation between these extremes of social hierarchy is sometimes just a few blocks. Slums are also situated by the rivers that make their way through the city. During the tsunami, and the flood which occurred during my fieldwork, the rising water level made their houses fill with the garbage usually covering the river banks. All dwellings in the slums were small and simple, except for the new Housing Boards which are apartment complexes built with financial support from the State Government. Other areas where poor people dwell are under bridges and on pavements. One middle class central area is filled with hotels and guest houses and locally termed 'the bachelor neighbourhood'. This is where men from towns and villages move to during the process of finding a job and a place of their own. They hope to fulfil their aim to bring their families and make a better life for them in the city.

During my stay in the city, the debate over the quotas for the non-Brahmin castes was strongly intensified. Tamil representatives in the central government in Delhi had initiated a suggestion to extend the quotas. The aim was to include the highest level medical and information technology (IT) education in certain well renowned institutions. The media reported daily on the Brahmin protests against this suggestion, whereas the non-Brahmin responses passed without much notice. Like my Brahmin informants, the media held that entry to high education ought to be based only on competence. It was argued that if quotas should exist, they should be based on income. Much criticism was voiced against the 'creamy layers' constituted within lower castes by members who had made individual benefits through the quotas.

When the elections to the State Assembly took place, political issues often emerged in everyday interactions. People in general were disappointed with the politicians. The competing party leaders were regarded as speaking well during election time, but their words had no bearing on future action. Promises of a free computer and lower prices on a certain amount of rice were arguments raised to attract voters, debates on changes in distribution were seldom heard. This popularised 'game' appeared to be quite successful within the local media and among several inhabitants. Community belonging, both according to caste and religion are important factors in people's voting preferences. In the area of Chennai where the majority of the Muslim citizens live, AIADMK received most of the votes because the party brought forth a Muslim as main representative of the area. The same party got the majority of the Brahmin votes as Jayalalitha is a Brahmin. Lack of correctness in

the census created a few gaps containing a possibility to vote in two places. Some felt a responsibility to use their second vote rather than have it taken advantage of by someone who would vote for the 'wrong' party. In such cases, the obligatory ink on the index finger which inhibited further voting had to be removed chemically. The newest form of surveillance employed at some polling booths was to take a photograph of each individual who had voted. People who lacked a permanent address, such as the pavement dwellers in Chennai, were not allowed to vote. To present a paper which confirmed an address was the first task in order to receive a ration card. Cheaper rations of rice, sugar and oil were provided on the basis of the family income visualised in the colour of the card. Fundamentally, a person without a ration card was not allowed to vote.

A large common interest among parents both in rural and urban areas is the wish for their children to have access to higher education to ensure them a better future with well salaried jobs. This is a crucial argument for people's movement towards the urban areas, as there is no higher education in the villages. The power of the Brahmin minority is partly due to their traditional role as the literate elite.[29] As a counter reaction, it has become a political act among the lower castes to attain higher education (Pandian 1992: 49). For many, the ultimate goal is to be trained in the US. The English language is perceived as a marker of educational level and higher status, and therefore also the formally uneducated in Chennai mix their Tamil with English. Although caste quotas have made it possible for many in the lower communities to come forward, informants held that it is not uncommon to be accepted in the most desirable higher educations in medicine and IT through bribes. The IT industry is large and fast growing in South India, and many in the younger generation aim to work in call centres or as software engineers. In a recent study, Christopher Fuller and Haripriya Narasimhan show that Brahmins continue to dominate in this sphere (Fuller and Narasimhan 2008). This is partly due to the fact that the leading companies belong to the private sector which does not make use of the quotas that regulate governmental bodies. Already during the first decades of the twentieth century, Brahmins migrated towards the cities to make use of expanding opportunities. Fuller and Narasimhan argue that the migration among the highest caste from the villages they dominated is an important factor in the changing conditions of power in the rural areas. Together with the anti-Brahmin movement which began during the

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[29] During the colonial period, the British demands on new forms of cultural competence, such as knowledge of English and the institutionalised language of law was met by the Brahmins. Their economic resources and power increased tremendously through their assignments in the colonial legislative bodies. This was perceived as a natural outcome of their intelligence, a view based on eugenics co-produced by the Brahmins and the British (Pandian 2007: 157).

same period, this migration influenced the possibility for the non-Brahmins to become politically and socially dominant (Fuller and Narasimhan 2008: 183). Chennai is the hub of the IT business in Tamilnadu, and today's high levels of income and living standards among its professionals have even persuaded Tamil Brahmins to return from the US. Despite their minority in numbers, the Brahmins thus continue to have significant social power in Chennai.

The historical context

The complexities of caste and the organisation of Indian society have been described from many different perspectives, and there has been considerable debate between the contradictory claims their different approaches have produced. The 'subaltern studies' school, which developed during the 1980s, criticised earlier scholars for emphasizing the perspectives of the elite and thus excluding inferior groups (Ludden 2003). Subaltern studies on the other hand have brought forth the power struggles enacted among the diversity of local communities. Fuller emphasizes the importance of the subaltern studies' historical scholars in the understanding of caste development, particularly through their attention to ideologies which are alternative to the colonial-Brahmanical hegemony, and in their anti-holistic approach (Fuller 1996). Earlier classical descriptions of caste, such as M.S. Srinivas' ethnographic account of the stable self-contained village system (Srinivas 1969), Louis Dumont's structural explanation of religious ideas as encompassing all other domains (Dumont 1970), and MacKim Marriott's emphasis on complementarity between 'great' (Brahmin) and 'little' (local) conceptions (Marriott 1976), argue against each other on many issues but they all share a holistic perspective on Hindu society. Local complexities and conflicts have therefore not had many opportunities to be fully comprehended in these studies (also Appadurai 1986, Dirks 1996, Kapadia 1995, Pinney 2006 [2001], Quigley 1993).

In Tamilnadu, caste is highly politicised. The sociologist M.S.S. Pandian, positioned within the 'subaltern studies' (Katju 2007), has given a detailed historical account of the development of this condition. In *Brahmin & non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present*, he outlines how the polar identities of the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins were co-constructed and became part of people's everyday lives (Pandian 2007).

Pandian describes how during the early phases of colonialism, the missionaries tried to define the meaning of local religious practices. Different groups claimed their particular beliefs and practices as the true form of Hindu religion. Many local practices were condemned as 'devil-worship', but the Brahmins, with reference to Orientalist scholars, were able to have their claim accepted. Pandian argues that by embracing the Orientalist view of

how the Aryans had civilized the Dravidians (described in Chapter I), the Tamil Brahmins with support of the Theosophical Society, legitimised their position as true bearers of Hindu authenticity. The redefined Brahminical Hinduism became nationalized and people of lower castes and other religious communities were made into imperfect Indians (Pandian 2007: 47). The Brahmins had to be both authentic and modern in order to be intelligible and position themselves towards the colonisers. The practice of caste however was strongly criticized by the British. To overcome this issue, the Brahmins used colonial scientific discourse and explained the importance of caste in medical terms of hygiene and sanitation as well as materialist reasons of divisions of labour.

The lower castes were increasingly inferiorized while the Brahmins gained wealth and power. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a 'Non-Brahmin Manifesto' was issued and the non-Brahmin movement began to take shape. The manifesto argued that the government of Madras Presidency should be based on 'true British principles of justice and equality of opportunity' (Pandian 2007: 167). In this sense, the colonials brought a form of awareness among the subaltern. A crucial criticism of the Brahmins was that they were incapable of disinterested rule, defined as recognition of difference between citizens and a government where different communities were represented. The Brahmins defined people only by the level of efficiency. The most radical group among the anti-Brahmins, the Self Respect Movement, condemned religion on the basis of European rationalism.

The conflict between the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins was, according to Pandian, an issue of class rather than caste. In the non-Brahmin campaigns, the Brahmin was represented as a trope for discriminating power related to caste, class, gender, region and language (Pandian 2007: 188). But as this trope came to incorporate any group, independent of caste belonging, who employed power, class identity was the main definition. The ritually defined high position of the Brahmins had been transformed into material power.

In the epilogue of his study, Pandian draws parallels between the non-Brahmin movement and today's Dalit movement which fights against contemporary non-Brahmin discrimination. He contends that the naturalization of the polar identities Brahmin and non-Brahmin allows no space for a Dalit identity independent of other non-Brahmins. As a consequence, the majority perceive the Dalit claims for equal rights as illegitimate. The contemporary political field is thus described as a non-Brahmin hegemony which merely replaced the Brahmin control the non-Brahmins previously fought against. The power of the new political discourse further discourages Brahmin politicians unless they deny their Brahmin identity (Pandian 2007: 236).

Although caste plays an important role in Tamil politics, it has not been separated from the religious sphere. Non-Brahmins continuously perceive it as important to be able to worship and reach god without the help of Brahmin priests. As expressed by the Vanniyar teacher in Pelasur: 'All you need is god's love, and you need not be a Brahmin to deserve that!'

The importance of personal love and devotion between god and devotee, without a mediating Brahmin priest, developed during the medieval period within the *bhakti* movement. The term 'comes from a Sanskrit verb which means "to share", and *bhakti* is a relational love, shared by god and the devotee' (Eck 1981: 48). Around the eighth century, Tamil *bhakti* poet-saints launched movements which to a large extent worked against the establishment. According to Diana Eck, they supported the downtrodden and despised Brahmanical ritualism (Eck 1981: 71). The extent to which this movement can be considered as subversive is interpreted differently among scholars. Fuller is less affirmative than Eck, and he holds that explicit opposition towards Brahmin domination was not expressed. Although god became available to all, the interpretation of the *bhakti* movement as promoting an egalitarian society rose at a much later stage at the time of modern reformism (Fuller 1992: 157f). In accordance with this view, Pandian contends that criticisms of the Brahmins were mainly limited to the religious sphere in the pre-colonial period (Pandian 2007:12).

Today, it is generally held that Brahmins and the lower castes ought to be seen as coexisting groups, influencing and modifying each others ideas and practices throughout history (Selvam 2007 [1999], Prasad 2007). The notion of 'Sanskritisation', the one way process in which lower groups changed towards those of higher to claim a superior position (Srinivas 1969), has been considered a simplification. Pinney contends that in spite of many, sometimes radical, differences between regions and various groups, 'these are different positions within a shared epistemological frame' (Pinney 2006[2001]: 9). Saskia Kersenboom describes the relationship between those defined as high or low in Hindu traditions as a unity. This unity resides in 'the continuities that can be traced in the concrete media of song, dance, play, sculpture, painting, religious story and rite that connect the rituals and beliefs of the villager with those of the townsman and urbanite, one region with another, and the educated with the uneducated' (Kersenboom 1987: 49). The kolam can be understood as such a unifying media. The continuous changes of the social and religious organisation described in this chapter are related to changes in and different perceptions of the kolam practice, which will be shown in the following chapters.

Religious practice

The commitment to *bhakti* is fundamental in Hindu religious practice. It is 'a vital, constitutive part of popular Hinduism and a stream that runs all through it' (Fuller 1992:158). The devotional relationship is usually established with a particularly chosen deity. As described in the Introduction, the merging between deity and worshipper through the act of *darshan* is central in this relationship. However, god's return of one's gaze that brings about this physically felt merging is not always taken for granted. Bhavani, a middle-aged Brahmin woman in Chennai, held that this was what she *hoped* for when she approached god. If the priest gave her a flower that had been offered and in contact with god, she felt that her prayers had been heard. Malliga, the Vanniyar teacher, did not refer to a mediating priest. During worship, *puja*, she could directly feel god's presence as vibrations. At this moment god removed all bad influences and filled her with blessings and joy.

Among the people I engaged with, I interpret the personal vows to the deities, *venduthals* or *pirattanais*, as one of the most sincere and common form of devotion that both men and women perform. While the *venduthal*s common to all genders will be accounted for in this section, the centrality of the kolam practice in women's enactment of *bhakti* in their everyday lives will be described in the next chapter.

A *venduthal* begins with a wish directed towards a certain favoured deity. It may be the hope of the recovery of a sick child, of a good marriage, or success in a final exam in college. The wish is communicated to the deity at his or her temple, and the devotee promises to perform a return when the wish is fulfilled. Sometimes the performance is enacted before, to aid the fulfilment. The return ought to be strenuous as to express the sincerity of the devotee's belief and thankfulness. Like most religious practices, the form of *venduthal*s varies by caste, family, gender and region. A common *venduthal* is to shave off the hair and offer it to the god Tirumal (a form of Vishnu) in Tirupathi, a pilgrim site across the border into the state of Andra Pradesh. Malliga performed a less typical kind. Her only son had had poor health since he was a baby, and each year Malliga had made *vendhutal*s for his recovery. She turned towards the goddess Angalamman, and for each return Malliga formed a depiction of her son as a small doll of dough and threw it towards the goddess when she was taken out in the street in her annual festival in Hariyarapakkam.[30] During my visit, a similar vow had been made for a sick cow at Malliga's mother in-law's house, and therefore her son-doll was

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[30] Many devotees bring small balls of the same dough and throw them towards the goddess as a form of offering. Meyer describes how women during a festival for Angalamman in North Arcot District threw small dolls of children at the goddess in thankfulness when their prayers for children had been heard (Meyer 1986: 135).

accompanied by a cow-doll. Some *venduthal*s are enacted among family members in a small temple, but more often they are performed during more spectacular events. The most arduous form of the latter, which only men between fifteen and sixty partake in, are those where hooks are attached to the body and used as a tool for pulling vehicles, or 'flying' on a rope to the deity. They were performed by many non-Brahmin men in Pelasur during the annual festival for the goddess Mariyamman. Those who had made vows for the benefit of a child carried the child through the flight. According to one of the village priests, the number of participants increases every year. Young men in Pelasur were of the opinion that the hook performances were connected to bravery as a part of manhood. In Hariyarapakkam, the men had until recently performed *venduthal*s in the form of fire walking, but I was told that nowadays the inhabitants in this village, in contrary to those in Pelasur, felt that this practice was outdated and backwards.

A few women put spears through their cheeks, but otherwise female *venduthal*s were less demanding. They rolled themselves around a temple, walked round it carrying a pot of burning coal, or danced for the deity in a sari made of neem leaves[31]. The dance was performed by my hostess in Pelasur as part of several vows she and her husband had made at the time of their marriage. They married out of love, with the consent of their mothers but disapproval of their fathers, and through the enactment of the vows they explicitly put their trust in the divinities' help in making the marriage happy. This was regarded as needed due to the lack of family support. They still have one vow left to perform, and this is to donate the *taali*, the necklace given to the bride at the wedding, to a temple.[32]

Non-Brahmins described the *venduthals* as central among all Tamils. But the Brahmins I met placed less importance on these kinds of vows. They used the term *neerchai* when they spoke about them, and they performed returns which did not require physical pain. Brahmins held that they would never place themselves under such harsh conditions as the hook performances. Brahmin as well as non-Brahmin priests however held that the practice was unnecessary. From their point of view god always fulfils your wishes, and there is thus no need to give returns.

Apart from expressing *bhakti*, the vows appear as means of constituting and communicating one's ability of self-control and endurance. I perceive this ability as a highly valued aspect of moral correctness among my informants, across castes. The villagers

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[31] The implications of these leaves will be described in the next chapter.

[32] It will be put in the *undal* (grinder) and replaced by a turmeric root on a string at a ceremony in the temple. Later, it will again be replaced by a newly bought golden necklace similar to the donated one. Further on *taali* in Chapter VII.

contended that the performance of *venduthal*s requires you to be courageous, *taitiyam*, and fearless, *payam illamai*. These qualities free oneself from feeling any pain.[33] To have fear, *payam*[34], is always regarded as dangerous and must therefore be avoided. According to Margaret Trawick, for Tamils 'to submit to *payam*, is to lose control, to come under another's power, to let part of all one's life flow away' (Trawick 1990:190, also cited in Nabokov, 2000: 46).

Religious practice contains the hierarchical inequality that is part of the caste system. In the encounter with a deity the inferior position of the devotee is expressed, and similarly, when a Brahmin meet a person of low caste in the religious context certain behaviour is required. Fuller describes this relation as one of the central facts about Hinduism, and illustrates it with how the inferior being moves his/her face, the highest ranked part of the body, towards the feet, the lowest ranked part, of the superior being. Another important part of Hinduism is that while god exists in all of nature (as *brahman*) the devotees perceive that a part of god exists in every human being (as *atman*). Therefore people make no absolute separation between persons and divinities (Fuller 1992).

The relative position between beings is further expressed in regulations that concern cooking and sharing of food, both during religious practice and in everyday meals. In general, left-over food is considered polluted and therefore harmful. However, if the second consumer is inferior to the first, the food is transformed into an unpolluted or blessed state (Fuller 1992: 77). In a household, the husband eats first and the wife last. If there are any leftovers from the day before, it is she who finishes them. To eat leftovers is in this sense a means to express that the wife has a lower position than her husband. During festivals, non-Brahmin women cook sweet rice and present it before a deity at his/her temple. When the deities are involved in a meal, women thus feed them before their husbands and other family members. The food is regarded as being consumed by the deities and it hereby becomes imbued with their blessings. Women bring the blessed food to their family members, and when they have consumed it, the deities' grace, *prasadam*, becomes incorporated in the human bodies. This sharing is an essential part of worship in popular Hinduism (Fuller 1992: 75)

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[33] Further, it is important to be clean, *cuttam*, when the return is to be given. Participants undergo certain preparations to attain this stage.

[34] My interpreter translated *payam* with fear, but Trawick argues that while the term comes close to the word 'fear', it is rather 'a thing itself to be avoided', it is like 'a dangerous, life-corroding disease' (Trawick 1990: 190).

The hierarchical inequality partly governs what kind of food is regarded as proper for different beings. In general, my informants held that Brahmins are vegetarians and never make non-vegetarian sacrifices to their main deities Shiva and Vishnu, whereas most non-Brahmins consume and sacrifice animals. However, the same deity may receive vegetarian items from some families, and animal sacrifices from others, although they belong to the same caste. Thus, the required food depends on both family practice and preferences of a particular deity.

The tutelary deity of Pelasur, Ponniyamman, requests a goat sacrifice each year. Her devotees, who all are non-Brahmins, perform this sacrifice to please the goddess and make sure that she will continue to protect them. The ritual is performed close to midnight at a nearby lake, and because of the late hour only men can attend. The man who presently serves Ponniyamman told us that a few decades ago when his grandfather was priest, the festival continued for twenty days. The sacrifice was made at the goddesses' shrine, and the meat was collected in a pot and thrown over the village border to be eaten only by the goddess. The devotees had to stay inside the village so that they would be safe from the goddess' danger. Today, the goat is cut into pieces and one share is given to each of the lowest present castes who all belong to the Dalits (washermen, drumbeaters, and barbers). The meat is brought home to be cooked and shared among family members. The sacrifice of a goat or hen can moreover be a form of *venduthal*. This performance takes place in a temple, and after the animal is blessed by the deity it is cooked and shared on the temple grounds in a similar way as other blessed food.

The incorporation of god's grace into the body of the worshipper takes other forms than food. Camphor or oil lamps are always lit for the deities during worship, and the flame is considered to facilitate the merging between deity and devotee. This occurs visually, but also physically as the devotee touches the flame with his or her hands and moves them towards the eyes. Flower garlands, ashes from cow dung and water that has been in contact with the deities are equally imbued with blessings. When these materialised blessings come in contact with the worshipper, as when Bhavani was given the flower by the priest, they are incorporated into the devotees' bodies. Fuller describes that the temporariness of the merging between deity and worshipper, marked through the ephemeral character of the materials that are used, is linked to the need for constant repetition of worship (Fuller 1992: 75). This use of ephemeral materials and need for repetition corresponds with the continuous redrawing of the kolam.

The conception of a lack of complete separation between different kinds of beings presents itself in many different contexts. During the controversy over new changes in the system of caste quotas during my fieldwork, the perceived offenders were termed as imbued with unpredictable evil forces.[35] When children of Brahmin families misbehaved, their parents threatened them with Arjun Singh, a politician working for increased quotas for lower castes in higher education, instead of with evil spirits.[36] Another example is Shiva, an elder farmer in Pelasur who has been active in the party AIADMK, and no longer keeps images of the Hindu deities in his home. They have been replaced by large colour photos of MG Ramachandran, the most revered film actor and politician in Tamilnadu. In one photo, Shiva greets MGR and the two men are accompanied by Jayalalitha, the former CM and heir of MGRs leadership of AIADMK. Shiva voiced their close relationships: 'MGR is like a god to me, and Jayalalitha is like a mother.[37] In helping the poor, he has done more than god can do.[38] When I see his pictures and pray, I get his blessings. He gives blessings like a god.'

These examples of the continuity between divine and human beings are simultaneously examples of the positive and negative ways of seeing described in the Introduction. Shiva's apprehension of MGR's blessings through an exchange of their gazes refers to the notion of *darshan*, whereas to be gazed at by Arjun Singh is similar to the effects of *drishti*. At the same time, Shiva's trust in MGR can be perceived as an outcome of how the non-Brahmin parties, initially DMK (Pandian 1992), used the belief in connection between entities when they merged the cinematic and the real in their political campaigns.[39]

Sectarian belonging within Hinduism has three main categories. Devotees of Shiva are termed Shaivites, of Perumal (Vishnu) Vaishnavites, and of Shakti Devi, Shaktas. People firmly believe that if one gives their prayers to their main god it will reach all deities, because all others come from her/him. Each category includes not merely the main god who has given name to the category, but family members and avatars within this group. Additional sub-categories are named according to such members.[40] These categories were meaningful for some of my informants while others never used them. For instance, women in the village who

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[35] A nationwide debate in which the same arguments of efficacy versus disinterested rule described by Pandian during the non-Brahmin movement (Pandian 2007) was used.

[36] The importance of evil spirits within Hinduism will be described in the next chapter.

[37] It was common among people I engaged with to use kinship terms to express closeness with politicians, just as they did with non-kin who they were emotionally involved with.

[38] MGRs actually taxed the poor and favoured the rich. A religious revivalism took place during his period as CM, 1978-87 (Pandian 1992).

[39] During the latest campaign, cuts from political mass meetings are merged with action scenes from cinemas where the politician/actor/god/man heroically defeats the antagonist.

[40] For instance, the worshippers of Shivas son Murughan (Kumar), who are many in number in Tamilnadu, can be termed as followers of either Shaivam or Kaumaaram.

considered Shakti Devi as their main deity and the creator of the universe and all other gods never referred to themselves as Shaktas. Vaishnava Brahmins emphasized their belonging with pride, whereas they were pointed out by non-Brahmins as the worst in treating other communities as inferior.

The recent changes of inhabitants in the village area of Pelasur, Tennampattu and Hariyarapakkam and the communities relationship to each other, is materialised in a change of the public places of worship. At the time when the non-Brahmin worshippers of the goddess Mariyamman were not allowed to enter Brahmin Street during the annual festival for her, she dwelled in a small shrine. Through donations during the last couple of decades, Mariyamman's public place of worship has grown to a modest temple. It is the most frequently visited in the village, and her festival is the largest public festival during the year. The goddess Ponniyamman's shrine at what before the expansion of Pelasur used to be the eastern boundary of the village has also been enlarged. The increased attention and space given to these goddesses are related to the reduced amount of Brahmins inhabiting the village. The majority of the Dalits in Pelasur worship another goddess, Muthumariyamman, who has a small temple dedicated to her in the Dalit part of Pelasur. During the clashes between the Vanniyars and the Dalits referred to above, the Vanniyars in the elder's council decided that any Vanniyar who attended the annual festival of the Dalit goddess would be punished with fines, and the Dalits answered that if they came, the Dalits would rape their women. As the Vaishnavite Brahmins have left the area, the two Perumal temples they used to attend have been closed. For the last twenty-five years, *puja*s have not been made for the god, and no kolams have been drawn at their entrances. Neighbours of one of the temples consider the area as a dwelling place of evil forces. There are discussions in the village council about tearing it down and building houses on the premises, but the owners who live in the US refuse to sell. The largest and probably oldest temples in the three villages are those dedicated to Shiva, one in each village. Devotees from different castes worship this god in his temples in Hariyarapakkam and Tennampattu, whereas the one in Pelasur is closed except for a few annual occasions. These are both religious festivals as well as meetings of the elder's council.

In addition to these places of Hindu worship, there are numerous smaller temples and shrines throughout the three villages. The only 'temple' of another religious community is the Pentecostal church on the main road in Pelasur, and it attracts devotees from low castes in Pelasur as well as from nearby villages. The Hindus complain about the 'loud and strange' forms of worship conducted in this church, and claim that the Pentecostals gain support only through their strategy of giving food to the 'SC-people'. As the Pentecostals

disapprove of Hindu worship such as the kolam practice, the Hindus are anxious about the present growth of the Pentecostals. The few Catholics and Muslims in the three villages have to take the bus to a nearby town, around 15 km away, to partake in religious ceremonies outside their homes.

The inhabitants of Chennai have some form of their main deity within close reach. The Brahmin-dominated neighbourhoods are centred on large ancient temples hosting a male deity and his consort. As in the villages, there are plenty of various Hindu temples and shrines. Muslims are almost in a majority near the mosques, and Jain communities live close to their temples. In the slums, people mainly worship different forms of the goddess (see further on Amman in the next chapter). However, many have converted to Christianity and their faith sometimes encompasses both Hindu goddesses and the Virgin Mary. In wealthy areas, Catholics and Protestants have access to large churches. Religious communities interact to various degrees, and people never talked about open conflicts between these categories.

Family dignity

In people's everyday lives, the social position of an individual family depends on to what extent its members attend to issues of dignity, prestige and respectability (*gauravam*). According to Malliga: '*Gauravam* is part and parcel of people's lives, the reason for doing or not doing things.' My informants described the responsibility of upholding *gauravam* in practice as different for men and women, and therefore this concept of morality can be understood as part of how gender is constructed. Whereas men's tasks were defined as maintaining an income and preferably having one wife, women were required to focus on several issues. In general, women have an ambivalent position in Indian society. They embody the central notion of auspiciousness and the following ability to engender well-being and new life, as well as impurity which is connected to a lower ritual status (Baker-Reynolds 1991, Fuller 1992).[41] The most central issue regarding *gauravam* from women's perspective is chaste (*karpu*) behaviour.

In the Tamil context, Kannagi, the main female character in the classical Tamil narrative *Silapathikaram*, is regarded as the embodiment of the female ideal of chastity. She endures the situation while her husband has an affair with another woman, and when he is falsely accused of theft and sentenced to death, Kannagi revenges him. Her powers (*ananku*) gained through her chaste behaviour and accumulated in her breasts enable her to burn down

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[41] The ambivalence of women's position is related to the different forms of the Hindu goddesses, which will be elaborated in the next chapter.

the whole town in which her husband was killed (Kersenboom 1987, Hart 1975). During the 1960s, the political party DMK instigated a cult around Kannagi in which the honour of Tamil identity depended on the chastity of Tamil women and thus on the control of female sexuality (Anandhi 2005).

The great pride people take in women's chaste behaviour was expressed in a media event during my stay in Pelasur. For several days, the headlines were filled with accusations against a famous actress who was regarded as brutally violating the sexual morality of Tamil women. The actress had been interviewed on her opinions concerning a survey on women's sexuality, and she stated that: 'Our society should liberate itself from such ideas that brides should all be virgins at the time of marriage. No educated man will expect his bride to be a virgin at the time of marriage. But when indulging in pre-marital sex, the girl should guard herself against pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases' (Dhara 2006). The actress was attacked by offended women who demonstrated carrying brooms and chappals, and her effigy was burnt.[42] Many wanted her to be banned from the state, and in the end she had to make a public apology. Being an outsider of North Indian origin, she was even easier to demonise. Although the actress never mentioned Tamil women in particular, the statement became part of a politicised debate on Tamil identity (Anandhi 2005).[43] When the most important events of the year were described in the media the following January, the actress' statements came second to the extensive flooding caused by the last monsoon. My informants in the village had difficulties in explaining the anger they felt towards the actress, and this can be seen as an expression of how rarely sexuality is talked about. But primarily, the women in Pelasur felt accused of being unchaste and consequently immoral violators of *gauravam*.

The arranged marriage is a way of upholding sexual morality as well as keeping procreation within the right lineages. The ideal marriage partner for Tamil women is mother's brother's son (MBS) or father's sister's son (FZS), referred to as 'cross-cousin marriage' in accounts on the Dravidian kinship system (Busby 2000, Trawick 1996).[44] However, educated people in the cities explained that nowadays they avoid close kin marriages because of scientific research which claims genetic problems leading to different forms of diseases. They also argued that this arrangement used to be a means of keeping and accumulating wealth

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[42] Brooms and chappals are regarded as both unclean and effective against bad spirits. Due to their uncleanness, it is very humiliating to hit somebody with these items (Meyer 1986: 213).

[43] The Dalit movement in Tamilnadu has become part of Tamil nationalism in order to extend their political power, and consequently they were against the actress (Gorringe 2007).

[44] There is a comprehensive tradition of research on the Dravidian kinship system, but this topic is not a part of the present study.

within the family. Yet, for many young women and their parents, marriage with close relatives constitutes a sense of security. Among Brahmins, marrying within the right sub-caste (*gotram*) is a continuously important factor, which does not have to include the MBS or FZS. People of lower castes expressed less concern towards rules on endogamy within their sub-caste (*kulam*). At the sites of this study, it sometimes occurs that a man takes more than one wife. The man might be condemned as he defies the *gauravam* of his family, but no one interferes explicitly. However, for a woman to have relationships with more than one man in a life time was officially unthinkable, particularly for those who belong to the upper caste.

Many couples marry out of love, transgressing the prescribed rules. People fall in love on the bus, in school, at their workplaces or in the street. Men and women who belong to different castes elope to get their marriage registered, and take the penalty of fines to be paid or of being ostracized for several years.[45] During the 1930s and 40s, these couples would have been supported by the Self-Respect Movement. This movement promoted love-marriages, and organised them in public without the usual requirements of for instance a mediating Brahmin priest, the astrologically defined time, the use of dowry, and the tying of the *taali* (Hodges 2005). These weddings were attended by up to 10 000 people, and important in the political struggle of the movement. Photographs of the events were published in the popular form of calendars and spread to those who did not participate. The family and the domestic space were defined as the key site of the reproduction of the unjust society, and social norms were thus attacked in public space. The self-respecter's contestation of family values included a criticism of using traditional 'home decór' (Hodges 2005), but Sarah Hodges has not come across a particular mentioning of the kolam practice in this context (personal communication 2007). Eventually, the leader EVR was considered to have gone too far, and he lost support for his ideas. The DMK, who gained their power after Independence, promoted mainstream conservative family policies (Hodges 2005: 274f).

In order to become married and earn the social identity of a woman and an auspicious wife, the issue of dowry causes much worry. It used to be only Brahmins who practiced the giving of gifts from the bride's family to the husband's. Since the last two generations among the non-Brahmins I met in the field, dowry is praxis and constitutes a large difficulty to meet. The dowry amount can be the object of huge debates among the elders in the respective families, but if the demands of a preferred man's family cannot be fulfilled by

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[45] If the respective families have given their consent, the presence of the relatives and the priest at the marriage function confirms that the marriage is accurate. But if you do not have their consent, people hold that it is important to register at the authorities. Otherwise, the couple has nothing to fall back on if their parents want to beak up the marriage or the man wants to leave.

the woman's, she has to be content with a less demanding man. From the woman's point of view, this often includes a less worthy man defined as having an unstable economy and lack of education, and who might be prone towards drinking and smoking. For the family as a whole, this is to a large extent a matter of *gauravam* .[46] The enlargement of the practice is related to an increasing demand for consumer goods (cf. Hancock 1999).

Emphasis on family and ancestral tradition increases among women after marriage. The woman moves into the husband's house and/or family, and to begin with she is the lowest person in her new household. It is her duty to take responsibility of all household tasks, such as cooking and bringing up the children. Her maintenance of the family *gauravam* now concerns the in-laws. It is the mother in-law's duty to make sure that her son's wife performs all these tasks. The development of the relationship between the two is crucial. Women within both Brahmin and non-Brahmin castes hold that it is possible to build up trust and closeness, but more often I heard painful stories of dominating mother in-laws. My unmarried interpreter was given the advice to get to know the mother of the man she cared about before they got married.

Sexual relations ought to be a part of married life only. According to my informants, it is especially important for women to not indulge in 'such behaviour' either before marriage or in widowhood. Yet, an unmarried woman might agree to sexual relations with a man on the condition that he has promised to marry her. A hardly mentionable issue among Brahmin women who are not allowed to remarry, is that there are widows who have still taken lovers. If they are adamant about remarrying, they have to run off and conduct the marriage in secret. Among the younger generation however, the norms against both remarriage and divorce have become less important. Non-Brahmin women have stated that advice on sexual behaviour can be given at marriage. For a woman this might be given by the sister in-laws when they stand behind her at the wedding ceremony. The main concern is that she should be docile towards her new husband during their first night.

In both the rural and urban areas where this study was conducted, married couples increasingly live in nuclear families with their children, but the former practice of joint families continues to exist. Although the members might live in different places, the joint family is a strong unit in relation to the larger community. People within the joint family take pride in not having to ask others for help. The villagers I met regarded people who have

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[46] The former practise of bride-wealth among non-Brahmins is still a part of their marriage functions. During the ceremony when the marriage is formally confirmed, gifts are presented to the bride's family by the groom's and vice versa. However, these gifts do not have the same economic value as the dowry.

had to turn to the elder's council for advice in resolving conflicts as failing to uphold their *gauravam*. At the same time, they all emphasize the importance of giving and showing hospitality to guests and in this way keeping the home open towards interaction with the surrounding community.

The new ideal of the nuclear family is accompanied by an aspiration for fewer children. After some time in the field, one of my informants stated that when a stranger asked, she would say that she had two children. In actuality she has four, because she kept on trying till she got a son. Her brother's family is the cause of much anxiety as they have seven daughters and are hardly able to feed them. The necessity of having sons is mainly expressed in economic terms, sons are regarded as more able to earn an income which can support the parents when they grow old, and they stay in their parents' home after marriage. Whereas it is the duty of men to ensure the economic conditions of the family, women are responsible for the continuation of *gauravam* into the next generation through their task of bringing up children.[47] The necessity of the daily kolam performance in women's moral responsibility for their families and the surrounding community, mainly from a religious perspective, will be elaborated on in the next chapter.

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[47] It is considered to be the woman's fault if there are no children in a marriage. A barren daughter in-law would be shameful for her new family and she runs the risk of being thrown out. This is an accepted reason for a man to take another wife. In order to avoid the problems surrounding definite barrenness, informants explained that a woman who has not become pregnant after repeated attempts may in some cases receive a suggestion by her in-laws to spend one night with her husband's brother. Such arrangements concern the continuation of the family, and it has got nothing to do with an acknowledgement of female sexuality.

Chapter III

Kolam as part of women's constant re-creation
of auspiciousness and well-being

Every morning and afternoon, women enact the kolam performance in front of their houses. The thorough preparations of the ground, the drawing of the image, and the visual result are all part of the practice. Although it is a repetitive act, women intentionally draw each new design differently from the previous one. The morning kolams have to be made before any other daily task is attended to. The images will be erased during the day due to people walking in and out of the building, and passing in the street. But the hesitation in walking directly on the design expresses a respectful attitude, and a perception of an importance of the kolams in people's experiences of their environment.

The statements given below represent general notions on the reasons people have given for making kolams. In this chapter, the implications of their expressions will be outlined, both by providing ethnographic context and using secondary references. It will discuss the close link between women, auspiciousness, beauty, completeness, and order, as well as how women engage in re-creation of the meaning and efficacy of these concepts through the kolam practice.

Woman in her 60s, living in a slum area in city, in the process of handing over the daily kolam making to her grand daughter:

> We do it [the kolam] to praise god, god has given us everything, so we should give back in thanks and praise. To invite god into our house (*viidu*). To make it beautiful, to make it into a home (*illam*). It adds beauty (*alagu*) to the family… Only then will the family be happy… all the procedures we do for god begin with kolam… We offer what we can to god.

Female teacher in village school:

> You know the story behind the drawing of kolam? There is one big story. In the olden days… the kolam drawing is not for beauty. Can we provide food for twenty life forms? No… so in the olden days, people drew kolams in raw rice powder for the ants to eat that. The kolam was drawn as a good deed (*dharmam panna*). For blessings (*punniyam*). But nowadays it has transformed into a beautiful thing only.

The kolam is first for blessings… then only it is for beauty. If the kolam is not drawn in front of your house when the goddess of good deeds (*dharma devatai*) and goddess Lakshmi comes that way, they will think that: The house has got some bad omen (*aba sagunam*) today and let us not enter that house today. The kolam is drawn mainly to welcome Mahalakshmi. The prosperity (*selvam*) should be welcomed.

Middle-aged woman, music teacher, in city:
> The kolam makes the image of the house complete (*purnam*).

Middle-aged housewife in village:
> There is one belief… that if we draw the kolam in rice powder, then the house will get the blessings of Lakshmi (Lakshmi *kadaksham*) and the house will have an auspicious atmosphere (*mangala garham*).

City slum area, young girl with mother who converted to Catholicism at marriage:
> We draw it [the kolam] with devotion (*bhakti*).

Male priest in village:
> We can draw kolam for all gods, and if you draw it with devotion (*bhakti*), it will be fruitful… if you draw the kolam, you will increase this power and energy (*shakti*) in you.

Middle-aged housewife in village:
> We do it [draw the kolam] with love and desire (*asai*).

Male astrologer in small town:
> Auspiciousness (*mangalam*) is: we have to make the steps to decorate in order to satisfy the celestial beings. That means we have to make our house into a hygienic condition. Whenever a place is hygienic, we [humans and deities] like to sit there.

Offering for blessings and religious merit

The doing of morally good deeds, the doing of *dharma* (Sanskrit), is central within the Hindu faiths. Dharma is 'the overarching moral order of society and the cosmos', and human beings as well as deities should act according to this order (Fuller 1992: 19). The maintenance of moral order is part of people's everyday lives, and it requires that appropriate relationships are upheld among themselves as well as with the deities. The deities share this responsibility, and

if human beings misbehave they will be punished by god's anger (ibid: 224). In Tamil, the idea is expressed as *dharmam panna*, 'to do dharma'. The most cherished good deed among my informants is charity and generosity, the act of giving. It should be done with love and care, *anbu padugattel*. The return is the blessings from the deities, also referred to as religious merit, in Tamil *punniyam*. To receive god's blessings is regarded as an honour. People describe the importance of *punniyam* as creating an increase in your well-being both in this life and the next.

When women draw kolams in rice flour, they gain *punniyam*. The powdered rice ideally used is a gift, a food offering, to small creatures such as insects and birds. In the same manner as when you give alms to the poor, the deities will be pleased and give you merits when you feed insects. The gods and goddesses will approach your house and bless you because you have done such a good deed as to feed those which are not even able to ask for help. The merit received from the deities becomes stronger when you offer the food in the morning, before you have eaten yourself. Even though the materials used in making kolams have changed over recent decades, the emphasis on rice flour and the idea of giving food to living creatures is still one of the main reasons mothers give their daughters in order to continue the practice. It is believed that the small animals will bring the message of the kolam makers' goodness to the deities.

The maintenance of the good deed of kolam making is regarded as a means to showing respect to the deities and their wishes. The connection between the deities and the kolams drawn in rice flour works on different levels. According to Hindu beliefs, the gods and goddesses are present in the whole of nature. The deities make plants grow, and at the same time they reside in the plants. Rice has a special position in people's lives. It is the main food item and the main source of income for farmers in South India. People depend on its abundance in order to stay healthy. It is their most important staple crop and their source of life. As a means of survival, it is considered as something precious given by the gods. To ritually offer rice back to the deities through the kolam is an act of thankfulness as well as an expression of hopes of an abundant return. At the harvest festival, Pongal, the annual climax of the kolam tradition, the richness in elaboration and enlarged sizes of the kolams are linked with the sense of overflowing abundance of newly harvested rice. The creation of an image made in rice flour is thus an offering to the deities directly, as well as indirectly through the small animals.

Bringing the deities into the home

Apart from the belief in the return in the form of blessings, *punniyam*, the kolams are made to invite the deities into the house. When the kolam is completed, the door will be kept open. God will enter the house from the outside and take a seat at the *nadu viidu*, a place usually situated in the centre of the inside where images of the deities are placed, and regular worship, *puja*, is performed. When the deities enter, they give their blessings to the kolam maker and the house. The blessings make the atmosphere of the house auspicious, in Tamil *mangala garham*. This atmosphere is believed to increase the welfare of the house as well as the family members. Women's efforts in the kolam performance have pleased the deities and turned the house, *viidu*, into a home, *illam*. Through women's mediation of the deities' blessings, women enact their main responsibility, which is to maintain and increase the well-being and prosperity of their family. Women are regarded not only as having the responsibility, but also the capacity to perform this mediation more sincerely than men.

Deities turned to

Within the multiple forms of Hindu beliefs, people express different perceptions regarding to whom the kolam is directed. There is no contradiction in the fact that some people hold that the kolams are drawn to invite all gods, that some make them for the goddess Lakshmi, and others for the goddess Mariyamman. God, conceptualised as *saami* when talked about in an all-encompassing manner without a particular form or gender, is a part of all named deities. All deities are both immanent and transcendent in the environment. People establish closer relationships with certain divine forms for a number of reasons, for example the continuation of how a family has kept a god or goddess related to their ancestral home as a tutelary deity, *kula deivam*. While some deities are worshipped locally, others are revered regionally or on a pan-Hindu level (Fuller 1992, Kersenboom 1987, Meyer 1986). Vishnu is present as Perumal in a stone roughly shaped into a rectangle placed as a guardian at the outskirt of the Dalit area in Pelasur, as well as in an iconometrically perfected sculpture in a large Brahmin temple in Chennai dedicated to Parthasarathy, the joining together of Krishna and Arjuna who took part in the Mahabharata war. The Dharmam Devathai, referred to in the statement above, is a minor goddess inhabiting qualities of dharma which has no form.

> While the daily kolams can be made for unspecified deities, those drawn at the many festivals regulated by the calendar are generally made to invite the particular deity to whom the celebration is directed. For instance at the harvest festival, all kolams are directed towards the sun god, Surya.

Goddesses and their embodiment of **shakti**

In relation to the daily performance of the kolam, women who name the deity which the image is drawn to invite always refer to a goddess. Among the majority of the women in the villages I worked, Mariyamman is perceived as the most important goddess, both to make the kolams for and to worship in general. Many among the better educated middle class in this area, and the majority of the city-dwellers of Chennai who specified a deity, argue that kolams are drawn to invite Lakshmi. Most of my informants perceived all goddesses as forms of Shakti Devi. Shakti is a name of The Goddess, Devi, as well as a term which is translated as power. In this context, *shakti* is particularly linked to divine female power or energy, and is thus embodied in Devi.

Fuller explains that male gods depend on *shakti* in order to act, as the male principle *purusha* is passive in opposition to the female active principle *prakriti*, whereas goddesses can act autonomously. Shakti (the power and the goddess) is characterised by a capacity to both create and destroy. She generates fertility in the soil and the rivers by her presence in them, but when she is angered, for instance when her sexual energy is unreleased, she can become very violent. The danger of her violent aspect is controlled by male gods through marriage, and this makes Shakti subordinate to her husband, and her heated fierce state is cooled down (Fuller 1992: 44ff). Mariyamman is one form of the 'infinite' number of the Amman goddesses embodying both the creative and destructive aspects of *shakti*, whereas Lakshmi, goddess of prosperity and wealth, is one of the married goddesses. They are both important in relation to the kolam practice, and will be described in more detail below.

All women are considered to embody *shakti* as well, and thus share the capacities of the goddess. Her power is manifest in women's sexual fertility (Wadley 1991). As we will see, there is an analogy between goddesses and women and their married or unmarried state, but there are different perceptions of this analogue.

The Amman goddesses

In every Hindu village in South India, there is at least one temple for an Amman. In a localised form, she is the tutelary deity of that village. Amman translates as mother, as devotees perceive her as looking after them like a mother does for her children. Her names are often local, while for example Mariyamman is regional. There may be several temples for different Ammans in one rural area, and this is also the case in non-Brahmin neighbourhoods in the cities. With reference to the former areas, Ammans are often named 'village goddesses' (Fuller 1992). Mariyamman creative aspect is enacted when she brings rain (*mari* is tamil for

rain), essential for the life of farmers, and her destructive aspect is performed when she brings diseases like small pox, which might have deadly outcomes.[48] Satisfied by people's worship, publicly manifested during her annual festival, and privately sometimes daily in people's homes, she makes sure that the rain engenders a plentiful harvest that provides enough food during the coming year, and that women will give birth to new children.

Mariyamman takes several forms. At the border of their village, people place an image of seven stones, usually with anthropomorphic shape. They are called the seven sisters, or the seven virgins, the Sapta Kannigal, and are forms of Amman protecting the village.[49] The sister in the middle is depicted in a larger shape, and according to my informants, this is Mariyamman[50], the eldest and most prominent of the seven. An exception was in the temple dedicated to the tutelary deity of Pelasur, Ponniyamman, where she was the goddess in the centre. In many back yards, Mariyamman is worshipped in the form of the neem tree, the *veepa maram*[51]. This form of the deity has the ability to cure the diseases she causes. As part of the cure, a layer of neem leaves is spread on the sick person's bed, and a paste of the leaves is smeared onto the skin affected by her poxes. The leaves cool the heated state brought on by the goddess. During possession of evil spirits, neem leaves are drawn downwards on the influenced person's body to assist in the process of exorcising the spirit. Another common practice is to keep Mariyamman outside the house in the form of three bricks. At one Amman temple in Pelasur, the goddess' presence was formed in bricks as a *yoni*, a common representation of the female sexual organ.[52] Some keep the goddess as a figurative poster in the *puja* area, while others argue that it is too risky to bring her inside the house. Additionally, people worship Mariyamman in the form of the cobra. Snakes often have their dwelling places in large termite hills, and as such these places are perceived as the temples of

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[48] According to Meyer, to become ill through the presence of Mariyamman can be understood as to receive the goddess' grace. This would make the loss and pain caused by the disease more understandable (Meyer 1986: 220).

[49] In her discussion of *shakti's* role in Tantrism, Harper refers to this form as Saptamatrikas, the seven mothers (Harper 2002). In her life story, the Dalit woman Viramma describes the Sapta Kannigas as the protectors of the Kurava tribe. According to her, these goddesses have their domains in the forests and mountains where the Kurava hunters have their dwellings (Rancine and Viramma 1997).

[50] In the rural area of my fieldwork, she was often referred to as Mariatta.

[51] The connection between gods and trees expresses a strong belief in powers inherent in trees. For example, when a calf is born, the placenta is wrapped into a parcel and hung in a branch of a Baniyan tree. As the tree is capable to develop new trunks from its aerial roots, it is believed to have the capacity to increase the fertility of the cow whose placenta has been put in the tree. According to one informant, people not only respect the trees, but they worship them, and all temples must have a *stalavriksha* (Sanskrit) *stala*-place, *vriksha*-tree. The tamarind tree on the other hand is avoided, as evil spirits are considered to dwell in them.

[52] The yoni is commonly represented together with the *lingam*, the male sexual organ in which Shiva is present. The lingam is placed on the yoni, and some women perceived this as a representation of women's role as carriers of all burdens in life.

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Mariyamman.[53] Abirami is one of the young women in Hariyarapakkam who attends such a temple.

In addition to the street kolams at her mother's house, Abirami used to make kolams daily at the nearby termite hill, the temple of Mariyamman in the form of a cobra. Situated close to a row of houses, the termite hill is almost as high as this young woman, and if she reaches out her arms, their length will not reach from one side to the other. The termite hill is the home of the goddess, and as at all other homes, there must be a kolam. Apart from at the entrance, Abirami put kolams at the neem tree, the three bricks, and the trident, *sulam*, which is the goddess' weapon, all situated beside the anthill. She brought milk everyday to feed Mariyamman. It was fed directly into the entrance hole, because when the special bowl attached to the trident was used, the dogs kept emptying it before the cobra. In Adi *masam* (Tamil month of July-August), festivals are held at all temples of the Ammans, and during these occasions several women from the neighbourhood helped Abirami in making kolams at the termite hill. It is important to keep the goddess happy. The notion of her ambiguous power was expressed by a neighbour of the hill*:* 'We have a lot of fear of the snake [Mariyamman]. It came out during the festival. All run in fear! This is the only time I have seen it. People say that it might come out any time. If we treat it well, it will be kind to us…'

Abirami is very thin and her hair is dry and tousled. Her appearance is that of a young teenager's. But she reveals that her age is twenty-eight, which means that she should have been married years ago. At thirteen, she was taken out of school and put to work as a weaver in a nearby town. Her working day was from early morning till late night. She had to stand all day, and there were no fans as their breeze would mess up the thin silk threads used in the loom. She developed knee pain and her hair started to fall out, and after eleven years she could not continue. For four years, she has had the main responsibility of the household work in her mother's house. Her mother is disabled and bed ridden, and her younger brother has taken over their father's job as an itinerant seller of dresses since the older man's blood pressure became too high.

Abirami has been very interested in drawing kolams for as long as she can remember. In her free time she creates new designs and teaches others how to draw. She started to make daily kolams at the termite hill three months ago. The neighbourhood women encouraged her and said that it would please the goddess. Mariyamman might reward Abirami

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[53] In the central and southern parts of India, it is quite common that termite hills contain a god. The present deity may be both male (Shulman 1980: 117) and female (Meyer 1986: 58). Snakes are worshipped throughout India and are connected with the earth and fertility (Meyer 1986: 42).

in the form of a husband. Hearing those words Abirami put even more effort into her kolam making. At the same time, an elder and respected woman told Abirami that too much involvement in prayer would not be good for her. She should have less commitment concerning the feeding of the snake. The woman made a calculation and suggested that nine Fridays in a row was a better option. After some weeks a marriage alliance was confirmed. Abirami's horoscope matched with the man's and the preparations proceeded very well. In the final stage something went wrong. 'I don't know why, it is not for me to get involved… a matter between the parents. I did all this work to get married, I had the belief that it would help me to get married… I also thought it looked nice.' The broken alliance had a strong impact on Abirami's devotion. Her disappointment is great. Now she only makes the kolams at the anthill on Fridays. A young girl from the neighbourhood keen on kolam drawing has taken over the daily ones. But Abirami continues to make the daily kolams in her mother's house, and at a Shiva temple in a nearby town. That town is her family's native place, and the local form of Shiva is their family god.

The goddess Lakshmi

Many women I engaged with in the field have explained how Lakshmi walks the streets before sunrise and sunset, how she enters every house where beautiful kolams are made, and gives Lakshmi *kadaksham*, Lakshmi's blessings. For some, kolam and Lakshmi are the same. As a bringer of well-being and riches, she is perceived to reside in what gives people their health and income. People turn to her for protection and enlargement of their means. For farmers, she dwells in the grains and especially in rice. To prepare the rice flour and then lay it out as a kolam is therefore to be in close contact with Lakshmi. Software engineers invite her to their computers, and professors want her to reside in their tongues as they depend on their ability to speak. Some make kolams for her in front of the place where they keep their money. Among those who make the daily street kolam for all gods, many contend that the kolams they draw on the stove are made to invite Lakshmi. Her presence in the place where women cook is believed to enhance the food and thus increase the well-being of the family.

Lakshmi is connected to neatness and cleanliness, *cuttam*. She resides in the urine and dung of cows, which like the other five elements of the cow have purifying properties.[54] A place imbibed with impurity, *tiittu*, caused by for example menstruation or death, is thoroughly cleaned when it has been sprinkled with cow urine. The dung, which

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[54] These substances have the capacity to purify and cool, and are important in many rituals, for example *homa* (fire sacrifice). The other three are clarified butter, milk and curd.

women mix in the water when they prepare the surface of the area where the kolams are made, purifies a place in the same thorough way. *Cuttam* connotes physical cleanliness when a place is rid of dirt, and cleanliness at heart, with a pure mind and body in a religious sense of sanctifying. Many informants have referred to the purifying properties as being able to protect from germs and bacteria, and similarly the leaves of the neem tree are regarded as antibiotic and as being able to improve the level of health.

In addition to Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity is spoken of as for example Mahalakshmi, The Great Lakshmi, or Ashta Lakshmi, The Eight Lakshmis. The eight represent the different forms through which Lakshmi gives wealth.[55] At the same time the different forms represent ideal characters a woman ought to have. If all the qualities are fulfilled no one will complain about this woman. Guru Lakshmi, ruler of the Tamil month Margali, teaches women how to keep the wealth, how to spend on good things, and how to avoid the bad things. She is also perceived as having a stronger appreciation for beauty than other deities. This will be further described below.

Bad influences cannot come directly from Lakshmi, but through her elder sister, Mudevi. Mudevi is an antithesis of the ideals the younger sister represents, she is lazy, undisciplined, and poor. If goddesses made kolams, Mudevi would not do it. Among my informants, she was mentioned by Brahmins and some of those who belong to the better educated in other castes. Brahmins relate Mudevi to the ambiguous Amman goddesses. People who belong to this caste perceive the undisciplined, impure characters of Lakshmi's sister as equivalent with the village goddesses' abilities to become fierce and cause harm. Women of lower class or caste who direct their daily kolams and prayers towards Mariyamman never talk about Mudevi. While Lakshmi takes part in the daily lives of some in the latter groups, her sister does not. Although the connection between the goddess Lakshmi and kolams is strong for many, she is far from always mentioned.[56]

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[55] The eight are as follows: Viralakshmi who gives bravery; Gajalakshmi who is connected with the white elephants; Santanalakshmi gives children; Dhanyalakshmi increases the harvest; Vijayalakshmi gives success in jobs, wealth; Adilakshmi gives wholeness; Dhanalakshmi gives gold coins, wealth; Aishwaryalakshmi gives well-being and wealth to the household. As narrated by one of my informants.

[56] In her dissertation, Nagarajan emphasizes the importance of Lakshmi and Vishnu's second wife Bhudevi, goddess of earth, as the deities towards which the kolam is directed (Nagarajan 1998). In a later article, she focuses on how women explained one reason for making kolams as to 'exercise the memory of the debt felt to the earth goddess, who bears all the human and non-human actions on her.' (Nagarajan 2001: 169). She continues a discussion in her dissertation on whether a religious attitude towards nature can be conservation-oriented in the form of an 'embedded ecology'. Only one of my informants mentioned Bhudevi, and that the kolams beautify this goddess.

Different perceptions of **shakti**

Lakshmi is a balanced goddess married to the god Vishnu, upholder of the universe. Fuller contends that Lakshmi represents the ideal Hindu woman throughout India. As the controlled goddess brings prosperity, the subordinate auspicious married woman embodies the ability to bring well-being to her family. In both cases the dangerous aspects of *shakti* are controlled, and there is thus an analogy between the married goddess and the married woman (Fuller 1992: 201). But like the different notions of Amman and Mudevi among my informants, scholarly accounts emphasize the need to control *shakti* in diverse ways.

Baker Reynolds contends that Amman and Lakshmi 'represent two paradigms of female divinity and female possibility'. From this perspective, all Ammans are Alakshmi, or Mudevi (Baker-Reynolds 1991: 43). Although Fuller refers to Lakshmi as the ideal, he holds that the goddess in myth and ritual must transform herself between married and unmarried states because both her creative and destructive forces are needed in the world (Fuller 1992: 47). In Meyer's description of another important regional form of Amman, Angalamman, the goddess is represented as an auspicious wife with sons as well as an unmarried virgin (Meyer 1986: 50f). As narrated by one of her informants: 'he [the informant] does not squeeze her [Ankalamman] into a clearly defined concept with boundaries which she cannot transgress; on the contrary, he likes his goddess to tear down as many fences as possible and for her to be part of a world as large and complex as he may perceive it (Meyer 1986: 41). At Angalamman's festival in Hariyarapakkam, the goddess did transform during the event. She was drawn in procession as a single, unmarried deity the first six days, but the final evening she came with a husband. They were named as Ishwari and Ishwaran, which are equivalent to Parvati and Shiva. Further, in some families wives make votive rituals, *noonpu*s, for the well-being of their husbands. According to Baker-Reynolds, women make them for married goddesses (Baker-Reynolds 1991: 50). In Pelasur, non-Brahmin women made *noonpu*s for Mariyamman.[57]

The majority of the women I met were subordinated to their husbands through marriage, and this was generally seen as the ideal. However, the view on Amman among the non-Brahmins was different than among the Brahmins. Mariyamman's benevolent aspect was described as stronger and more reliable among the former group. As held by Karin Kapadia: 'in the non-Brahmin perspective, Mariyamman does not need a male god to control her', 'she is entirely 'complete''(Kapadia 2000: 200). Kapadia relates the completeness of Amman to the

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[57] One of these women described how she transformed her grinder into Mariyamman as part of the *noonpu*.

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general understanding of her as the Supreme Deity and embodying *shakti* as well as infinite wisdom. The latter quality is related to the male principle *purusha*, and Amman is thus androgynous. But unlike the unity of Shiva and Parvati in Shiva Ardhanariswaran which is dominated by its male side, referred to as the Brahminical perspective by Kapadia, Amman is dominated by the female.

Appearance of the house

Kolams communicate not only with the deities, but with the people who inhabit the surrounding community. The presence of a kolam outside a house visualises that all is well in the home. When the inhabitants of a home celebrate an auspicious function, for example a wedding, the kolam will be made larger and more elaborate. Approaching neighbours and visitors know beforehand that they can share the experience of happiness. The image is a sign of welcoming. At the same time as the invited deities have blessed the family with a marriage and increased the auspiciousness within the home, the kolam transfers auspiciousness towards the community. Inauspicious occasions, such as the death of a close relative or the commemoration of ancestors, call for the absence of kolams. A house with an empty entrance causes passers-by, whether human or divine, to worry about what kind of trouble the home is struck by. The presence or absence of the kolam gives a house an entirely different appearance which affects the surrounding beings in different ways.

A building without a kolam in front of the entrance has the wrong appearance. Its absence does not only refer to inauspicious occasions. The presence of a kolam visualises that the home is attended to, that it is in order. An important way for attending to the home is through cleanliness, *cuttam*. The purifying cleansing with the dung-water and the thorough sweeping with the broom before the kolam is made is given much more time in the morning than the actual drawing of the image. In the cities where other materials are used, the importance of cleaning remains. The neatness and cleanliness behind the preparations is visualised in the smooth surface, and constitute parts of the beauty in the completed image.

People refer to beauty, *alagu*, when they describe the capacity of the kolam image to attract, and make the surrounding beings accept the invitation. Kolams beautify the home. The gods and goddesses are beautiful, and they appreciate beauty created by their devotees. Lakshmi in particular is connected with beauty, which makes the link between her and kolams stronger. It is not merely visual aspects of the material result which are of importance. The intention behind the performance is emphasized. The preparation of the ground and the drawing of the image should be made with loving and sincere devotion,

bhakti, towards the deities. A local priest, Ayyar, even held that there is no beauty, god gives importance to *bhakti* only. Yet, women give emphasis to beautification. It can be said that what is considered as beautiful is already during its creation embedded with *bhakti*.

Completeness

The apprehension of beauty, among gods as well as people, is further embedded in having satisfied the idea of completeness, or fullness, *purnam*. According to my informants, the kolam makes the image of the house complete. Completeness is strongly connected to auspiciousness in the practical life I have taken part in, as well as in the Hindu textual tradition. The terms conceptualise ideal notions of cosmos. In early Vedic texts, *purna* (Skrt) is used in the context of ritual and 'denotes "fullness" of the offering' (Bäumer 1992: 433). In later, philosophical texts, (Upanishads) it has the metaphysical meaning of Brahman, the Absolute, as Totality and all-inclusive Fullness. In this inclusiveness, all contradictions lose their identity (Bäumer 1992: 430).

A fundamental form of the goddess is the pot, the *karagam* (*purna kalasha*, *mangala kalasha* etc, Skrt), filled with water. Usually, a coconut is placed on the opening with mango leaves in between. It is 'the emblem *par excellence* of fullness and prosperity, of life endowed with all gifts, moral, material and spiritual. Its ritual value is so deeply rooted and ubiquitous even to this day that no religious ceremony can be performed without the installation of the Auspicious Pot.' (Sensharma 1992: 445, her emphasis). At all auspicious functions I attended, the pot was worshipped as the container of the goddess. People, who have had the goddess speaking and acting through them at her festivals, have been carrying her in a pot on their heads. During the harvest festival, the new rice is made to boil over in new pots of clay. Women adorn the pot with a *taali* and they speak of the pot as a married auspicious woman, *sumangali*, when using English 'a holy woman'. The pot corresponds with the womb and the innermost part of the temple where the main deity is kept. The latter areas are both referred to as *karuvarai* in Tamil (*karpagraham*, Skrt). 'It is the womb which conceals within it the mystery of the birth of the cosmos' (PK Agrawala, cited in Sensharma 1992: 446).

The notions of both *purnam* and *mangalam* are realised in how the kolam is considered to make the image of the house complete. The absence of the kolam is an inauspicious sign, and is a cause for the deities to pass by instead of entering. Its presence visualises auspiciousness by divine blessings. In the more traditional type of kolam design (see further Chapter IV), the particular image is complete when the ending of the line drawn

around the dots meets its beginning. The full moon is another representation of completeness which relates to auspicious time (see Chapter VI). People strive for this fullness, referred to as perfection. According to an informant with higher education: 'To become perfect, one should know one's duty, to the family, the society and the nation. It is the goal in everything you do to reach completeness. All actions must be completed. You must complete your education.' Less educated might not use the term *purnam* but talk about a state of stability in terms of balance between hot and cool states (see next chapter).

The state of completeness is temporary, and the kolam is part of how this state has to be reworked every day. If it is neglected, the house is in disorder. It opens up for inauspicious ambiguous and evil forces.

Threatening forces

Apart from the fierce side of Mariyamman, one has to keep other unpredictable forces inhabiting the environment at bay. The notions of the evil eye, *drishti*[58], and evil spirits, *aavi* or *pey*, are strong powers that need to be directed in everyday life. These are entities and forces which might become destructive if people do not adhere to ideas of what is proper practice. 'If we are good in thoughts and deeds, spirits will not attack', as one woman put it. Proper practice is mainly defined as following the traditions of the ancestors. At the same time, overdoing what is right and proper might activate negative forces. If these forces enter one's house or body, they can cause illness and death in people, crops or cattle. This has importance for all castes. The belief in *drishti* is strong, belief in evil spirits less, especially among people with higher education. After some time in the field it became clear to me that when people referred to *drishti*, they often included *pey*, but they were more reluctant to mention the latter.

Drishti is powerful eyesight understood as the casting eye invested with too intense emotions. The gaze of a person who has jealous thoughts and emotions causes harm to others. Already at birth, a protective *puja* is made for the newborn. If a mother watches her own child being very good at something, people expect the child to become ill. If your neighbour's new oxen start limping, you might be accused of causing this by gazing with envy at their animal. The interactions between my neighbours in Pelasur are related to the notions of seeing:

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[58] Described in Chapter I, which together with *darshan*, constitute negative and positive 'ways of seeing'.

Before Priya goes outside her hut to make the morning kolam, as described in chapter I, she lights a lamp for the images of the deities hanging on the wall close to the stove, and looks at them. Then she takes a quick glance at her sleeping family members, her maternal grandmother and her sister's daughter. To see, and be seen by, an unknown passer-by in the street first thing in the morning is a risk she does not want to take. Who knows if that person brings harm. Priya's grandmother Nagammal makes sure to see Gayatri, a truly good and auspicious neighbour, on days she has to do important things. When she has to attend the court testifying in the case against her son in-law, she calls Gayatri out on her veranda so Nagammal can take a good look. But if Shakuntala's mother in-law comes to their street, Nagammal hides inside the house. She believes that 'one gaze from that miserable woman will cause my skin to bleed… If I had seen her by mistake, then I would immediately close my eyes and run to the neem tree and look at it.' The exchange of gazes with the deities on the wall, and Mariyamman in the tree, are both forms of *darshan*. The blessings received are thus believed to protect from the evil forces.

According to the majority of my informants (cf Fuller 1992, Nabokov 2000), evil spirits are human souls which have not yet reached the heavenly realm nor become reborn in another body. Their deaths are premature and violent, they are believed to be victims of suicide or killing. They might also be souls which have not satisfied their desires, their lives have been unfulfilled, incomplete. If a person's horoscope tells that she will live for sixty years, and she only becomes thirty-five, her soul will wander around for twenty-five years. Spirits roam around at unattended places such as grooves and meadows, or nearby or in the corners of the house they used to live in. They can be especially threatening when it is dark, and for people who feel afraid. When you have been at a funeral or at the graveyard, you have to take a bath before you enter your home, in case a spirit follows you home. Evil spirits feel alive but have no body. If a person was blind or had no legs at the time of death, the spirit will be the same, and act in such a way. They can be used against your enemies through black magic, *seivinay*. When informants talked about this practice, they held that people nowadays have less belief in its effects.

Aavi are spirits which can be both good and bad. Some people, who have suffered a violent untimely death but have been considered as having done exceptionally good deeds during his/her life time, may become a good spirit. They may eventually become a tutelary deity for the remaining family members. *Pey* are ghosts, which only can be negative and threatening. The former, *aavi*, are unseen, the latter, *pey*, are white, and have some kind

of visible form. A stream of mist in a distant field is for some a cause for shivering and whispers of *aavi*. The terms are sometimes used interchangeably.

Integration of 'scientific discourses'

People with higher education, both in rural and urban areas, are eager to point out what they hold are scientific arguments for making kolams. In the scientific discourse, matters related to evil forces become germs and bacteria, and those related to creating purity become antiseptic and antibiotic. The importance of using cow dung when cleaning the surface on which the street kolam is made, is motivated by the dung's capacity as a disinfectant rather than saying that it is purifying due to god's presence in the substance. But in many conversations, both forms of explanation coexist. Some explained that all five products of the cow are antiseptic, or antibiotic, and will keep harmful bacteria from entering the house. They will, moreover, keep away insects and poisonous diseases. The holiness of the cow itself has become scientifically reasonable. Apart from giving milk, cows provide life by breathing out healthy air. As the ozone layer filters away the harmful elements in the sun rays and gives a healthy light, the breathing of the cow filters harmful bacteria in the air. The smoke from the *homa*, the sacrifice made by Brahmin priests, is described as good for physical health rather than purifying through the burning of products from the cow and certain wood.

Middle aged women in the upper classes who have servants to do all the household work except organising it, perceive kolam making as a physical exercise. They refer to the required bending down and stretching of limbs as a form of yoga. Especially the *moladara chakra*, situated in the small of the back, is activated. Even to press the fingers together when strewing the powder is an exercise. These women have stopped doing all kinds of work such as kolam making, washing clothes, sweeping floors, and using the stone grinders while cooking. Many have become overweight and have heart problems. They argue that nowadays, women have to go to gyms or take yoga classes in order to stay healthy. Both activities have become increasingly popular among the upper classes in the cities. New practices are embraced as they enlarge the comfort in life, and at the same time a romanticised view of grandmothers who were able to endure all the traditional work is expressed. With the reference to yoga, not only the physical exercise, but the connection between body and mind in the kolam making is considered as valuable. Both practices develop a person's ability to concentrate. Another benefit of kolam making is the fresh air it gives as you go out in the morning. During the period of the year when the kolam making increases, it is believed that the morning air is thinner and therefore even better to breathe.

One of my informants in the city had done some research of her own on the kolam tradition. While mainly interested in the aesthetic part, which she referred to as the beauty of the design, she had also compared explanations given by young women today with those given by her own generation when they were young some four decades ago. She concluded that: 'When the science and the international knowledge came, when the science came to dominate, the people became educated. Questions were raised, and they wanted rational answers.' Although many of the well educated younger women I spoke to have less belief in explanations referring to the deities' wishes, my experience was that women in general appropriate new ideas and combine them with what is already known.[59]

Protection

Before the construction of a new house on an empty piece of land can begin, *puja*s need to be done in order to rid the space of evil forces. The house is very vulnerable in its uncompleted state, and different protective measures are taken during the building process. When it is completed, an inauguration directed against the evil and towards auspiciousness follows. The vulnerability persists to some extent and continuous protective practices are required to keep the house in an auspicious state.

There are different discourses on how the protection of the house relates to the kolam practice. Statements from informants who were well educated Brahmin men, as well as arguments in some scholarly valued texts, firmly hold that one of the main reason that kolams are made is to protect houses from *drishti* and evil spirits. For example, in *Abithana Chintamani: the Encyclopedia of Tamil Literature*, it is stated that: 'Bad spirits will not enter into your house if you draw a kolam in front of it' (Mudaliar 2001 [1899]:525). In her dissertation, Nagarajan writes: 'The kolam acts as a net, a catcher of feelings, and a protective screen for the emotions cast out by those who pass by the doorway or cross the threshold' (Nagarajan

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[59] The neem tree, described above as a form of Mariyamman, is an example of the interaction between science and religion in the Indian context. Apart from curing diseases caused by the goddess, substances from the tree have been used as pesticide and as an anti-inflammatory. People use branches to clean their teeth in the morning. Its usages are described in ancient Sanskrit texts. http://www.american.edu/ted/neemtree.htm

US deparment of Agriculture claimed to have invented fungicidal properties in the tree, and took out a patent on it. This act has become a case of 'biopiracy' as the properties of the tree were part of indigenous knowledge and could therefore not be patented. The organisation the Green Group in the European Parliament together with the Indian Research Foundation and the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) brought a case which had the patent rejected. http://www.greens.org/s-r/23/23-22.html

The Hindutva movement has pushed the relationship between religion and science as far as claiming the content of the Vedas as scientific truths. Meera Nanda discusses the post-modernist emphasis on every culture's right to their own epistemology, and argues that this attitude has paved the way for the conservative Hindu nationalism and legitimised their ability to rely on Vedic Science. At the same time as they embrace modernity in the technological sphere, they downplay people's critical thinking (Nanda 2006[2004]).

1998: 73). As stated in Chapter I, Layard (1937), Gell (1998) and Ingold (2007) have also elaborated on this issue.

The majority of the women who draw the kolams expressed their aims differently. When I directly posed the question of eventual protective aspects of the practice, they were strongly dismissive. As Gayatri argued: 'A beautiful thing can never "shy away" *drishti*. It rather attracts the evil as beauty creates jealousy.' Kolam makers talked about the reason for their practice only in relation to positive, auspicious aspects of life.

Particularly non-Brahmins, who do not perceive of the kolams as protecting the house from evil, engage in several other practices with this aim. In the upper part of the door frame, people hang items with protective properties. The most common is a lemon in a piece of cloth. Some families turn directly to a deity for protection. They might hang up a conch, which refers to Vishnu, or an image of The Mother's[60] eyes. Aloe Vera, fur and white stones are other frequent versions. Colourful clay masks placed in a high position on the wall or on the terrace is a newer phenomenon.

The above mentioned items may merely be replaced when they have fallen down. It can also be the case that there have been problems in the house. Issues of illness, family arguments or lack of money are then consulted with a *saamiyar*, a person who speaks the word of god during possession. When god has come over the *saamiyar*, he gives remedies for the problems. One cure is to chant mantras over a lemon and ask the people of the house to tie it above the doorway. *Puja*s against *drishti* and *pey* are made regularly at entrances when people find reasons for stronger protection. Shopkeepers for example do this once a week.[61]

Complementary practices

Another important practice connected with the right appearance of the house is the use of yellow turmeric powder and red *kungumam* powder. Non-Brahmin women smear turmeric on the outer side of the threshold and on the lower part of the door frame. They place thin lines and dots of *kungumam* on the new surface. Rather than protecting, it has a similar function as the kolam. The practice invites the deities in order to get their blessings. It beautifies in its visualisation of auspiciousness and cleanness, *mangala garham* and *cuttam*. Turmeric has the

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[60] The wife of Aurobindo, who together with her husband constructed an important ashram in Puducherry in the 1920s.

[61] They use a pumpkin or lemon, and red *kungumam* powder is placed on the sides of the fruit when it is split open. This ritual is referred to as a substitute for animal sacrifice (Meyer 1986: 119n).

same purifying properties as cow dung. It increases the cleanness as well as maintains hygienic conditions in the house.

The above practices accompany the kolam performance to make the image of the house complete. Many refer to this image as Lakshmi *kadaksham*. The expression is not only a certain blessing, but is also used as an adjective. A house can look like Lakshmi *kadaksham*. This implies that the appearance is right, and ready to receive Lakshmi's blessings. It is as beautiful as Lakshmi, and will therefore attract the goddess. As expressed by a housewife in a slum area in Chennai: 'If you look at Lakshmi you feel a kind of completeness and beauty, joy, if you look at the kolam, you feel the same way.'

Completeness and right appearance are not merely related to the outside of the house. A kolam on the stove makes the image of the kitchen complete. As you have to fold up the bed linen every day, certain taskes for keeping your home in order are done regularly. The annual Adhya *puja* are made for the protection of tools and vehicles. Before the worship, the whole house is thoroughly cleaned in every corner. Even wall-cupboards and closets are emptied and sorted. Some families sprinkle cow urine on the floors. When the cleaning is completed, kolams are put[62] to beautify the fresh areas and mark that the spaces have been transformed into orderly places. During the following *puja*, the purifying and auspiciousness is enhanced by the sounds of a bell, and smell of incense moves around the whole house.

The turmeric and *kungumam* accompany the kolam at the *nadu viidu* as well as at the entrance. Drawn into a small image of yellow and red, the two substances complete the area of worship inside the home. 'It will make that place of worship appear holy, *tiru*. It will give us hope that god will be in our house too', as my neighbour Gayatri concluded.

Appearance of women

As the appearance of a house ought to be complete, so should the appearance of a woman. Like the house, she should look like Lakshmi *kadaksham*. A proper, auspicious woman wears a colourful sari, and jasmine flowers in her hair. Bangles around her wrists and ankles add auspicious sounds to her visual appearance. She washes her face, feet and hands with turmeric powder which makes the skin slightly yellow. The hair is long and kept in a tight plait. Between her eyebrows she puts a *pottu*, a red mark consisting of *kungumam* powder or a plastic stick-on. She wears gold jewellery which she has been given by her

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[62] When used in the context of how kolams are created, the Tamil word *poodu* refers to making, creating and putting kolams.

mother's brother[63] at the celebrations of important transitions in her life. At her wedding, her husband gave her one silver toe ring on each foot. She wears a particular collar, a *taali*, or *mangalasutram*, tied around her neck as a completion of her marriage. The first two knots were made by her husband, the third one by her new sister in-law. In its simplest form, the *taali* consists of a turmeric root on a yellow string. The root is later changed for metal pendants, preferably gold, and the string for a gold chain. The pendant visualises family or caste belonging, and are always kept out of sight, closest to the heart behind the sari blouse. The *taali* must be carefully attended to, partly by regularly smearing it with turmeric. For those who can afford it, the husband gives his wife a second *taali* if he outlives his sixtieth birthday with her.

The image of completeness that a proper woman visualises refers to her being married, and as such considered auspicious. Without a husband she is incomplete, and should not beautify herself with these signs of auspiciousness. Having a husband makes reproduction possible, and therefore the signs also refer to fertility. The use of the turmeric and *kungumam* are of particular importance. While some women put it on every day, it is more common to use these substances on Fridays. Gayatri expressed the importance of the substances with emphasis: 'You serve your husband breakfast after you put it on in the morning. It is believed that married women who put on turmeric and *kungumam* after they have taken a morning bath make god become present in them. It gives them an appearance of holiness.' Like the kolam it is considered to bring well-being to the husband and the family through god's blessings. As the absence of kolam is a bad sign, a woman without the red and yellow substances sends out sadness. Neither should be used when there has been a death in the family. The centrality of these substances was expressed in elder women's hopes for the young unmarried: 'May you have a long life with *kungumam* and turmeric'. If a woman dies before her husband, she will be adorned with turmeric and *kungumam* even at the washing of her body before she is taken to the burial ground.

The connection between the yellow and red substances, kolams, and women, is expressed by Sathiya, a well educated young woman living with her parents belonging to the lower middle class in the village area:

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[63] Gold jewellery is a form of insurance for women. It is given as part of *siir danam*, certain gifts from the mother's brother, and considered as a share in parental property. Traditionally a daughter has no right to inherit parental property, but a law exists since Indira Gandhi (Kapadia 1995: 21f). Among poor informants, some women had sticks in their pierced ear lobes, usually as a consequence of male family members' over spending.

Lakshmi *kadaksham* is how the kolam and the house look. The way Mahalakshmi looks. The kolam is a part of this; you can't separate the kolam, the house, and the turmeric/*kungumam*. These three things tell us about the kind of woman in the house. You attract Lakshmi by looking like her. This is the way you should look yourself as a woman, beautiful and perfect. If you look like Mudevi, Lakshmi will not enter the house.

Even if this woman belongs to a non-Brahmin caste (Mudaliar), she explains the appearance of Mudevi in a discourse otherwise mainly used by Brahmins. Mudevi's sleepy face influences people she meets so that they also get tired. She keeps her hair loose and her clothes are neither tidy nor clean. If your hair is undone at the time you put a kolam, you might invite Mudevi instead of Lakshmi. Mudevi may enter your house with ill feelings. In a sense, she is a carrier of people's bad thoughts about you, she brings in their dislike and vengeance. When Lakshmi has accepted your invitation through the kolam, and in the evening added with the lighting of the lamp, Mudevi will not enter.

The ideals of women's right appearance were in general the same among my informants, although people of higher castes had stricter rules and required more discipline. The reference to the resemblance of Lakshmi was not necessarily connected to whether kolams were made for this goddess in particular. Although Brahmin women usually do not use turmeric and *kungumam* on the door frame of their homes, they give much importance to its usage on their own bodies. Like the well educated non-Brahmin women, they explained how the purifying turmeric keeps women's bodies free from harmful bacteria and germs, and its antiseptic properties treat infections on the skin. It is considered a sign of cleanness, of both body and mind.

Sathiya is a good example of the difficulties in connecting certain perceptions with certain categories of people. High education takes place in an environment historically dominated by Brahmins, and her views are consequently influenced by such ideas. Moreover, such education exists in cities where 'modernity' as opposed to 'tradition' is more pronounced than in the village. The emphasis on Lakshmi appears to have a bearing both on Brahmin religious values, as well as a modern need for an increase in economically valuable assets. The interaction between 'modern' and 'traditional' values concerning women's appearance is expressed in the relationships between a maid, her employer, and their respective families:

Bhavani have had many arguments with her servant on the usage of the *pottu*. The servant comes regularly from a poor low class area into the wealthy home of her matron's family to take care of the laundry and washing up. The servant is the mother of three children,

but she has been a widow since her husband committed suicide about ten years ago. Being an inauspicious woman, she ought not to wear any beautifying signs of the opposite condition which Bhavani is in. Bhavani belongs to the Brahmin caste, and her upbringing has been very strict. When she married, she felt as though she had migrated, in the sense of almost entering into another world. Her husband is very open-minded, and it took about a decade to adjust to the freedom he gave compared to the rules in her mother's house. His parents died early, so she never had to adjust to interfering in-laws either. Her mother continues to phone up and scold Bhavani if she comes home late in the evening, which she sometimes does after having given a lecture. But since she is married, Bhavani does not need to listen to her mother. The husband has encouraged her to continue her education even after their marriage and supported her in developing her skills in kolam making as well as other interests. She is full of joy and energy, and is preparing a research application on the relationship between kolams and music.

Bhavani's self-confidence has grown immensely, which is why she has had the courage to question the traditional habits of her maid. Bhavani feels that it is incorrect that she, who is much older than her servant, can wear a *pottu* while the servant cannot. She should not deny her beauty and make herself appear as her life is lost, even though she is a widow. The arguments did not make the servant give in, but Bhavani demanded that she had to wear a *pottu*. The servant is now following her employer's advice and everyday before she goes to work she puts on her *pottu*. But they have made a compromise as she wears a black one, which does not hold the same meaning of auspiciousness as red. When she goes to her relatives' houses, she has to take it off again. They do not accept that she has taken on such modern habits. Her mother scolds her for going out in such a manner, and will not let her daughter inside her house until the *pottu* is removed.

Despite her open-mindedness in relation to the maid's family, and appreciation of the maid, Bhavani would never let her make the kolams. She believes that no one would put the same effort in making kolams at another person's house. It would be a sign of irresponsibility if she left the task to someone else.

Bhavani considers herself as a lucky Brahmin wife due to her supporting open-minded husband, and her experiences of being outside of her home and learning about the world. Her female friends have had to give up everything for their husbands. Recently, her position in the family has taken a new turn. The elder of her two sons has become seventeen, and as he has reached puberty she must adjust to his requests in addition to her husband's. The adolescent son is far more conservative and concerned about women's right appearance

and behaviour than his father. Bhavani must now listen to complaints about what she wears and eats, how she moves, and that she should not talk too much.

In general, when a married woman did not wear all the items visualising her auspiciousness, others could talk about this in the sense of lack, *moli*. If she had forgotten to put on her bangles or put fresh flowers in her hair, she was *moli*. Women in the city who wanted to visualise a 'modernised' identity, did not put flowers in their hair. I was told that feminists refused to wear both a *taali* and a *pottu*, which was utterly shocking news for others. In the same sense that a woman who lacks her auspicious signs is *moli*, a house without a kolam is considered as *moli*. It is lacking and incomplete.

Protection of bodies

Sarasu is a woman in her seventies who belongs to the Kattu Naicker tribe and lives on the outskirts of Pelasur. Her arms are covered with green tattoos, *patchai*, made as kolam designs. When Sarasu was younger, women from the village used to come to her house to have kolam designs tattoed. It was also common that Kurathis, women from the Kurava tribe living as nomads in the area, walked the village streets and offered their skills in tattooing. Women considered it as a means to beautify their bodies.

The first kolam tattoos were often made during childhood, on the initiative of mothers. Sarasu made tattoos on her granddaughter Anusha when the girl was around six years old. One was made as a kolam design on the inside of the arm, and one as a dot on the forehead where the *pottu* has its place. In addition to the inside of the ankle, these are the most common places for tattoos on women. The green substance used was made from leaves of certain plants. They were dried, and then dissolved into extracts which were perceived to be healthy for the body. Sometimes soot from oil lamps mixed with a particular tablet bought in a herbal shop in town was used instead.

Anusha, now almost 30, is definite about not adding any more designs. When she was a small girl, her grandmother told that: 'Yemaraja [god in the kingdom of death], will come and chop off your arm [and hand], and use it as a ladle for his food (*ragi*) if you don't have a kolam on it.' So Anusha felt she had to endure the painful pricking of the needles. 'The arm was bleeding and swollen for more than ten days. Today I couldn't tolerate the pain. And my children don't need to have any.'

Most young women share Anusha's view. In addition to the pain, the practice is nowadays associated with village life, in terms of being uneducated and poor. In the city, a new interest influenced by western fashion is emerging among young upper class men.

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According to the Brahmins I have met, they have never taken part in the practice of tattooing.[64] The reason given was that Brahmins do not engage in traditions which give physical pain. Yet, some of them practice branding of images of god as a means to purify the body.[65]

Kolam tattoos have only been worn and made by women. Men within the non-Brahmin movement have had the image and name of their political leader tattooed on their chest. MGR, the founder of the AMADMK party, asked his male followers to put his symbol on their bodies as a sign of commitment and faithfulness.

As with the kolam in front of the house, there are different discourses on whether tattoos, as well as the *kungumam* and turmeric have protective properties. Women mainly refer to the use of tattoos as a fashion rather than protection. They describe it as positive that the designs will remain with them at death, unlike other things they wear such as hair and clothes. Sathiya, a pavement dweller in the city, held that as the soul will go to heaven when you die, the kolam tattoos will go to a tree and merge with the greenness of its leaves. A well-educated man in Hariyarapakkam explained that the properties of the green substance were strengthening and purifying of the blood, and the pricking of the needles good for health in a manner similar to acupuncture. According to an astrologer brought up in the rural area where I worked, tattoos protect the soul from evil forces, in the same manner as dots of soot used on children do. Further, he argued that turmeric protects the openings in a woman's face. The most important place to protect is on the forehead where the *pottu* is put. This is the place of the third eye connected with a person's thoughts and soul, where evil forces may enter.

The auspicious wife and mother

The auspicious, *mangalam*, and the inauspicious, *amangalam*, are considered to be important cultural concepts throughout Hindu India (cf Carman and Marglin 1985, Madan 1991, Parry 1991, Samanta 1992, Wadley 1991).[66] The conditions of time, events, persons and spaces are defined according to how they relate to auspiciousness. The concepts are closely related to

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[64] Already at the turn of the twentieth century, colonial administrators noted that the common practice of tattooing was 'slowly falling in disfavour among the educated classes' (Francis 1906 [1878]).

[65] Branding has also been used in the intiation rituals for devadasis (Kersenboom 1995).

[66] The scholars referred to have also debated to what extent purity, *cuttam*, and auspiciousness, *mankalam*, can be considered as equivalent concepts. In relation to women's life stages, their difference is clear. To attain puberty and to give birth for example, are very auspicious occasions, yet they are considered as impure (Carman and Marglin 1985).

different stages in the course of a woman's lifetime. The ideal position of a Hindu woman is to be an auspicious wife, to be a *sumangali*. Some scholars hold that there are two conditions in order to become a *sumangali* (cf Baker Reynolds 1991). The first condition is marriage, the second is to give birth, preferably to sons, within this marriage. An unmarried woman who bears a child can never be a *sumangali*, neither can a married woman who is barren. Details concerning women's different life stages in relation to auspiciousness have been accounted for by Holly Baker Reynolds (Baker Reynolds 1991). Most of the women that I talked to about this issue held marriage as the only condition. As described in the previous chapter, it is moreover of greatest importance to be chaste to your husband in order to be regarded as auspicious and thus a *sumangali*. In this sense, the notion of the *sumangali* is linked to family prestige. Importantly, it is the fertility and the strong procreative capacity of the *sumangali*, considered to be connected to the divine energy *shakti*, which makes the married woman auspicious (Wadley 1991). This capacity enables the continuation of life. Without an auspicious woman, the household can never be a complete home.

Implied in the condition of marriage, lies the notion of the loss of auspiciousness if the woman loses her husband. Some regard it as though the woman even loses her soul when she becomes a widow. Accordingly, she does not need a *pottu* to protect her third eye. Irrespective of her age, she is at that time considered a woman who should no longer bear children, she has become infertile. But if the husband outlives her, the woman remains auspicious at the impure moment of death. As widows are generally perceived as inauspicious, they have to stay in the background at any auspicious family function. At Brahmin functions, a kolam made by a widow is considered as a bad sign. But no caste has restrictions on widows partaking in the daily re-creation of an auspicious home through the kolam performance.

The term *sumangali* is not a part of everyday speech, especially not among non-Brahmins, but the idea of the auspiciousness gained through marriage, and lost at widowhood, is pervasive. The increase of auspiciousness for the well-being of the family, by performing the right acts and avoiding any sign of inauspiciousness was certainly perceived as a part of the daily duties.

The highest level of an auspicious state of being, used to be a woman who was married to the god in a temple, a *devadaasi* (Kersenboom 1987). When she married the god, she merged with the goddess. As a god, her husband could never die. Thus, she would forever be an auspicious wife, a *nitya sumangali*. Informants spoke about how mothers in the olden

days[67] prayed that their daughters would become *devadaasis*. It gave status to a family if they had a daughter that was married to a god.

The *sumangali* is auspicious because she is blessed. A male Brahmin argued that it is the man who blesses the woman through marriage, but female informants rather talked about that the blessings were given to them by god. It might be said that the husband channels the blessings from god to the woman through the act of marriage. The husband enables the wife to receive the blessings from god. A woman upholds her state of auspiciousness through practices of making kolams, cooking food, using turmeric and *kungumam*, and attending to related forms of correct behaviour. In this way she channels daily blessings from god to her husband, the family, the house and to the surrounding environment. *Mangalam* in the form of *mangala graham*, auspicious atmosphere, was almost always referred to as a reason for making kolams.

Discussion

Prosperity, health and auspiciousness are central to the maintenance of a good life. These conditions are not the direct result of people's own actions; they are given by the deities through their blessings. Consequently, practices aimed at receiving god's blessings are very important in daily life. In Hindu perceptions of the world, the notions of auspiciousness, beauty and completeness are closely linked, and lead to a sense of order. The incomplete is inauspicious, ugly and disordered. It is the responsibility and capability of the *sumangali*, the married woman who embodies auspiciousness, to maintain and increase the well-being of her family. It can only be achieved if she creates an auspicious atmosphere, *mangala garham*, in their home. The kolam performance is an essential part of this maintenance.

Brahmins have referred to the kolam as a sign of a *sumangali*. The performance is generally seen as a daily re-creation of auspiciousness and the continuation of life. As a completed image, it visualises the auspicious atmosphere it generates. When the wife and mother attend to the appearance of herself and her home, she communicates the well-being and auspiciousness within the household to the surroundings. The continuation of performing good deeds increases her capability, and brings her closer to the divine mother, Shakti Devi. The connections can partly be traced in the translation of the word kolam: form, symmetry, appearance, character, appropriate dress, beauty, gracefulness (Winslow 1983). The complete

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[67] By this expression people approximately refer to the time when today's older generation was young.

auspicious image of both houses and women refers therefore not only to visual appearance and a material outer form, it is embedded in ideas of religion and morality.

Belting, who contends that it is necessary to view art history also along anthropological lines to understand what images are and our responses to them, discusses two aspects of the concept image, a physical and a mental part (Belting 2005). The physical existence of an image is what we see, while its mental existence is what we imagine. We engender the latter form in our own bodies, and these images can be played out against visible images in the world. Belting defines an image as the presence of an absence in the sense that the physical visible image materialises that which is imagined, or remembered. The external and internal representations are always in interaction. One of his examples is a photograph of a dead person which is actually absent but becomes present through the material image. The material image is therefore the medium of the mental image. This is possible because we give the same capacity to the medium which we have in ourselves; to imagine that the absent is present (Belting 2005: 55).

The kolam image can be understood as representing the presence of the deities and the idea of completeness. From Belting's perspective however, the kolam would represent the absence of god and of completeness. Auspicious women would mediate the presence of completeness to the kolam, and the images mediate it further to the surroundings. When women draw the images, it is a means to usher in a completeness which is not there. Completeness is the desired state, not a part of the ordinary. It can only be achieved through the intervention of the deities, and people's, in this case women's, capacity to reach them. The ephemeral kolam thus mediates the imagined completeness, and the briefness of the image's presence is analogous to the temporariness of completeness in everyday life. Considering the perceived temporariness of the complete, this interpretation comes close to what the kolam image is. But in Hindu perceptions of the world, the deities and the complete are regarded as immanent, they exist latently in all of nature. Therefore, women and the images they draw can be understood as mediating not that which is absent, but as increasing the presence of that which is latent. The kolam image makes it possible to perceive this increased presence visually, but it also mediates an auspicious atmosphere which can be experienced multisensorially.

Gell's interpretation of the kolam starts from Layard's definition of the images as protection against evil forces. According to Gell, the intricate maze-like pattern becomes an obstacle because the spectator cannot cognitively make out how the design has been constructed (Gell 1998: 85). The kolam achieves what Gell defines as captivation. Through

the technical virtuosity of the artist (the artistic agency of the kolam maker) and the uncertainty which the complex result produces in the spectator, the latter becomes lower in a hierarchical relationship. The frustrated observer becomes captivated and trapped and hereby resigns mentally. The kolam would then trap the evil intruder outside the house. However, the findings of this study rather point at the kolam as a beautifying pattern which embraces the beholder. Gell contends that aesthetic pleasure is an end in itself, and that it cannot explain how artefacts mediate in social relationships (Gell 1998: 81). The present study will try to show that the kolam has the capacity of social and religious efficacy although it simultaneously gives aesthetic pleasure.

There might not be a contradiction in that Gell and other scholars argue that the kolam protects the house from evil, while the majority of kolam makers do not. The expressed importance of keeping their surroundings clean and neat, both as a part of the kolam practice and as a means to rid a place of evil forces, could be interpreted as an indirect function of the kolam to keep away evil. On another level, the kolam practice is a good deed, and as such preventive of evil. Likewise, the presence of the invited deities attracted by the beauty keeps away evil forces. There might also be regional and historical differences regarding the efficacy of the kolam practice. Nagarajan has done ethnographic fieldwork among kolam makers in Tamilnadu (Nagarajan 1998), but in Gell's and Ingold's conceptualisations of the image as a maze, there are no references to fieldwork on the kolam. Ingold refers to Gell (Ingold 2007: 53), and Gell refers to Layard as well as to his own unpublished paper on Indian tattoos (Gell 1998: 85, 90).[68] Mazes might have the capacity to trap and ward off evil forces, but this study holds that the kolam should not be incorporated in this category. An important issue is that the acts of invitation and protection are very different ways of relating to one's surroundings. To invite entails an interaction between inside and outside, whereas protection indicates a separation as the outside is kept at bay. The kolam makers express their experiences of the practice through notions of openness and hospitality, as a sense of connection between themselves, the deities and the social community. The scholarly interpretation's stress on protection is to propose a more articulated difference between the inside and the outside. The kolam makers' perception on the other hand, conveys a positive

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[68] Gell's paper 'Tattooing in India' was presented at a conference in Delhi 1994 (Gell 1998: 261). He argues that the kolam practice is closely connected to the tattooing practices among women of lower castes and tribes in India, and, like Layard, that both types of patterns protect against demons and evil spirits. In addition to the sources explicitly given by Layard, (see Chapter I), he makes references to one text by Abbé J. A. Dubois from 1899, and one by Pandit Sastri from 1903 (Gell 1998: 85). Layard's references to Dubois and Sastri describe the character of the month Margali and how kolams are made during this month, not the kolam practice in general (Layard 1937: 121-122).

continuous flow striving for prosperity and well-being. The movements of this flow relate to the abundance of the overflowing pot boiled at the harvest festival, it concerns the reproduction of auspiciousness and life.

Chapter IV

Aspects of form and materiality

The temporary condition of the ideal state of completeness is embodied in the ephemerality of the kolam image. Its brief existence which requires new performances twice a day can however be modified by the use of different kinds of materials. This chapter puts the use of rice flour as the ideal into perspective, and shows how the development of new drawing materials are related to new types of surfaces engendered by new building materials. Practicalities, as well as changing values, interact in this process that consequently alters the kolam. The second part of the chapter describes different types of designs, and outlines their connection to caste belonging. Notions on the deities' presence in the kolam, and its relation to *darshan*, will also be discussed. The chapter will show that the alterations of materials and forms do not change the efficacy of the image to invite the deities.

Visibility of kolams

As discussed in the previous chapter, the kolam can be understood as constituting a flow of auspiciousness between the inside and the outside of the house. But in relation to the wider landscape, the image differentiates between uninhabited and inhabited areas. It is only on surfaces in places where humans and manifest forms of the deities dwell that kolams are encountered.

Well made kolams ought to visually stand out in relation to their immediate surface, as well as to the surrounding environment. The landscape in the villages is spacious with few distractions, and allows for the desired clarity of the images. In larger towns and cities, it takes patience to perceive the smaller daily designs. As the calm early morning hours pass, the streets become crowded with citizens and vehicles which soon dominate the scenery. While the images last longer on side streets, their ephemeral quality is obvious outside shops on busy main roads. During certain occasions, kolam makers adjust the drawing materials to make the images more enduring.

New construction materials of roads and buildings which form different surfaces have caused further adjustments. The ideal of using rice flour on a ground prepared with water mixed with cow dung is strong, but no longer pervasive. Women make choices of

different combinations of drawing materials and surfaces to accomplish more or less lasting images. Practical issues as well as ideas of beauty, belief, morality, and economic status are reflected in and constituted by the combinations. The combinations of drawing materials and surfaces are related to the places in which the kolams are made.

Streets

Except for the asphalt surface on the middle part of the main road, the majority of the streets in Pelasur and Tennampattu are unpaved. Grass is eager to take over the bare soil. When women prepare the ground for kolam making in the mornings, they maintain their task to keep the whole area in front of their house and up to the middle of the road free from plants and garbage. The thorough sweeping and splashing of water and dung keep growth under control, and makes the surface even.

The dung liquid starts to sink into the soil immediately after it has been splashed out, and when the kolam designs are drawn, the rice flour attaches to the dampened ground. The flour soaks up some of the liquid, and the design becomes fixed to the soil by the dung and water. The dampness makes the soil darker, and the contrast between this surface and the white flour makes the image stand out. The clarity and brightness of the kolam is thus enhanced by the preparation of the ground. The interaction between the ideal material and surface makes the kolam last during the day on an average village street.

In Hariyarapakkam, the streets as well as the houses are covered with concrete. On broader streets, the soil is left open on the sides closest to the houses, while the narrow ones are completely covered. There is no need to struggle with grass, and during the rainy season, it is a blessing not to have to make one's way in mud and pools of water. But the new surface has caused problems for the creation of kolams. The concrete surface is less permeable and it takes a long time for any liquid to sink in. The mixture of dung and water is relatively thick, and used on concrete it remains on the surface like a puddle. Therefore women living on this type of street have stopped using the dung. Not even plain water is absorbed properly. When the kolam is applied, the design floats out and becomes blurred. As the flour cannot bond with the surface, the kolam vanishes more quickly. Passers-by, vehicles or a strong wind easily destroy it. Although the remaining kolam will deliberately be swept away in the afternoon and replaced by a new one, it is important that is looks beautiful from the beginning and lasts as long as possible. Women complain about the concrete and the increasing amount of passers-by. Some have lost interest in the daily kolam, it feels like

a waste of time. For the majority however, the importance of the kolam has resulted in new drawing materials rather than a decrease in the performance.

The amount of concrete used in Hariyarapakkam is related to the higher economic standard of the people inhabiting the village. Politicians have put more effort in making sure that the residents in this area, compared to Pelasur, are satisfied. At the time of the latest state election, which occurred during my visit, government money was suddenly available for the enhancement of streets in Pelasur. The pavements of streets in towns and cities are likewise connected to which class people of the neighbourhood belong to. Apart from the slum areas, all streets of Chennai are smoothened with asphalt or concrete. The general ambition to move upwards in society brings about the need to adjust the kolam making to the new circumstances.

Whatever the street surface, intense rain complicates the kolam performance. A smaller downpour does not stop women from their ordinary morning duty. Kolams made on such days will vanish rapidly. A few times when the monsoon was heavy, kolams were not even started. Particularly in the rural areas, the streets appeared deserted and boring without the vivid images. The reduced amount of people moving around, as well as the slippery mud and puddles turning into ponds, were secondary impressions.

Replacement of rice

For the last three decades, the most popular material for drawing street kolams is an industrially refined sparkling white stone powder. It is usually referred to as kolam powder, kolam *maavu*, while the younger generation has termed it disco *maavu* in reference to its glittering properties. The glitter emanates from a mineral, mica, which is added through a chemical process. When the sun shines, a kolam in this powder stands out from its surface far more than one in rice flour. The kolam *maavu* has several practical aspects. The grains have a size which facilitates a good flow. It is heavier than rice flour which gives more resistance to the wind and passers-by on the new concrete surfaces. It is less prone to float out as it does not mix as easily with water as rice flour does. The resulting image is thus clearer and more durable.

Although it contradicts the ideal of giving food to small beings, the use of stone powder is not new. Many poor families have to use whatever rice they can get as food, in contrast to people who own land and businesses and have plenty of rice available for kolam making. The poor have worked out other solutions for the daily practice. In a village close to Pelasur, the ground partly consists of white limestone. The white bedrock became visible

when villagers dug into the ground to construct a new well, and the word of the finding got around in the area. Women from the area dug out pieces of limestone which they took home and ground into powder. This developed into a business with itinerant sellers. The stones to be found at this site are no longer pure lime, and when ground they yield an off-white powder which resembles ordinary brownish sand. The distinction between the surface and a kolam image made in this sand is less clear than when kolam *maavu* or rice is used. Better-off women refer to the former kind as dull, improper and less beautiful kolams. But as several families have to opt for this cheaper material, the digging and selling business continues.

Priya is very careful in her choice of powder. After breakfast the itinerant seller of kolam *maavu* in Pelasur suddenly walks by, and Priya hurries out in the street with her empty plastic bowl. She complains loudly to the seller for being late, which forced Priya to make thin and small kolams for a whole week as she was running out of powder. Before she buys any, she takes a handful to test if the flow is good. The grains have to have the right fineness, and the powder must be free from dampness which causes bumps. Priya's grandmother scolds her for not sticking to rice flour. But rice flour is too fine according to Priya. Even though she is skilled, the lines easily become uneven and the flour sticks to the fingers instead of flowing smoothly between them onto the ground.

When Priya's mother was young, stone grinders were an essential part of the household equipment. The smaller one, *ammi*, was used to make pastes, and the larger, *ural*, was used to grind flour. The manual process allowed for the production of flour appropriate for kolam drawing. Flour which became too fine was sorted out for cooking, and too large pieces were sorted out with a metal net to be ground a second time. Nowadays, the stone grinders are seldom used to make flour. It is more convenient to bring the rice grains to the mill. Before the rice is handed over to the miller, it is soaked in water and re-dried. This practice makes the grains softer and consequently faster to grind, which in turn makes the powder produced cheaper. To buy rice flour for kolams in a shop is considered a waste of money. In rural areas, it is not even available. Electric mixers have to a large extent replaced the stone grinders as a daily household appliance. If a small amount of flour is needed, the mixer is the ideal tool to use. However, the processing of both the mill and the mixer results in very fine flour which is why Priya has difficulties using it.

The refined kolam *maavu* based on stone appeared on the market approximately at the same time as the production of the rice flour changed. Kolam makers consider the newer powder more suitable for drawing, and for many it has replaced the use of rice flour in

the everyday performance. Others negotiate with the moral religious ideal of giving, and mix the two materials.

Women in general contend that the gods and goddesses prefer kolams made in rice flour. The preference is, apart from the idea of feeding small animals, connected to the notion of the presence of the goddess within the material. The use of stone powder instead of rice can on particular occasions be a chosen strategy to keep away a deity. Among the elder generation in the village, women hold that the goddess will refrain from entering one's house if stone powder is used instead of rice. It is believed that when a person is affected by the diseases Mariyamman brings, she has 'come over' (possessed) that person. When the goddess manifests her presence in this negative manner, people want her to leave the home as soon as possible.[69] She can not be invited by the morning kolams. Women have argued that it is particularly important not to use the rice flour on such occasions, as that performance would attract the goddess more. If the sick person is to recover, kolams should be made 'only' in stone powder. Priya's grandmother Nagammal described how Mariyamman often and easily comes over her. Sometimes the goddess is helpful, for instance when she assists Nagammal in curing a friend's child. At other times Nagammal experiences discomfort in not being in control of herself. The uncertainty over the goddess' aims has made Nagammal avoid the use of rice flour in her kolams.[70]

The ideal of offering food continues in other practices. When a woman has cooked new rice, it is common that she fills a small plate and brings it to the back of the house while she calls the crows. It is believed that the ancestors come and eat through this bird. Out of respect, she feeds her family members, both diseased and living, before she eats herself. The cow dung on the other hand has been given new meaning. Some women who live on paved streets have reinterpreted it from a means to acquiring pervasive cleanness to a substance which causes dirt. One of them said that: 'Nowadays cows eat garbage in the street[71], which makes their dung less clean. Who wants to touch it now, not even maids will do it.'

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[69] Meyer describes how the presence of the goddess in a person experienced through a disease at the same time can be a means to cope with the suffering it brings. The occurrence is considered as the deity's grace, and as such it makes the pain more tolerable, even understandable (Meyer 1986: 220).

[70] Minakshi further held that the person whom Mariyamman had come over as small pox should not be near a bed where marital life takes place. The Dalit woman Viramma has explained this connection in her life story (Racine and Viramma 1997). Mariyamman was attracted by another man than her husband Ishvaran (Shiva), and therefore he threw her out of their home and cursed her. The goddess felt that she was unjustly condemned. As she was not allowed to remain with her husband, she cannot put up with other people's marital pleasures. If the sick person annoys Mariyamman's feeling, that person's illness will increase.

[71] Informants have referred to the uncleanness of pigs as related to all the garbage and other unnameable stuff they eat.

Thresholds

In the form of smaller designs, the daily street kolam stretches over the steps into an area leading up to the threshold, *vaasel*, to the border of the interior of the home. In mud huts, the veranda merely consists of an extension of the roof supported by wooden pillars, and of the base of the house. It is a place for working as well as receiving guests. During the hot season, it provides a place for sleeping. The surface of the veranda floor consists of layers upon layers of a paste made of dung and water. The same material is used as flooring inside the hut, on top of well-stamped soil, and on certain occasions an extra layer of dung paste is smeared on the floor, and after drying it has a velvety appearance. The majority of the brick houses on the other hand have an extended base in addition to a more solid veranda constructed from the same material as the walls. There is no shading roof over the base, but in the evenings it might become a place to chat or take a rest. The base and the veranda floor are made of stone. When these houses were new, the inside flooring consisted of the same dung paste as in the huts. Presently, most families have invested in concrete layers both inside as well as on the outer veranda and base. The concrete terraced houses do not have verandas, but extended bases similar to those of brick houses. They either face directly onto the street as the older houses do, or are constructed a couple of meters away. The latter type has a concrete ramp which leads from the street to an open paved area in front of the house and up to the entrance. This front part is often closed off from the street with a wall, and sometimes a gate. The local meaning of this term implies that these houses are equipped with roof terraces. Whether living in rural or urban areas, people strive for the possibility to tear down their hut or brick house and rebuild it into a terraced one.

The threshold areas, including the steps of the veranda and/or base and the ramp, are walked on frequently. In effect, the small kolam designs drawn here disappear quicker than in the street, and the less absorbent surface of the material used in newer buildings increases the process. The less permeable stone and concrete requires kolams drawn in a material which rubs off less quickly. For this purpose, it is common to use a piece of limestone as a crayon. More recently, acrylic based paint has been introduced. Paint is useless on the porous soil and dung paste surfaces, but applied with a brush it attaches well to the hard concrete.

Kolams in paint most commonly appear on new terraced houses. The paint is costly and this type of kolam reinforces the sense of economic improvement signalled by the new house. Families that can afford a terraced house and paint kolams are likely to have consumer items, such as a fridge, a sofa and a new colour TV. The children probably go to

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private English medium schools[72]. The painted kolam might be white and match designs on gates and window bars, or made in colours that correspond with the hue of the house or inventive railings on the terrace. The kolams are painted in front of the entrance and on the ramp. They stay on for months. Women in this type of houses on the one hand feel relieved from the work of constant kolam remaking. On the other, they feel uncomfortable in leaving the entrance without a daily kolam. They hold that the paint kolam does not give the same sense of completion of one's tasks. After the area in front of the house is splashed with water and swept, they therefore often make an extra kolam in powder in front of the painted one.

In upper class areas in Chennai, people live in large villas or new apartment buildings surrounded by high walls. Outside villas, daily kolams are made in powder on the ramps, while those at the entrance inside the walls are made either in powder or paint. The most exceptional entrance kolam I have seen was an inlay of marble in different types and colours. The apartment buildings often have a kolam at the gate by the street. These buildings have brought about a new form of threshold area, inside the building but outside each home/flat, which is mainly seen by the people who live in the building. It is not uncommon to have a small design outside each flat. In addition to kolam *maavu* and paint, designs printed on plastic adhesives are increasingly popular in these places. Again, the value of economic standard interacts with the practicalities and beauty of a longer lasting kolam in a frequently used area.

Inside the home

Kolams are commonly made inside the house once a week, at the place of worship and in the cooking area. The difference in time in relation to the outdoor practice is connected to the worship of the deities, as well as the durability of the chosen material. As already mentioned, the surfaces in the street and the type of house correspond with the surfaces inside the house. Likewise, the kitchen and *puja* areas are differently constituted. People living in mud huts often keep their stove, also constructed in mud, at the back of the building in the open air or under a shelter. This area is thus ambivalently categorised as being inside the home. Before a kolam is drawn on the stove, it is again covered with dung paste in the same manner as the floor and area outside the house during festive occasions. Women who find the soot generated by the burning wood unclean perform the kolam on the stove daily. Families living in brick or

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[72] Schools where all subjects are taught in English, not Tamil.

terraced houses use gas stoves[73] placed on a bench in an indoor kitchen. The gas stove is not constructed as a solid form and thus has no place for kolam designs. Women respond differently towards this new dilemma. Some lift up the stove, and draw the image on the bench underneath it. Others argue that it is not enough to have made the kolam, the image should also be properly seen. These women draw the kolam beside the stove. Another solution is to not make any kolams at all in the kitchen.

The most important place for indoor kolams is the *puja* place, the place of worship, at the centre of the house, *nadu viidu*. The practice of worship is to a large extent a matter of family tradition (see further Chapter VI). Both deities and ancestors are worshipped, sometimes separately and sometimes as one as when ancestors have been deified and thus embodies both forms of worship. The *puja* place can be situated in a separate room, a cupboard, or a shelf in the kitchen. The place contains images of the worshipped, those of deities usually come in the form of mass produced prints and sculptures[74], while ancestors are framed in photographic portraits. In a similar manner as the material used in kolam drawing expresses the economic conditions of a family, an upper class woman can present a large *puja* room with oil paintings of the deities decked with gems (classical Thanjore paintings) and a silver cupboard for the shrine of their main deity. At the time of worship, the *puja* area is cleaned and kolams are drawn in front of the deities, on the floor as well as on shelves.

Because of the divine presence in the images, the connection with the deities is considered to be more direct at the *puja* place than at the entrance of the house. To please the deities and make them comfortable in their concretised forms, many women continue to add rice flour into the kolam *maavu* when they draw kolams at the *puja* place. Simultaneously, the *puja* area is the place where the material has changed the most. The majority of the homes I visited used paint for these kolams. Plastic adhesives were common among the middle class, both in rural and urban areas. In quite a few of the newly constructed houses, the floors consist of patterned ceramic tiles. These are both smoother and more solid than concrete. A kolam in powder would have no adhesion to this surface, and women gave examples on how people walking over such kolams had slipped. Paint kolams are not made here either as the majority of the tiles have irregular patterns on which the kolams cannot stand out. In this

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[73] Kerosene stoves are hardly in use anymore. They have been much debated as the oil was used to commit 'dowry deaths' where in-laws set their daughter in-law on fire unless the dowry demands were met. Informants further described how the oil has been used for committing suicides.
[74] According to Woodman Taylor, the acknowledgement of the deities' presence in figurative two dimensional images was an ontological shift introduced by the philosopher Vallabhacharya in the sixteenth century. Previously, it was only three dimensional images which had had this status whereas paintings were considered as unable to embody god (Taylor 2005: 202).

case, as when the kitchen is left without a weekly kolam, the appearance of the (interior) house has become detached from the kolam and mainly displays the economic status of the family

Festive, auspicious occasions

During festivals and family functions, worship is intensified and the deities' blessings are more deeply sought after to ensure a continuation of the auspicious atmosphere of the occasion. The importance of the kolam performance increases, and accordingly, the preparations as well as the size and elaboration of the images.

Before any kolams are made, the inside of the house is thoroughly cleaned, and big kolams are drawn on the floors. At family functions, like the celebration of a girl's first period, a kolam is made at the place in the house where the function will take place, as an auspicious place for the person in focus to be seated on. In the same manner as during the weekly performance at the *puja* place, many opt for rice flour or at least a mixture of rice flour and kolam *maavu*. In families who use paint for the indoor kolams, a festival or marriage is usually a chosen occasion to do the required annual repainting.

The preparation of the ground in front of the house is meticulous, especially on unpaved streets. Hours are spent on picking out pebbles and evening out small holes with the hands. If holes are deep, soil is brought from another area to fill them up. Middle-aged and elder women living in unpaved streets continue the practice of smearing a dung paste on the ground instead of the usual splashing of dung water. The evenness of the pasted surface makes the kolam stand out more clearly. The rows of houses in village streets are not always full, and where there is an open space or an unattended house, the grass on the street becomes thick. When there is a temple festival and a deity is taken to a procession in the street, wage labourers are given the task of cleaning up grassy areas. A neighbouring woman might complete the work by making a kolam in front of an empty house. On the broader streets in Hariyarapakkam which are only paved in the middle, women have problems on festive occasions. When the kolams are drawn as large designs towards the middle of the street, the concrete becomes the surface under one part of the image, the soil on the other. The symmetry is gone as the lines look different on each type of surface, and the aspect of beautifying is diminished. Women experiment with ways of getting around the problem by making several smaller images instead of one large. One is made on the soil and another on the concrete. In this way each kolam looks better and has no dividing edge in the middle.

The frequency of large kolams at festival occasions in Chennai varies between different neighbourhoods. In some areas, the elaboration is equivalent to that in villages, in others it has decreased. Women in the latter areas perceive it as a waste of time and effort when the intense traffic makes the images vanish too quickly. But the practice occupies large parts of the social landscape in new ways. Kolam competitions in public areas, temporarily closed off from traffic, are increasing. This will be described further in the next chapter. Competitions are also held in semi-public areas such as women's colleges. The students are usually given a theme, for instance the drawing of figures related to the nation during the celebration of Independence Day.

The relative lack of interest in the city relates to an aim that the elaborate and enlarged images made on festive occasions should last longer than the daily ones. Many women of middle age and above accomplish this aim by mixing rice flour with water into a milky liquid, and then apply the designs with a cloth. It takes more skill to work with this loose material. It is easy to drip in the wrong place, and as the liquid sinks in fast, a mistake cannot be rubbed off. Drawn on a surface of dung paste, these kolams can remain for a couple of days. On less porous material, it vanishes in half a day. Women who continue to use this method complain about how worn out their nails and fingertips become after drawing them along the ground during hours of kolam making.

For many generations, a common way to visualise enhanced auspiciousness in the kolam is to add lines in *cemman*, a special kind of red soil. Bhavani explained to me that it reveals auspicious news related to god. This means that the material can be used to show that a son has been born, or that a marriage will be held. But it is not used to show a secular matter such as a child getting good exam results. *Cemman* is handled in lumps which are loosened in water and made into a paste. The paste is drawn as a line encircling the design. Some women describe the practice as an idea to keep the ants from eating the rice flour. They are believed to not like the *cemman*, and therefore they will not walk across it.

Red and white have further associations. Brenda Beck elaborates on different meanings of colours and how they relate to thermal states in South Indian rituals (Beck 1969). Red is connected with the female, heat and blood, while white is connected with the male, coolness and semen. In their combination the colours are used in rituals such as divination (cf Daniel 1984). They are painted in wide stripes outside temple walls, and drawn on foreheads of devotees, particularly male, where their different forms visualise sectarian belonging. Heat, visualised as red, is a powerful force associated with life and death. It is generated during menstruation, birth and sacrifice. These states of being are regarded as

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impure (*tiittu*) and therefore heat can be used metaphorically to express impurity. Coolness, visualised as white, is associated with purity and control. Beck contends that as the female needs to be controlled by the male, the red needs to be encircled by white (Beck 1969: 553).

In the everyday lives of women I have met, the importance of finding a balance between the hot and the cold had vast implications on their cooking practices, but it was not expressed as a part of the kolam making. A body which is overheated, or too cooled down, is likely to become ill. During the hot season in the spring and the beginning of the summer, the diet is changed to keep the thermal balance in the body. People can have different thermal states and might need personal adjustment to their food. When women have their periods, particularly the first one, they are regarded as very hot and become cooled down both through food and turmeric water. Colour and temperature sometimes coincide, as red chillies are hot and white rice is cool. But yellow mango is hot although yellow bananas are cool. Turmeric can be said to embody both states, and a level of fragility between them. In its yellow condition turmeric has cooling properties. The red *kungumam* powder expressing heat mainly consists of turmeric, and when lime and calcium are added the colour and properties of the material change.

My experiences of the everyday visual landscape have directed me towards people's emphasis on the use of colours in the combination of red, white and yellow. In the areas dominated by Brahmin inhabitants, there was a lack of yellow on the entrances. But yellow in combination with the red *pottu* was as much a part of both Brahmin and non-Brahmin women's appearances. Women's main definition of the centrality of yellow and turmeric was its connection to auspiciousness. Red was positively associated with fertility, and it was the favoured colour on the wedding sari.

The practice of using *kungumam* and turmeric on the steps and door frame follows a parallel change in material like the kolam. With few exceptions, people who reconstruct their old house, or build a new one, replace the old front door and door frame with a new smooth one. The new doorway is never smeared with turmeric and *kungumam* powder, instead the colours are applied with red and yellow acrylic paint. Similarly, paint is used for the permanent image on the wall at the place of worship inside the home. During auspicious family functions, the ambiguous attitude towards the new material is expressed in the smearing of real powders next to the acrylic paint on door frames. But the powder does not stay on the smooth new surface the way it does on the rougher old wood with less finish. The material and shape of the *pottu* is changing as well. The *kungumam* powder is often replaced or accompanied by a red circle in plastic adhesive. The new material comes in an endless

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amount of shapes and colours, and to use these have similar connotations as other new materials. A woman of the older generation in the village might accept the new material, but condemn a drop formed *pottu* as untraditional and too much of city-girl manners.

The red and yellow on the doorframes, and the white in the daily kolams with the sometimes added red *cemman*, turns pale when seen together with much of the kolams made during festive occasions today. Powders in a variety of colours are increasingly popular, both among young and old women. The combination of white and *cemman* in the kolams is thus partly replaced.

In rural areas, people use colour powders mainly at the annual harvest festival, and in urban areas it is to a large extent used daily during the whole month leading up to this occasion. Fields in the designs are filled with bright, saturated hues which strongly heighten the intensity of the images. Ideally metallic powder which glitters like gold is strewn on the colour as a final touch. Shops sell small plastic bags of chemically coloured powders, and the powders are mixed with kolam powder or brown sand. Women experiment on how to mix the coloured powder without losing the intensity of the hue. It is difficult to plan how much kolam powder needs to be mixed with colour to fill the design. The leftovers are mixed with more kolam powder and used up in the daily practice. Morning kolams with lines in pink, light blue or other vague shades are thus seen several days after the festival is completed. The amount of coloured powder used in the kolams at these festive occasions is another visualisation of economic standard. Families who cannot afford it at all fill their designs with *cemman*, ashes, and sand, or stick to the white designs. One solution at the harvest festival in the village when large kolams are made several days in a row, was to spend money on colours but not make a new image the second day. Some regarded this as taking the easy way out. These women said that it would have been more proper to use only white, but make a new kolam each day.

Women generally preferred brightness rather than a particular colour when they made kolams on festive occasions. Dull shades were dismissed. This preference was further expressed in discussions on clothes as bright colours could compensate if a women did not wear the right type of dress, for instance when a *chudidar* was put on when it ought to have been a sari. The disallowance of dark colours was expressed in a difficulty to accept the new fashion developing among the upper middle class in Chennai of wearing black saris. Women outside this realm, in rural as well as urban areas, related black to the fierce side of Amman's powers, as well as to unknown and threatening forces. Their expressions of black relates to Beck's interpretation of red as in need of control. Black and red are part of the different flags

of the large Tamil political parties. Their usage of colours related to the powers of Amman can be interpreted as a means to represent the parties as embodying these powers.

The increasing preference of bright colours in the kolams appears to be an appropriation of the visual vocabulary of the mass-produced figurative images of the deities present in homes, temples, work places, buses and streets. In her work on these images, Kajri Jain refers to the strong hues as 'shouting colours'. Among artists who have painted the originals for the prints, there is a notion that 'ordinary people' need loudness to be able to be attracted by an image and concentrate on the god which it inhabits (Jain 2007: 186).

According to Taussig, our perception of colours is affected by their texture and substance (Taussig 2006). From his perspective, the pigment in the red *cemman* powder gives an intimate sense of redness due to the play of light its uneven surface brings forth, while a red hue printed on a glossy surface is but a fakeness that only relates to what we see. The material body of the colour is lost in the standardized print, but Taussig contends that its soul is resurrected through the imaginations new names such as Persian red might bring, as well as through the depth and transparency of colours in cinema projections (Taussig 2006: 51).

Types of designs

Among the Brahmin women I met in Chennai, there is a clear difference between the types of designs they use in comparison with women who belong to other castes. When trying to explain the issue to my non-Brahmin interpreter, an elder woman stated that 'As you eat mutton and we are vegetarians, you make dot kolams, and we don't.' She further argued that it was impossible to compromise either on the right design or the right material and technique inside Brahmin temples. At auspicious functions in Brahmin homes, it was also considered crucial to make proper types of images. Only the daily street kolam was unregulated.

Kolam designs have changed considerably over recent generations, in a process of appropriating other ideas and practices in the surrounding community. This process connects the choice of design to the kolam maker's age in addition to caste belonging.

Women had a rough categorisation of types, but they rarely gave particular names to specific designs. The most common type is the *kambi*[75] kolam. It is based on a grid of dots, and usually laid out with the breadth of a foot between each dot. This measure makes it easier to walk in the design as the drawing progresses. The dots become joined in an abstract symmetrical maze-like design where one single line is twisted and turned around the

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[75] *Kambi* means metal wire, and refers to the bent lines in the design.

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dots. Some designs contain more than one line, and a particular number of dots can be joined into various different designs. If the number of dots in the grid has been wrongly calculated, or the line drawn towards the wrong direction, the image cannot be completed.

One small *kambi* kolam can be repeated endlessly into a large image exponentially. The number of dots is increased according to the intended size, and the direction of the smaller design is slightly changed at each repetition. Educated women in Chennai are eager to point out the large interest computer scientists have in this type of fractal design. A group of scientists based in Chennai and led by Gift Siromoney, have during the last three decades used the designs to develop picture languages able to identify certain families of kolam images (Asher 2002: 58). The initial use of formal language theory developed into a particular matrix grammar. Based on the grammatical rules and mathematical properties of the tradition, Siromoney's group has constructed computer software which mechanically reproduces kolam designs (Narasimhan 2004: 88). Even if the categorisation of types according to algorithmic counting does not have relevance in daily kolam performances, people are proud over the interest shown by natural scientists. In a less praising manner, the computer scientist Narasimhan argues that: 'The kolam practitioners themselves do not seem to be adept at innovating or even motivated to innovate new patterns.' (Narasimhan 2004: 98)

The younger generation calls the *kambi* kolam the *chikkal* kolam, which means difficult kolam, as they find this type too complicated. Moreover, to make mistakes in the performance is considered to cause harm in the family, and to set out with a difficult design enhances this risk. Young women prefer to use the lines to connect the dots instead of encircling them. This way the grid of dots continuously makes the image symmetrical but the dots are no longer visible. These kolams are usually figurative. Flowers and animals are most commonly depicted. Kolam makers name designs in this category with reference to what they represent, for instance *puu* kolam for flower kolam. A more general name is *pulli* kolams, which means dot kolams and this term can also include the *kambi* kolams, as it did in the statement by the Brahmin woman above. On special occasions, the chosen design often connects with the type of celebration. At the harvest festival for instance, women draw kolams which contain pots boiling over with rice surrounding a sun. The sun is often represented in the form of a swastika.

As already mentioned, Brahmins do not usually make kolams based on a grid of dots. But as they often have a low caste servant that makes the daily kolam, there might be a kolam based on dots at their entrance. A Brahmin woman would rather draw a kolam based on a triangle or a square. When there is a family function or other festive occasion, the

Brahmins who are Shaivites build an elaborate kolam around a small square, while those who are Vaishnavites draw the middle square with concave sides. A square based design which actually bears its own name, is the *teppa* kolam, which represents the water tank situated beside large temples. The Brahmin designs without dots are termed line kolams, *kodu* kolams. According to an astrologer in the region, there are particular combinations of kolam designs to be drawn each day. The designs are connected to the deities ruling over the twenty-seven star-constellations and the nine planets. The interactions of the celestial bodies constitute certain combinations which will be different on each day of the year. The invitation through the kolam will be accepted directly by the deities connected to a particular day. But the astrologer claims that this knowledge has been lost. In all designs, it is important to point out the middle. In dot kolams, the middle always contains a dot, in line kolams however, a small circle is usually made in the centre to complete the image.

When rituals at positive occasions are enacted for gods or human beings, the subject of worship is placed on a particular kind of stool, *manai*. In order to make the space auspicious, a special kolam formed in the shape of the stool is drawn. The kolam, *vatamanai*, is made under the stool if it is a person who will be placed on the stool and worshipped, and on top of the stool if the *puja* is made for a god. The *puja* might include a *homa*, a fire sacrifice to the god Agni performed by a Brahmin priest. Bricks are placed around the area were the fire is to be lit. Small kolams as well as dots of turmeric and *kungumam* are drawn on the bricks, and it is customary that they are made by the woman of the house. When rice is cooked in an agricultural family's field as part of worship for the family deity and the ancestors, kolams are first drawn on the fireplace.

An important design more recently introduced is the *rangoli* type. They are built out freely from the centre and have no dots, and have become very popular due to the possibility to add new patterns as the drawing process proceeds. It is defined as a design appropriated from the North West states of Gujarat and Rajasthan. *Rang* means colour in Hindi, and *rangoli* colour design. There are other regional versions of designs, but it is beyond the scope of this research to delve into all of them.[76]

It is the figurative *pulli* kolams and *rangoli*s that are filled with colours on festive occasions. *Kambi* kolams are considered to lose their beauty if they are coloured. In daily speech, the term *rangoli* is used for any kolam with colour fillings. The increasing appreciation of colour adds to the reduced interest in *kambi* kolams, which is already

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[76] For instance, I have been told that in Chettinadu (the land of the Chettiyars), a region further south in Tamilnadu, street kolam designs differ according to each family.

perceived due to the difficulty in drawing them. Special occasions allow for more space and time to be spent on the kolam practice. Personal combinations of the presented categories are common, and an emphasis on individual creativity engenders new types. All women held that it was considered as more auspicious and beautiful to draw the white lines so that the powder came out as double parallels. This was frequently practiced when large *rangoli*s and figurative kolams were made. In addition, women made designed borders around the large kolams to separate the area outside their home from their neighbours'. Some added texts such as 'Happy New Year' and 'Happy Pongal', in English or Tamil, in the design during these holidays. On one occasion, I came across kolams made by adolescents where statements like 'Save Nature' and 'Donate an Eye', accompanied coloured figurative images.

The introduction of tools, such as the roller and the stencil, has to some extent changed the appearance of the designs, as well as provided a simpler method of kolam making. The roller is made of a pipe of metal or PVC with holes that produces a design as it is filled with powder and rolled on a surface. The stencils are made of the same material but in a shape resembling a small plate with holes. With a quick tap the powder comes through the holes and make up a design. Both kinds of tools need a hard surface to produce a distinct form. The rollers are used as borders around a large kolam, or to make up rangolis, while the quite small stencils are more suitable for indoor areas. In addition, women who have time and money on their hands develop other techniques. Kolams can for instance be drawn on water. Here a bowl is filled with water, and the surface is prepared with a white powder which is normally used between tyres and their inner tube. The powder floats and holds up the kolam which is drawn on the surface. Carefully treated, this kolam can be moved and saved for a while.

Presence of gods and goddesses

The material images of the deities, such as sculptures in temples, framed prints in *puja* rooms and trees in the backyard, are considered to be inhabited by a divine presence. It is this presence which enables the exchange of gazes, *darshan*, in which the devotee becomes touched and blessed by the deity. The perception of the presence of the gods and goddesses in the kolam images works on different levels. People's notions on this are related to the ideas of god's presence in general. Some contend that the deities are present in any kind of kolam, and that the images therefore should be conceived as a sacred space. More commonly, kolam makers hold that the divine presence takes certain designs. Such particular designs are described as symbols of gods, or as actual images of god. For example, a Shaivite might say

that the dots accommodate Shiva and the lines Shakti. Another Hindu contends that it takes a figurative drawing of the yoni-lingam to contain these deities.[77] Both argue that in the latter figurative image, the divine presence is stronger. Catholics have a parallel perception of the presence of god, and draw a design including the cross at their places of worship.[78] These figurative types of kolams ought not to be drawn in the street. If someone steps on such an image, god is dishonoured and might punish the woman who made the wrong kolam in the wrong place. Yet, some women chose to make such images outside. They might like the design, or want to approach god more directly, and argues that passers-by ought to know where they cannot walk. For instance, foot prints are made in the street even though they are directly linked to god. Brahmin women draw them on the celebration of the god Krishna's birthday. The foot print is drawn in the middle of the image, and often repeated in small forms constituting a path which leads Krishna into the house. Among the non-Brahmins, many women draw foot prints as a form of the goddess Amman in their street kolams.

Every Friday Bhuna makes a kolam which by its certain design comes to inhabit the planetary god Venus, in Tamil Sukram. As Sukram presides over Fridays, there is one planetary god, Navagraha, connected to each day of the week.[79] A *mantra*, sacred word, is written in Tamil script in the image. To write and pronounce the mantra is an additional means to invite god to the kolam and to the house. The presence of god in this image makes it unfit to be drawn other than in the *puja* area. Bhuna's husband, who comes from a Brahmin family, has suggested that she should make one particular kolam image of the planetary god for each day of the week. Bhuna comes from a family of the Mudaliar caste, and in her mother's house no one made kolams of the planetary gods or containing mantras. Even though a woman ought to appropriate the practices of her husband's family after marriage, the unfamiliarity of the images has made her reluctant to follow her husband's suggestion. They have agreed that the drawing of the Friday image will do. If Bhuna wants to make one of the other six, she has to bring out the book of the designs which her husband has given to her. She feels less awkward in drawing two other types, which similar to the kolams of planetary gods are considered as especially auspicious and close to the divinities. One is the Ideya kapriyam, the 'lotus of the heart', and is directed towards the goddess. The other is the Iswara kolam, the

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[77] Image of Shiva and Shakti which has the form of their sexual organs. References to Shiva and Shakti could not be expressed by a Vaishnavite for example, as people who belong to this form of Hinduism do not consider Shiva and Shakti as central. In Tantrism, the dot is named *bindu* (Sanskrit) and signifies the infinite (Narayanan pers. comm.).

[78] Protestants usually do not make any kolams as they do not consider god as actually being present in images, and do not keep images depicting gods in their homes.

[79] There are nine Navagrahas, *nava* is Sanskrit for nine. Two of them preside over planets which are not connected to the week days. These will be described in Chapter VI.

'kolam of the Lord', which is made for Shiva. When these two kolams are drawn, their names are written in Tamil script as part of the design. Bhuna learned to make them during childhood, but like the Navagrahas, they are less commonly used among non-Brahmins. An astrologer might suggest to a woman, of any caste, to draw the kolam of a planet as a remedy when that particular planet is held to be causing problems in the woman's life.[80]

The Navagraha kolams are part of a category termed *yantra* kolams. *Yantra*s are geometrical diagrams inhabiting the deities, and are kept in *puja* areas. There are separate diagrams for separate deities. They are commonly etched on small copper plates, which require more exactness than the kolam images if they are to contain the divine presence and power. Copper *yantra*s are also put in the base of sculpted images of deities in temples, and are as such believed to transfer god's power into the image. *Yantra*s are based on the circle. On a philosophical level, geometrical motifs contain speculative thoughts, *darshanas*, of the Vedas and the Upanishads (Vatsyayan 1997: 18f). The circle has an unmanifest, unchanging state of rest in its centre, and within its circumference the manifest is in constant flux moving along with the sixteen spikes of the wheel, *chakra*. The texts also use the imagery of the body, and the centre of the circle corresponds with the human navel. Tantric texts and practices emphasize several *chakra*s within the body. The Upanishads contain the seed of what much later became the concrete language of *yantra*, and they lay the foundation of architectural and sculptural principles. According to the philosophical texts, 'the visible is not just the visible but the very aid to the invisible' (Vatsyayan 1997: 20). The geometrical forms become a means to reach a state of *yoga*. By focusing on the images, the body and senses can be controlled and disciplined. The inward looking can lead to a state of detachment in which the human consciousness is transformed into a standstill, and the binary opposites are unified and the formless is experienced. Conflict and tension no longer have meaning. The texts describe artistic creation as a form of *yoga*, and therefore this concept has validity in Indian aesthetics (Vatsyayan 1997: 18).

Orthodox Brahmin men in Chennai have explained the difference between a *chakra* and a *yantra* in that the former becomes the latter when the original circle form is bounded by four corners where the lines are open in the middle. Buddhists use the term *mandala* for *yantra*. According to the same informants, *mandalas* can inhabit several gods while each *yantra* form usually contains only one deity. An exception is the Sri Yantra, or Sri Chakra, which is considered to be one of the most important *yantras*. It consists of four layers of Shiva

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[80] It is usually the drawing of Saturn, in Tamil Sanni, who presides over Saturdays, which is the remedy as this planet is considered to bring misfortune.

(male) and five layers of Shakti (female), and is inhabited by the goddess, Shakti Devi. Among people who have the goddess as their main deity, the Sri Yantra is perceived to inhabit all deities.

The *yantra* kolam can be seen as a 'transcription' of the *yantra*, and exists for a few deities in addition to those for the planetary gods. These designs were well known among Brahmin women, sometimes under the term *kodu* kolam, but seldom referred to in other groups of kolam makers. Bhuna's Brahmin husband argues that *yantra* is a development of kolam, but kolam makers do not express a notion of a direct connection between the practices. The use of kolams and *yantras* are generally perceived as different methods of approaching the deities.[81]

In a similar manner as the kolam designs partly differ among different castes, the image drawn on the wall in the *nadu viidu* by the family altar is related to caste and family deity. The combination of red lines and dots on the yellow is a practice among lower non-Brahmins. The higher Chettiyars use white instead of yellow as background for nine red dots, while Brahmins do not make this image at all. When a family celebrates a certain deity, the woman of the house draws an image connected to the god, and which is believed to attract and contain that deity. Those who worship Murughan draw a peacock (Murughan's mount) during the Maylar festival, three white triangles on *cemman* are drawn for Mariyamman, a conch and disc (weapons) for Perumal (Vishnu).

Discussion

People strive to enhance the material standard of the home and its equipment. It is considered an improvement to be able to advance from the roughness of old wood, dung paste floors, dust from thatched roofs, and muddy streets. The smoother and less permeable surfaces are easier to sweep and keep clean, and the resulting reduction of manual work is valued. Rather than maintaining the house of the ancestors, people tear it down and construct a new one in concrete as soon as they are able to afford it. The economic conditions within a household are always present, also during the decision on which material the kolam should be drawn in. Personal choice is given scope in that women who take a large interest in drawing kolams opt for the ephemeral materials rather than the durable acrylic paint. This enables them to remake the images more often. The importance of the kolam is shown in how women adapt their practice in relation to changes in their environment. The moral ideal of feeding small animals

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[81] Geometrical designs are also drawn among non-Brahmins on the ground in preparations of rituals of exorcism (Nabokov 2000, Rancine and Viramma 1997).

interacts with the importance of showing the community that you can afford to make kolams in new materials. The social position of a family can thus partly be understood by the type of material used in the kolams. This is reinforced in combination with the house type and its construction material. The ambiguous notions of how to adjust is expressed in the compromise between the ideals and the practical. To the extent that caste can be seen as a social and religious belonging separate from economic class, this belonging can be understood by the type of kolam design drawn in the street. It is thus of concern what other people think about the kolam outside the house. It speaks about the woman of the house who is responsible for the practice. Further, the image of completeness the kolam constitutes can be interpreted as incorporating the imagination of a better life. In accordance with other changes, notions of what a beautiful kolam looks like change.

Kolams made in kolam *maavu* are considered as beautiful by the younger generation, because the images glitter and stand out against the surface. According to elder and more orthodox women, it is not the same beauty as that inherent in kolams made of rice. Kolams drawn in other material than rice flour, and those constituted by mass-produced plastic adhesives, embody a less auspicious beauty because they have less connection with good deeds and the deities. Among many of the younger women, the visual result is considered as more pleasing for the gods than the act of giving. Yet, the main idea to please the deities in order to receive their blessings, including the importance of cleaning the area on which the kolam is put, is persistent. It is as though the younger generation felt that they had transferred the divine power of the rice flour to the new materials. The dedicated joy of experimenting with new designs and materials can be interpreted as a way to increase the devotion put into the performance, and as such be appreciated by the gods. The changes in the kolam practice thus contradict Walter Benjamin's concern about the loss of 'aura' when art and cult objects become incorporated in mechanical reproduction. Notions of authenticity, a unique essence, and a presence of historical testimony are embedded in Benjamin's concept, and he argues that when the aura is lost, the object is no longer part of the domain of tradition (Benjamin 1999 [1968]: 215). According to Benjamin, the experience of the lost aura is partly replaced by the new relationships we develop with machines such as the camera. This can be related to Taussig's conception of mass-produced colours' loss of sensuous materiality and the resurrection of their souls in cinema (Taussig 2006) referred to earlier in this chapter. But for the majority of the younger kolam makers, the coloured mass-produced images (including booklets and magazines with printed designs) have not been detached from religious practice but continue to be regarded as invitations to the deities. Even though two images printed on

plastic look similar, their presence in a home is imbued with personal devotion by the woman who put them there. Similarly, a kolam made on the street with a mass-produced image as a model, is always individually interpreted and performed. In addition, the smoothness of the new surfaces is sought after for reasons related to practical issues and social values. This personal interpretation can be connected to Schneider's use of the concept appropriation in his discussion of individual artistic practice among contemporary artists in Argentina (Schneider 2006). These artists, often of European descent, incorporate ancient Latin American designs and materials in their art works. This working method is not about 'copying' an 'original' or stealing someone's property, but a means to investigating their individual identities. Each art work is a personal interpretation of pre-existing materials, and Schneider frames their practice in a hermeneutic understanding of appropriation. It is a creative practice that is concerned with learning from, and mediating between, different cultural forms (Schneider 2006: 27). The strong and varied hues in the kolams, drawn in powder on the rough ground or applied in paint on a smooth surface, can be comprehended as creatively appropriated from recent mass-produced material objects in the environment, such as advertisement posters, images of the deities, nylon cloth, plastic kitchenware, and the translucent colours in cinemas and on web pages.

Among the Tamil elite however, the increasing changes and possibilities of choices concerning design and material have engendered a discourse on authenticity in the kolam practice. Kolams have been defined as essential in the construction of a Tamil identity and are regarded as part of a timeless Tamil cultural heritage. People who claimed such belonging held that women in the nearby states of Karnataka and Andra Pradesh who perform the practice must have Tamil ancestors. Women I met from these regions did not express this view but described how they were brought up to make kolams in a similar manner as Tamil women.

Narayanan, the reader at Stella Maris College in Chennai who has done research on the kolam, holds that the performance was declining during the sixties and seventies. Young women were influenced by North India and the Western nations. The Northern tradition of the *rangoli* and its colour fillings became a source of inspiration for the kolam makers in the south. During the beginning of the eighties, conservative interests such as *Dinamalar*, a BJP[82] sponsored newspaper, started to print kolam designs daily as a means to 're-establish' an interest in Tamil traditions. Women's magazines in both English and Tamil

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[82] Bharat Janata Party, one of the main actors in the Hindutva movement, of which some are working for India as a Hindu nation freed from Muslims and Christians.

followed this initiative, and it became a fashion among the readers to collect the designs. The *rangoli* design without the grid of dots has been perceived as 'other' in this context. Like the bright colours, it was appropriated from North India, and can thus not be a part of a timeless Tamil identity. Among the Brahmin women who belong to the elite, it would appear contradictive at least to dismiss kolams without the dots, as many of these women emphasize squares and triangles as the proper forms to build the designs around.[83] People in general are more concerned about the size and material than the actual design. But as a woman can put the well-being of herself and her family at risk by drawing an image which embodies a deity that someone might walk on, the type of kolam design used on the street does have relevance.

The main purpose of the kolam images is not to contemplate them in solitude. The performance is a part of everyday life where kolam makers and the completed images interact with a social and religious context of diverse beings. There is a dialogue between the practice and the surrounding community, where they constitute and reconstitute each other. But as Bhuna's husband expresses, the kolam image can give the beholder an individual pleasure as well:

> *Darshan* is the final fruit of all rituals… you enjoy the beauty of god through your eyes… Even having a kolam, if you are highly religious minded, you see if you are interested in viewing paintings, you lose yourself when you see a great painting. So also, if you are interested in kolams you loose yourself and stand there for some time and enjoy the beauty. And in a particular kolam you've seen, you think of a particular deity.

This relationship extends that between a material image and a beholder. Although the description echoes Kantian notions of aesthetic pleasure in an individual when he encounters a painting, the pleasure here refers to a third being. It is the deity, perceived as embodied in the image, which the beholder through the act of *darshan* is considered to establish a relationship with. The closeness between the deity and the worshiper is what the *bhakti* tradition emphasizes, and hereby the kolam has mediated an intimacy within the religious sphere.

The issue of the embodiment of the divine in material images was further described in a story that Malliga narrated. It was about a man who held that he had seen god in a formation in the sand on the beach. When he came back to his village, people made fun of

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[83] The issue of authenticity in relation to women's responses will be elaborated on in the next chapter on city competitions.

him and said that there could be no such thing. A *sannyasin* (a man who has renounced his family and social life and leads his life devoted only to god) explained to the man that the villagers were wrong. If the man had seen god in the sand, it was god. According to the view of the *sannyasin*, and partly an ambiguous definition among my informants on which kolams embody god or not, it could be said that it is not the design of the image which is the main issue. It is of greater concern how a particular material image affects an individual.

The iconographic and iconometric rules concerning the construction of images of the deities installed in larger temples, contradicts this view. The exactitude required when a *yantra* is drawn has a similar significance. Jain argues that in order for the deities to be present in an image, the gaze of the deity first has to accept the image. It is the deity's self-recognition which gives an image its efficacy and power (Jain 2007: 293). The image therefore has to establish a relationship with god before it can be efficacious on a human being. According to a medieval Vaishnava text, it is god who takes the initiative to manifest himself in an image 'as an act of sympathy towards his devotees' (Davis 1997: 32). In order for the devotees to become attached to the embodied deity, sculptors were urged to make the images as beautiful as possible. Richard Davis, scholar in religious studies, terms the relationship between god, image and devotee as 'aesthetics of presence'. He opposes the Hindu perception of the image, as actually embodying the deity, to a medieval Christian theory which contends that the image is a representation. The Christian image may convey a message, but this message is always separated from the image. Devotees may learn about god through his material image, but they can not get access to him directly in the sense that Hindu images give their worshippers (Davis 1997:33).

For the women who draw the kolams to increase the well-being of their families, the close contact with the deity engendered in the practice does not have to be constituted by *darshan*. The closeness develops through the performance and it entails relationships with the family and the wider community. *Darshan* is sometimes a part of, but not a necessity for, the efficacy of the kolam. The house and its inhabitants might thus be blessed through visual contact, or through the presence of the deity inside the house. The requirements on the appearance of the kolam are less exact than on deities as *yantra*s and sculptures in temples. In everyday life it is its presence, the visualisation of the practice being performed, that has the main value. However, the notion that the deities appreciate beauty and are attracted by the beauty of the kolam relates to Jain's discussion of the deity's need for self-recognition in the form he or she wants to be present in. The beautiful appearance of the house, largely engendered by the kolam and the devotion it embodies, encourages god's presence as they

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recognize their own beauty. The kolam image or the house might be the chosen form in which the deity becomes temporarily manifest. The next chapter turns away from materiality to relationships established through the social organisation of the kolam practice.

Chapter V

The social organisation of the kolam practice,
in relation to place and the kolam maker's position in that place

In this chapter, the relation between the kolam performance and the surrounding community will be described. It includes the immediate family, the street where one lives, the larger rural or urban community, and finally the institutionalised art world. Among the majority of my informants living in a house with their kin, a female family member makes the daily kolams. After marriage, the bride moves in with her husband's family. The new daughter in-law is required to take on the main tasks in the household, such as cooking, cleaning, washing and taking care of the elders and small children. From the first morning in the in-law's home, it is also her responsibility to make the daily kolams. This tradition may be negotiated depending on family constitution and interest among the female household members. It is increasingly common to live as nuclear families and for wives to work outside the home. These modern influences more insistently demand the need to organise the kolam making beyond the family unit. People narrate how the performance is organised differently according to which place the kolam is made in, and one's own position in that place. The chapter will contend that existing positions can be affected by the kolam performance, but that this is rare.

Families in separate homes

Priya's kolam performance, described in the introduction, interacts with how the practice is perceived and enacted among her neighbours. Her mornings are busy, as she attends to kolam making in more than her own home. Depending on her relationships with the people around her, her efforts are appreciated in various ways.

Priya lives with her maternal grandmother and sister's daughter on Vellalar Street in Pelasur. Like most of the neighbours, she belongs to the low Vanniyar caste which dominates the village. The majority of the inhabitants in the street live in their own brick house with tiled roofs, but Priya's home is a small mud hut which is rented and without electricity. Her grandmother, Nagammal, became a single mother shortly after Priya's mother was born. Nagammal's husband took a new wife and moved to another house. He offered Nagammal to come and stay with them, but her pride prevented her from doing that. Lack of

income and support has made their life vulnerable. Nagammal managed to get her daughter, Priya's mother, married to a farmer and they had three daughters together. Mainly due to economic difficulties, Priya's parents committed suicide a few years ago. Her elder sisters were already married, and as Nagammal was alone Priya moved in with her grandmother.

When Priya has completed the kolam at her own entrance, she starts at a new house. In one of the families across the street, both husband and wife have full time jobs outside the village. They belong to the middle class and live as a nuclear family with their two sons. Along with a servant who cooks, they have employed Priya to take care of the daily kolam. Her interest and skill, as well as her need for extra money, convinced them that Priya would be the right person to engage. She receives a monthly sum and a new sari once a year. Even if the wife sometimes has time during the weekends to put the kolam herself, she lets Priya do it to make sure that she continuously feels appreciated for her work. The only exception has been the harvest festival, Pongal, when the wife joins in to colour the large designs drawn by Priya. The wife holds that she has always had a great interest in kolam making, but she finds her job more important than to adhere to the ideal that the woman of the house ought to make the kolams herself. The *puja* place inside her home is different. She would not let any servant take care of this sacred area, and as kolams are made here weekly, she does not have any difficulties to combine it with her work.

The house on the other side of Priya's has been empty for several months. The owners are Chettiyars and one of the better off families which have moved to town for better opportunities. There have already been two families as tenants, but they all moved out as the rent was considered too high. Priya sweeps and makes kolams in front of the empty house daily. It is on her initiative and the owners do not give her anything in exchange. They do not disagree with her efforts, but are mainly interested in how this particular house can generate an additional income for themselves. There are kolams in paint on the veranda and stone steps, but Priya feels that this is not enough to please the gods and make the space auspicious. It does not look good when the area in front of the threshold is empty. It is bad enough with the green colour fading from the walls, and the grass spreading towards the middle of the street. A house to which no one attends, including making daily kolams, easily becomes the habitation of evil spirits, and to think about such neighbours makes Priya and the rest of her family feel anxious.

The new terraced house next to Priya's is inhabited by an elderly single man. Because he is a man, it is unthinkable for him to make kolams of his own, and for quite a few years Priya drew them at his entrance out of concern for her neighbour's well-being. But her

family has recently ended up in a serious conflict with this man. He wanted to cut down their neem tree, which Nagammal worships regularly as Mariyamman, because he held that too many leaves were falling on his backyard. The disagreement has developed into a quarrel over to which of them a three-decimetre wide piece of land between their houses belong. Priya defines it as belonging to her family by making a kolam on it every morning.

A fourth place where Priya makes daily kolams is at a mill which is situated on an adjacent street. The mill has been Nagammal's work place for decades, and she was responsible for grinding rice and chilli as well as cleaning and making kolams at the entrance and the *puja* place inside the building. As Nagammal grew old, Priya's sisters helped with the work. Priya completed her twelfth year of basic education last year, and since then she has taken on the kolam performance and much of Nagammal's grinding work in the mill. While Nagammal continuously receives a small monthly sum for her work, nothing is given to Priya. The owner gave her a sari last year, but its bad quality made Priya perceive it as a humiliation and she could only bear to use it once. She does not try to take steps towards changing her situation as she hopes to inherit her mother's job as a teacher in a Government run nursery. According to state law, Priya has the right to do so because her mother died prematurely, but the administrative process is slow.

The mill owner, a man of the upper middle class in Hariyarapakkam, is also the owner of the hut in which Priya and her family lives. Nagammal had a good relationship with the former owner, and he helped her with the work. Together they found a stone with the *sulam*, Shakti's weapon, inscribed as a relief. They carried it into the mill and since then it has been a part of the *puja* place inside the building. Nagammal only allows kolams in rice flour at this stone. When her husband chose another woman and she had no place to stay, she was able to buy the plot where the hut they live in is situated. But the present owner, the son of the former, refuses to give her the registration documents. Explicit complaints include the risk of losing their home. Nagammal's small income might also be lost, as the owner plans to sell the unprofitable mill as soon as his sister gets married. Priya knows that marriage is soon at hand for her as well, and it is something she tries to shrug off. She wants to marry a man that at least has the same level of education as her, but the scarcity of assets in the family does not allow for a dowry which is large enough to enable any demands. She does not know that her grandmother is secretly saving money for the dowry. In the meantime, Priya helps to take care of her niece, Kala. Nagammal took the girl under her roof when a sister was born, only nine months after Kala, as there were no other relatives who could assist the mother. The rest of Kala's family lives in town, and she spends the summer holiday with them.

Priya gets support from Gayatri, the housewife in the opposite building. Gayatri is respected as an auspicious woman among the neighbours, and people listen to her views. She is very skilled in her kolam performance, and her interest in new designs keeps her from using more permanent materials. Gayatri's style is an inspiration for Priya. When the harvest festival is held and their street becomes filled with elaborate kolams the night before, they are always the last to complete their images. If they have any energy left they walk up and down the street, and critically appreciate and learn from the skill and inventiveness of their neighbours. Gayatri's younger sister in-law lives next door and is considered to be unskilled. Her shyness can be experienced in her vague and disordered kolams. Sometimes Gayatri helps out during festivals, but she has not been explicit regarding who has initiated this help and whether it is appreciated or not. Gayatri does not visit her mother's house frequently as it is quite far away. But when she leaves along with her daughter, Priya makes the kolam at their house. Between them it is not a matter of payment, that would be an insult to their friendship. During some afternoon hours when there is no work, Priya and Kala walk over to Gayatri's and join in watching a TV serial. Nagammal has asked them to stop, as it is very important for her to show that her family is able to manage without help.

When Gayatri's daughter and Kala come home from school, they often take care of the afternoon street kolams in their respective homes. Gayatri is not yet sure whether they will be financially able to give their daughter the high education both her sons have received. For Kala, there are no such possibilities. The husbands that will be available for the girls will have mothers who require knowledge in kolam making.

A fifth house adjacent to Priya's is inhabited by a joint family. Only a generation ago this was the most common way to organise families. Such a household consists of several women, and depending on the relationships between mother in-law, sisters, daughters, daughters in-law, and granddaughters, it is possible for them to take turns in the kolam making. The newcomer can never make requests and it is the mother in-law who has the last word in most household matters. But if there is more than one daughter in-law who has moved into the home, they can make an agreement where the one who has the largest interest in kolam making can have the daily responsibility for this task. In the case of Priya's neighbour, it is the youngest daughter in-law, Anjili, who draws the daily street kolam. Her husband's elder sister had partly taken over from the mother, who has back problems and difficulties in drawing the image. The sister is now married and lives on the other side of the village, but before she moved she taught Anjili a couple of designs that the mother preferred. During her first year in the family, Anjili paid much attention to learning these. Since then she feels more

accepted and allowed to experiment with new designs according to her own preferences. The elder daughter in-law, Anjili's new sister, does not like to draw kolams, but she helps out when Anjili is ill or goes to visit her mother for a couple of days in a nearby village. It would not look good for the family if they turned to a neighbour for help when they are more than one woman in the household.

Before her sons got married and the new brides moved in, Anjili's mother in-law used to make her morning kolam already at three or four in the morning. There is a sense of auspiciousness in being the first woman in the street to complete the kolam, as this means that her family will receive the blessings of god first. Priya feels more at ease since the daughter in-laws took over. They do not get up as early as their predecessor, who was considered to overdo her duty, and Priya can therefore manage to complete the morning kolam at her own home before any other neighbour is out.

Families in apartment buildings

Apartment buildings in towns and cities which are inhabited by many residents of different families require a more formal organisation of the street kolam performance. The organisation depends on the positions the people in the house have in relation to each other.

Selvi lives with her husband and children in one of the lower middle class areas in central Chennai. They rent a flat in an apartment building where the residing families roughly belong to the same caste and class. In houses where people are equal, women arrange the kolam performance according to a certain system to make sure that the kolam will be made daily. This system is called *muraivaasel*, which means organisation of the entrance. Selvi's family is one of eight in the building, and each day a woman from one of these families takes care of the cleaning of the street in front of the house, and the creation of the kolam. On the ninth day, it is again the turn of the first family. The system can also be based on a weekly or monthly turn. Sometimes it can be organised among women of different families who live in separate houses. It is an important duty which is allowed to intrude on other tasks. A woman who works outside the home and comes late is excused if she explains that she had that day's *muraivaasel*. A few times when she has been sick or visited her mother's house, Selvi has not been able to attend to the *muraivaasel*. But she has developed a good relationship with the wife in the family across the corridor, and they help each other when they can. It is also possible to pay a certain amount if you are unable to take part in the *muraivaasel*.

On Selvi's way to work in a nearby phone centre, she passes the old two-storey house where her sister lives. Her sister's family rents in a building where the owners are part of the residential families. As such, they have a higher position in relation to their tenants. The wife in the owner family, Latha, recalls when her family filled up the whole house. Her two daughters used to help her with the street kolams and other household tasks. About a decade ago, they both got married and moved to their in-law's homes, and her sons got well-paid jobs in other parts of the city and have set up households of their own. Latha and her husband found themselves with too much space and decided to take in tenants. Four households rent a couple of rooms each. They have organised the performance of the daily street kolam according to the *muraivaasel* system, but as Latha is a member of the owner family she is excused from this duty. In most apartment buildings, each family has the responsibility for the kolams made in front of their own flat entrance, and inside the flat. In Latha's house however, the tenants have included her entrance in their *muraivaasel*. She is pleased with this arrangement, but she would never let them make a kolam in her *puja* room or kitchen. Rules on cleanliness differ between families, and Latha expresses her anxiety over her tenants' state of being: 'If one of my tenants has her period, she will not let me know, and I don't know how often they wash their hair'. The first condition explicitly refers to the impure state of *tiittu*, which I will return to below. The second condition, *cuttam*, is as mentioned in Chapter III a more general state of uncleanliness which sometimes can include *tiittu*.

Many women even perceive it as a risk to have a stranger from outside making their street kolam. It does not necessarily refer to states of cleanliness, but someone who does not belong to the family is not considered to employ the same effort as the woman of the house, and therefore the gods will be less pleased. Ideas of not fulfilling your responsibility and putting your family members at risk interact with the ideal of showing the community that you can afford to employ a servant to do the job for you. In Latha's case it is also a practical matter, her body does not agree with physical work any longer and there will not be any daughter in-laws in her home.

Manjula lives in a new three-storey house owned by a Brahmin family. The owners have lived in a villa on the same ground for generations, but a few years ago it was torn down to make way for an apartment building. The new construction includes a large flat for the owners and four smaller for tenants. Although during hot summer days, they sometimes miss the openly-built old villa, they are happy about the new arrangements which make it possible for them to increase their income. Manjula belongs to a Chettiyar family, and while they rent a flat in the city, they have a large estate in the countryside. Both owners and

tenants have high positions, regarding caste as well as class. When Manjula's mother grew up, she had to learn how to make kolams properly before she came of age. From this day and up till marriage, she along with the majority of high caste girls was not allowed to make kolams in the street. It was considered unsafe as the girl might attract the attention of young men. All women who now live in the apartment building perceive the performance of the daily street kolam as a task which is beneath them. The owners have employed a servant for this task. I was told that this practice was quite new, it used to be the new daughter in-law who had to perform all the hard work.

There are new apartment buildings, predominantly in upper class neighbour-hoods, where the owners are indifferent to kolams and do not employ anyone to do it. But as the area outside each flat is a semi-private issue, there might still be kolams of various materials in the stairwells and corridors. Manjula has put a kolam in plastic adhesive outside her family's flat. They way the house is built, people walk past close to their entrance and an ordinary kolam would be destroyed in ten minutes.

Families without a home

It takes a house for a woman to daily recreate the home through the kolam making. There is a strong preference towards owning the house in which you live. People who rent complain about the owners charging too high rents, or interference in their ways of attending to the house, or even their personal affairs. There are thousands of families, especially in big cities like Chennai, who are unable either to own or rent and lead their lives as pavement dwellers. For Yasodha, who is one of them, mornings are very different in comparison to Priya's, and others' who live in a home.

It is a couple of hours before Triplicane High Road has become dense with heat, fumes from vehicles, and loud horns. Concrete buildings with shops and hotels are slowly choking the old tiled ones. Yasodha and her family wake up on their straw mats temporarily rolled out on their dwelling place on the pavement in front of the ice-cream shop. While the other family members are still trying to make a move, Yashoda grabs her orange plastic vessel and walks over to the public water tap on the next block. As the last monsoon has been abundant, there is plenty of water and no fee required. The almost worn out kerosene stove is started up, and a pan filled with rice and water put to boil.

On the pavement on the opposite side of the street, Yasodha and her daughter Anandhi keep a table where they spend most of the day knotting flowers into garlands and selling them to passers-by. In the mornings, they keep their eyes open for people that might

want to buy yesterday's garlands at a reduced price. As there are some extra rupies left today, Yasodha manages to send her two teenage sons to the market. A rare glow of joy lightens up her unanimated face as she begins to prepare fresh vegetables along with the rice. Another pavement dwelling family yells at Yasodha from further up the street. She turns her back on their demand that she share her groceries with them. Heated rows over inaccessibility of food have become tiresome.

After breakfast the pavement has to be cleaned. The family's few belongings are neatly piled together in order not to be in the way when the shop keeper arrives to open his business. Yasodha makes the ten-minute walk to an open space behind an old building where she can clean herself and change clothes. Then she takes the bus to the downtown flower market to buy new jasmine buds for her business. She passes the Vinayakan temple, and prays that her two sons will find a paying job instead of playing around in the streets all day.

Some mornings, Yasodha is called by nearby shop keepers to come and clean in front of their shops. She pours water on the pavement outside the shops and sweeps yesterday's dust and garbage into the often overflowing gutter. If the shop keeper belongs to the Muslim community, which is large in this area, Yasodha's work is finished after the sweeping. If he is a Hindu, she completes the job by drawing a small kolam outside the shop entrance.

As Yasodha has lived all her life without a house, she has not had much practice in kolam making. Yet her mother insisted that Yasodha learned how to make them. The mother nourished the hope that her daughter one day would become married to a man that could provide a proper home. This would require kolams being made. As she grew up, Yasodha watched women making kolams in the street outside their houses, and her mother showed her old notebooks. In this manner, she could memorise a few simple designs.

The wish to get a house never materialised. After marriage, Yasodha moved from the pavement which was her mother's dwelling place to the present area which was the place of her husband's family. Yasodha's husband recently passed away due to an infected leg injury. And as her own husband was, so too now her son in-law (Anandhi's husband) is a cycle-rickshaw driver. There has been a long period of arguments with this son in-law. He keeps on demanding dowry as a condition for keeping Anandhi as his wife and taking responsibility for their two children, a boy and a girl. There was nothing to give, and he left his family. Yasodha is fed up with his claims and has now changed her strategy. Instead of asking him to come back, she has told the son in-law off and decided to help her daughter with her children. Somehow, they will manage the family without Anandhi's husband.

Spending all her thirty-five years on the streets, Yasodha has lost faith in a different future for her daughter and granddaughter. To teach them how to make kolams seems like a waste of time.

Temples

The acquiring of religious merit, *punnyiam*, increases when the kolam performance is conducted at temples. In smaller temples in villages, it is often the wife of the priest or a particularly skilled woman living in the vicinity that tends to the practice. In a large city temple, there can sometimes be a conflict between several women who all feel they have the right to create its kolams. Women work out systems of turns to avoid such conflicts. People consider regular kolam makers in temples as more able to get rewards from god because of the *punnyiam* received by spending so much work in pleasing the deities. During temple festivals when many large kolams are made, there will be more women than usual who take part.

Last Pongal, Priya took part in a large event in the Mariyamman temple in Pelasur. Bhuvana, a woman from Tennampattu who is married to a shop owner, had become interested in making kolams in acrylic paint. She had tried it out first on her own veranda, and then at a small Perumal temple in her street. Being a housewife in a middle class family, she had time and money to spend and thus the ability to experiment. During Pongal, she wanted to make something larger. She gathered together women from the neighbourhood to make painted kolams at the Mariyamman temple. Priya recalled how excited she and the other thirty women who participated were as it was the first time kolams were to be made in paint at this temple. For some of them, it was the first time they tried this material. It took almost a whole day to complete the images, and they had a joyous time together away from their ordinary workload and they were very proud of the result. I was first told that Bhuvana had arranged for the paint kolam as a *venduthal*, but she held that she had made it out of interest.

At my arrival in Pelasur, almost a year later, the designs had started to fade, and women were complaining about their dullness, and argued that they ought to be repainted at this year's Pongal. But no one came up with the needed material. The pujari's wife was the woman who made the daily kolams at the Mariyamman temple. She had never made kolams in paint and was thrilled with their beauty. As she had become older, she was also pleased in that the more permanent images had relieved her of some of her daily work. She complained over the fading images directly to me, and suggested that I should buy paint for new kolams. Although I had doubts about interfering too much in my role as a researcher, curiosity

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influenced my decision to provide the materials. Bhuvana took care of the organising, and like last time she made a design in her notebook as a model for the largest image to be made in the middle of the temple yard. A few women and some school children spent the afternoon cleaning up the area and removing remainders of last year's paint. Then one of the older and more skilled kolam makers drew up the outer lines to form the design. She had almost lost her hearing, and was unable to pay attention to remarks on that she did not follow Bhuvana's model exactly. But the women let her be as they had faith in her skills, and after Bhuvana left they all partook in slightly transforming the design according to their personal ideas. Most of the brushes were made of wooden sticks where one end was broken into thinner parts. This end was rather rough and made it difficult to handle minute details in comparison with how women were able to make use of ordinary stone powder. Anjili's suggestion to depict a small Kamatchiamman lamp in all the areas filled with green was heeded, but she had to get hold of proper brushes first. Women came and went during the event as they had to attend to their household duties such as giving evening tiffin[84] to their families. When two large kolams, about five and two meters wide respectively, had been completed it was rather late and everyone felt tired. We all had to get back home for the night. There were still three smaller kolams to be remade, but as time was up these designs were just repainted with new lines on top of the older ones.

The events at the Mariyamman temple were loosely organised and open to any interested woman in the neighbourhood. At the urban Brahmin temples, the rules on which women who can partake in the kolam performance are stricter, more in line with the practice that lower castes historically have not been allowed to enter the premises (Stein 1998). In addition, new materials are less appreciated. A woman I met at one of these temples, Minakshi, held that only rice mixed with water ought to be used.

Minakshi is almost eighty years old. Her eyesight has become weak, but after two operations she still continues her mother's practice of making kolams every morning at one of the largest temples in central Chennai. Minakshi grew up in the wealthy area surrounding the temple, and like all the other inhabitants in the neighbourhood she is an orthodox Brahmin. Her mother made kolams daily in the temple for forty-three years, and this gave her the name kolam-*patti* (kolam-granny). When Minakshi married, she moved to her new in-laws house in Sri Rangam further south. Every day she went to the closest temple to make kolams. When her husband died, she moved back to her mother's house in Chennai,

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[84] A smaller meal that usually is eaten in the morning or evening.

which was kept by her brothers, and re-established her practice of making kolams here. Now, she is like a kolam-*patti* herself.

The temple next to Minakshi's home is large, and there is enough room for the numerous amounts of women who come and make kolams here daily. Most of them are older and have daughter in-laws and servants which take full responsibility for all the household tasks in their own homes. Less work at home gives possibility to spend more time creating kolams in the temple. Large kolams are made in the pillar hall which constitutes the eastern and main entrance to the temple complex. Behind the stone walls surrounding the area, smaller kolams are made in front of the god in the main temple and by all the smaller shrines. The women live nearby, and on their way to the temple they pass each other's houses and state that today they intend to make a kolam. This way, women can keep track of how many of them are on their way, and they calculate whether there is room for their own additional kolams or not. Minakshi told about a woman who had recently moved into the area. Unaware of the habits of the local women, she just walked off and made kolams in the temple without informing anybody. This was perceived as an intrusion and was greatly condemned. Many devotees visit the temple regularly, especially in the mornings, which wears out the designs too quickly. A few of the engaged women check the kolams frequently, and make new ones if needed.

Minakshi is famous for her kolams. She is often called by people in charge of this as well as other temples to come and make kolams if there is a special festival. She keeps a schedule on the events to be prepared if her kolam making includes travelling. It is considered beneficial for the festival and the people present if Minakshi is the woman who starts the kolam making. She is a respected woman with a lot of skill, and she has never needed a notebook. She explains that: 'My ability to make kolams comes from god. I never decide beforehand which kolams I will make, the design comes from god at the moment I make them'. But she never makes kolams on the street at her home. A servant is employed for this task. Her brother's grandson's wife, who is the youngest married woman in the household, has just completed her medical studies and works at a nearby private clinic. Minakshi only expects her to make kolams in the *puja* room on Fridays.

When Minakshi was young, people of low castes were prohibited from entering the temple. Brahmin men were the only ones allowed to make a *puja* for the main deity in the innermost shrine, while Brahmin women could merely enter this area to draw a kolam for god. Since then, Government officials have taken over the maintenance of the temple from the Brahmin community and people from all castes and genders have been allowed to worship the

main deity. Dhanalakshmi, who is one of Minakshi's neighbours, complains about the incapacity of the officials to run the temples. The Government mainly consists of non-Brahmins, and the Brahmins find it difficult with a temple authority which is ritually less pure. According to Dhanalakshmi, the officials even interfere in how the kolams should be made. They might stop a woman by saying that the kolams have already been made by someone else. She feels that they misuse their responsibility, and offer less opportunity for ritual practice. Although women from any caste have been formally allowed to make kolams in the temple, it continues to be Brahmin women as no other caste lives in the vicinity.

At a small Mariyamman temple not far away where people of lower castes live, there is only room for one kolam maker a day. The task has been passed down from mother to daughter for at least three generations within three families living next to the temple. Most of the daughters have married their mother's brother's sons living in the neighbourhood, and thus remained close by. The women have a system resembling the *muraivaasel*, one woman from each of the families is responsible each day. If the women in the three families are busy, they hand over the task to a nearby woman whom they know is interested and skilled.

Changes during women's impure states

There are different rules for Brahmin and non-Brahmin women on how to enact the kolam performance in relation to menstruation and childbirth. Both states are perceived as ritually impure, *tiittu*, and affect women's proximity to god as well as human beings (cf. Good 1991, Hancock 1999, Fuller 1992, Kapadia 1995).

In accordance with the general norm for Hindu women, their nearness to the deities ought to be less during impure states. They can not enter temples or *puja* places for three days. Among my Brahmin informants, rules related to ideas on purity and impurity are stricter than for people within other castes. Brahmin women offer the daily food to god before eating, and therefore they cannot take part in cooking while menstruating. As non-Brahmins make this kind of offering only on special occasions, their kitchen duties are unaffected on ordinary days. In a similar manner, the proximity to god during kolam making restricts Brahmin women from drawing kolams during the first three days of their periods. For a non-Brahmin, a morning bath is required, but afterwards there is no reason for not making a kolam in the street or kitchen.

Due to the impossibility for a Brahmin woman to make street kolams during her period, other female household members need to be involved in the performance, unless a servant is employed for the task. As expressed earlier by Latha, uncertainty over the state of

being and caste restrictions of her servant, a Brahmin or other upper caste woman never lets her employee make kolams inside the home. Besides rules of impurity, *tiittu*, where Brahmins regard other castes as ritually inferior, there is a perception of lower people being less clean and neat, *cuttam*. The latter view is largely shared in non-Brahmins' opinions on uneducated and poor people as being lower. Borders of caste and class get blurred in these instances. What is clear is that it is the woman of the house who ought to make the kolams in the sacred and intimate *puja* place, except when she has her periods.

At childbirth, women's impure state prevents them from making kolams. Again, the Brahmin rules are stricter. Brahmin women are ideally supposed to be secluded in a separate room for twenty-one days after they have given birth to a child, and they ought to stay inside the house for three months. Among lower caste women, the need for seclusion is only three days, and after nine days women can go outside and put kolams. Many women, particularly those with higher education, emphasize the need to be inside the home as a means to protect themselves from bacteria and diseases during this vulnerable state of being. As during menstruation, other women need to be involved in the kolam making.[85]

Ambiguous perceptions of the kolam performance

Well educated young women in upper castes and classes who have managed to get a job outside the household contend that they have no time for kolam making. A woman who has reached such a level is not expected to have the same interest in household work as the elder generation. She is thus excused from making daily street kolams. This view is the same both in rural and urban areas. Yet, the Dalit women in the village, who continue to work in the fields as their mothers and grandmothers did, always make a morning kolam. Even if they have to get up at four o'clock, it must be made. They have neither had the option of employing someone to do it for them, nor to buy permanent materials to reduce their workload. Between these polarities, there is a continuum of competing views with which individual women constantly struggle.

Malliga, the Vanniyar woman who teaches at the primary school in Pelasur, belongs to a family of agricultural labourers. When she grew up, poverty was not far away. Education has proved to be the way to move upwards and get a steady income. She is brought up with the conviction that it is her own duty to make the kolam, and has a strong pride in

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[85] According to Nagarajan, her informants hold that apart from creating auspiciousness, a central aspect of the kolam is to protect the house from ritual pollution, and further that the absence of the image articulates pollution within the home (Nagarajan 1998: 91, 108). I have not heard this argument, but Nagarajan's emphasis on purity and pollution might refer to a Brahmin bias among herself and her informants.

upholding 'the traditions of the Tamil culture'. With great reluctance, she admits that she has employed a female neighbour to do the daily street kolam for her. With a full time job and four children, and no mother in-law in the house to help out, there is just no time. Paradoxically, it gives her status to be able to afford a servant. The striving upwards includes sending her children to better education at the Brahmin school in town. For the time being, there is only money for the eldest, a thirteen year old daughter. This girl is encouraged to stay with their relatives in town and focus on her studies rather than being at home and learning kolam making. Malliga hopes that her daughter will be able to marry within a family that will value higher education over knowledge in household tasks. A family that will not make their daughter in-law into a servant, as her own in-laws tried to, but can afford to employ one.

Most upper class people have already moved beyond the dilemma Malliga faces. For them, educated girls are perceived as an asset in marriage negotiations. Young women are encouraged to continue their education after marriage. Couples moving to the US or making a career in medicine or IT raise the status and *gauravam* (prestige and respectability, explained in ChII) of the family. Servants are employed to make the daily street kolam, or a more permanent one made in paint. Those made inside the home can be replaced by plastic adhesives.

The reduced status given to kolam making in the street radically changes at festivals and other special occasions. As the kolams are given a lot more room they receive much more attention, and it often becomes a matter of *gauravam* to have made the best image in the street. The prestige issue moves from the emphasis on having a maid to show a capacity to make beautiful kolams. Consequently, there are changes in who performs the drawing.

In the apartment building inhabited by upper caste families mentioned earlier, the servant is relieved from her kolam making during the whole month leading up to Pongal. Manjula and a young woman of the owner family take great joy in drawing kolams during this period. They work out new designs in their notebooks in the afternoons and buy suitable coloured powders in a nearby shop. Around four in the morning they get up and draw the image together. Although they know that elaborate kolams are appreciated and admired both by divinities and neighbours, they are more focused on having fun. Their mothers encourage them, as skill and ability in kolam making continues to be considered as a good quality in women. They hold that the daily street kolams are simple and can be made by anyone. The images are quickly erased in the city and less seen due to traffic and other disturbances, and they perceive the work as a waste of time. It is the larger kolams that count. People admire them and take precautions not to destroy them immediately.

For a woman who has a large interest, it is both joyous and a challenge to make complex kolams in which you can develop your own creativity and skill. For others, the prestige at stake may be overpowering, but an insecure and/or uninterested woman usually has a network of friends and relatives to turn to.

Specialists

Within smaller rural or urban localities, women who are not particularly interested or skilled in kolam making might ask a neighbour for help when the occasion calls for a large kolam. Skilled kolam makers are known and appreciated, but usually not far away from their own street. In cities and towns, there are experts who earn money with their skill. When a wealthy family rents a wedding hall, the organisers can find firms through ads in the local newspaper which along with catering supply skills in beautifying the hall. Their work includes making large kolams at the entrances and at the place the people in focus will be seated during the wedding ritual. However, it is more prestigious to make a name for yourself through your own skills independent of a firm. Sometimes women's fame is confined to their network of kolam makers, but it can also develop further outside this realm.

One of the latter is Alameku, a rich well-educated Brahmin woman from Chennai. Her reputation increased considerably since she learned how to make five lined kolams. Her husband supports her interest. She went to a weekend workshop held by a man who had a record in kolam making in the Guinness book of records. Although it is extremely unusual for a man to have knowledge in the kolam practice, he taught the participants how to make five lines with a single stroke. Alameku, who was the only one able to pick up the technique properly, is now asked for in a number of contexts. At a celebration at her husband's workplace, a bank, she made a kolam including the emblem of the bank in its particular colours. She has attended many kolam competitions arranged by Brahmin associations and private companies. The many diplomas she has received are kept in a file for display together with diplomas for partaking in competitions of cooking and making pastries. The diplomas include logos of the organising companies which make the file resemble a commercial. The experience of commercial interest is enhanced by the household products and luxurious food items which are given as prizes and kept on display in the homes. In spite of her economic position, Alameku does not let a maid do any kolams in her home or in the street in front of it. She feels that it is her duty, no maid would do it with the same effort as herself. And she enjoys making them.

Among the kolam makers I met, it was Ambika who had developed her skills in the most personal manner. At first glance, her colourful figurative images appeared very different from kolams. But she emphasizes that they are built upon the kolam practice, and when women approach her and want to learn how to make similar images, she always begins by teaching them simple kolams.

Ambika has taken a great interest in visual forms of expression since she was a young girl. Apart from making kolams, she draws on paper, paints on glass and canvas, as well as doing embroidery and working with sculptures. She is always curious in trying out new materials, and during one of my visits she showed me a figure she had sculpted from a piece of soap. Ambika has two main sources of inspiration. The first is the god Krishna. As a child, she saw a film in which Krishna made great efforts in helping poor children. He saved a girl who was unconscious after falling in a pool of water electrified by cables which had fallen down from the buildings. Since then, she has wanted to become a social worker. But her father did not allow her to get a higher education. Even though Mariyamman is her family god, it is Krishna who inspires her work, and he is her favourite motif in her kolams. Ambika's second source of inspiration is the artist Raja Ravi Varma. His emotional paintings of deities and mythological beings in lush landscapes have made him into one of the most popular artists in India. Varma combined 'Indianness' with the new aesthetic ideals imposed by the British during the second half of the nineteenth century. The art administrators of the colonisers exercised their mission to refine 'native' aesthetic tastes mainly in Calcutta and Bombay (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 47). Paintings were not considered as beautiful unless they were realistic. Figures had to have a volume and be situated in a proper perspective. Through paintings like Varma's, parts of the British ideals have been incorporated and merged with local expressions into mass produced images of the deities kept at places of worship. The newer local expressions are also part of Ambika's kolam images. She uses the perspective, and the figures are given volume by shades which she makes by hand or through sifting the kolam powder through a strainer. Her interest in the three dimensional has also made her try out materials like salt to make the figures into a relief.

For some years, Ambika gave art classes in her mother's house. The word of her skills spread around the town, and the home was often full of women eager to learn. Her father did not allow her to work outside, she could not even take part in public competitions. The family belongs to the middle class and is of low caste, but many of the women Ambika taught had a higher position, both according to caste and class. One of them was a middle aged Chettiyar woman who was both rich and powerful. She strongly disagreed with the

strictness of Ambika's father and argued that is was a waste of talent to keep her inside the house. The woman took Ambika to a large indoor kolam competition which she easily won. She got a diploma where she was given the title 'Queen of Art'. Because of the low position of her father in relation to the Chettiyar woman, he had to accept his daughter's increased movements beyond the home. Ambika became famous in her home town, both by giving art classes and making exquisite kolams. People hired her to make colourful images at weddings and other auspicious occasions, and her style developed into *rangoli*s in which dots are not used. She got an idea to depict the groom and bride in the wedding *rangoli*s, and she modelled the images on photographs. This approach became very popular and Ambika was able to earn her own money. According to Ambika, the portraits made for weddings are not connected to religion. However, when she makes images of gods, she perceives that the deities become present in the work. At an annual celebration in her former school, she once made a very large *rangoli* of the god Vishnu in his avatar form of a man-lion, Narasimha, who slits the stomach of a demon. During its making, she became scared of the power she felt emanating from the violent scene. She had to stop her work. Three priests were called, and they came to the school and made *puja*s for Vishnu to make him pleased and calm. Then she was able to complete the image. Ambika has made many *rangoli*s of deities in temples during special occasions. She would never accept money for making images in a temple. The task gives honour as the deities give her *punniyam* in the same manner as they do for women who make daily kolams in temples. Ambika is strong in her devotion and she holds that her abilities in making images are given by divine power, they come from Shakti Devi.

When Ambika was young, she fell in love with her mother's brother's son. He was the man she ought to marry according to traditional kinship rules, but Ambika's father did not perceive this as a good choice. The man lived in a large town but had been raised in a rural area, and the father was sure that Ambika would have problems with the different practices within that family. In the end the father had to give in, and Ambika was very happy to marry a man that had known her since she was young and was familiar with the problems she had had with her father. Her husband gave her full support in her artistic work, but the mother in-law had complaints and held that Ambika had to focus more on household work. Ambika wanted to have a maid so that she would have more time to develop her skills, but the mother in-law did not allow it even if they had the money. She held that Ambika ought to be able to manage with the work as she herself had always been able to. They made an agreement on the kolam practice in which Ambika makes them on special occasions and her mother in-law on ordinary days. Ambika gives her family prestige and respectability by her skill. But it

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took a long time for her to adjust in the town she moved to when she married. No one knew her and she had to build up a new network through her skills. Now she is hired in the same way as in her former home town, she holds large workshops for housewives referred to in the local paper, and has had a series on a local TV channel where she was teaching kolam designs and techniques.

For both Alameku and Ambika, to win a public kolam competition has been important in getting their careers started.

A more recent site for women with a great interest in the kolam practice is the web. Three years ago, a woman of the Indian diaspora in the US started a kolam blogg. Through our e-mail contact, she has explained that the kolam community who partake in the blogg has around 20 000 members. Designs and experiences of drawing are exchanged, and competitions are organised on the site. At the latest competition, a woman from the diaspora in Australia got the first prize. Further, school teachers in art and culture in the US make use of the blog in their work. For the founding woman, the maintenance of the web site is a full time job.

Competitions

Comparison of kolams between neighbours is a common part of the tradition at large annual festivals. During recent decades, this has developed into organised competitions. Kolam competitions are part of a context where children grow up surrounded by different competitions in schools and colleges, such as the best essay, the fastest runner, and the most skilled dancer. Prizes are given by principals in formal ceremonies, and a photographer is hired to make images for the family albums. Among middle and upper class housewives, competitions in kolam making, cooking, singing and embroidery are very popular. Some of the kolam competitions are held by Brahmin associations, and then only Brahmins can partake. Others are organised publicly by private companies and become a means of marketing their products. At some companies where the majority of the workforce is female, the owner arranges kolam competitions for the employees to keep up their working spirit.

Since the mid 1990s, a large public kolam competition has been organised by a local newspaper in one of the rich Brahmin dominated areas in central Chennai. During the first year, the competitors made kolams outside their own homes and the judges had to walk around many streets. The following years it was held in school playgrounds. The number of participants has grown into more than four hundred, and since a few years back the competition takes place in one of the main streets of the area which has to be closed off from

traffic during the day of the contest. Before the competitors begin, a water tank lorry is engaged to clean the street. The event has been thriving and it has developed into a four-day festival that includes music and drama performances, film shows, exhibitions and workshops of different local art forms. The organisation of the latter events started as a means to entertain the participants when they waited for the judges' results. The competition/festival is sponsored by a large Non Banking Finance Company (NBFC). The contestants comprise of various communities, ranging from rich housewives, their maids, young girls and even a few men. However, it is not an event for the lowest castes or classes. Most of the participants live in Chennai, but several have travelled from nearby towns or are visiting relatives from the US. On the one hand, the competition promotes individuality, but the spirit of togetherness which is engendered among the partakers is the most valuable aspect of the competition according to many.

The organising newspaper has marketed the idea of local cultural heritage in the festival. Accoring to Ramesh, the editor of the paper and one of the main characters in the organisation of the festival, the competition is a means to preserve the kolam tradition. He described that the aim of the event is to install a sense of pride in the inhabitants of the area, a pride over their buildings and history, as well as of the kolam tradition. The festival is focused on preserving certain practices as 'traditional' and as parts of Tamil heritage. Ramesh explained that this focus is shared by the sponsors who are renowned in Tamilnadu for being traditional, in addition to the calm manner they do business they wear Indian clothes, *doothi*, and put the Vaishnava sign, *naamam,* on their foreheads instead of wearing suit and tie.

The organisers have established strict rules on which type of kolam can be made at the competition. The colour fillings and the *rangoli*s are not allowed, as they are perceived to be a 'modern' inspiration from the north which has no place in 'authentic' Tamil culture. The participants have to base their designs on a grid of dots, and only use white powder. The *kambi* kolams, where the lines are drawn around the dots, are valued the most. Ramesh does not have anything in principle against the development of new designs, but he holds that they have no place in this particular competition. From his point of view, women who make figurative designs of gods and film stars, and who write 'Happy New Year' in *rangoli*s, are those who are not skilled enough to make traditional kolams. According to this categorisation, Ramesh contends that the unskilled figurative images are 'merely a form of popular street art', whereas 'the amount of skill needed to draw an image based on dots makes it into a real kolam which is an art form'. Apart from excluding certain images from being kolams, he thus excludes street art from 'real' art. And more importantly, he does not perceive an ability

within the kolam performers to make their own choices of design according to a particular interest.

The organisers invite professional artists, kolam specialists and teachers from local fine arts colleges as judges in this particular competition. A couple of years ago, Uthra, a gallery owner and art historian from the area, was one of them. She recalls that it was a tough task to pick out a winner among the two hundred participants. To become a winner, the kolam maker must know what Uthra refers to as the 'traditional' aspect of the practice. She looks for perfection in how the competitors have made the grid of dots and how they have aligned the dots with the lines. Whether the dots have been encircled into *kambi* kolams or figurative designs is of less importance to her than a perfect symmetry and evenness of the lines. Kolams based on squares and triangles are like the *rangoli*s too simple and therefore unfit for a serious competition. She thus shares much of the editor's view on the designs.

Although the participants in the competition accept the rules, the majority of the kolam makers I have met do not share the values expressed in the organisers' aesthetic judgements. Many women take great joy in experimenting with new designs as well as colours, and for those who find the grid of dots too complicated, the *rangol*i type is a means to continue the practice. Among the majority, new designs and materials has been incorporated in an unproblematic way.

The institutionalised art world

Some of the people I met described the kolam practice as an art form. For kolam makers, it was a means to express a value they considered that their practice had. In the works made within the institutionalised contemporary art world in the region however, I only found one clear reference to the kolams. This was Rani Pooviah, who painted the series 'Homage to Kolam' in 1973. She was from Chennai, but these paintings were made after she had left for the US. Rani, who died young in an accident, belonged to the artist village Cholamandal. This community was founded outside Chennai in 1966 by a group of artists educated at the Madras School of Arts and Crafts[86]. Their aim was to strengthen their positions and identities as professional artists in a context where hardly any galleries or art critics existed. The founding of Cholamandal was a part of 'The Madras Art Movement', which from the beginning of the 1960s criticised the Western dominance over definitions of art in India. The MAM expressed

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[86] The school was initially set up by the British as an education in craft, in contrast to the Fine Art schools set up in Bombay and Calcutta. Roy Chowdhary, the head of the school, revised the curriculum in 1929 and moved the focus from craft production towards Fine Arts (Bhagat 2004).

an identity crisis among Indian artists. It focused on indigenous art forms, and searched for the 'authentic' as a resistance to the Western agenda of modernism. It was also a means to form a Dravidian expression in relation to Delhi, which was the main centre for both politics and the forming of Indian modern art. Local culture as well as classical regional art was combined with international art language in the movement. As held by Ashrafi Bhagat in her dissertation on the movement: 'Subsumed within its text are the ambivalence of tradition and modernity and the definition of the regional modern' (Bhagat 2004: 293).

During one of my visits to Cholamandal, one of the artists who remained in the village, Haridasan, described the situation in which MAM emerged:

> Because of the colonial tradition, the Indian people had no courage to talk about their own art… the whole thing was a kind of brainwashing through the western rationalistic way of thinking, so this [Indian art] was all dismissed. So I also had a lot of difficulties to make them understand. When you talk about art, you have the verbal language of the West only. You have nothing else in your hand so you cannot deal with it. Unless you know a bit of Sanskrit terminology, that kind of Indian art and music tradition… unless you have that, you cannot talk about it. You will know only about Michelangelo and Picasso. Sculptures in temples were discussed, but when it comes to this abstract ritualistic art, it was not accepted, even now it is not there.

Haridasan has a strong religious background within the Tantric practices, and he has brought spiritual aspects of Tantrism into the contemporary art scene through the use of *yantra*s, the geometrical diagrams described earlier. Several contemporary artists in South India are influenced by Tantrism and *yantra* forms, and their work has been conceptualised as 'neo-tantrism' (Bhagat 2004: 293). In response to my questions and interest in kolams, some of the involved artists and art critics argued that it is quite possible to connect their work within neo-tantrism to the kolam images. From Haridasan's point of view, kolams are part of the ritualistic practices that comes under Tantra. He gives importance to what the images do: 'The kolam and *yantra* diagrams are not representational, they carry energy.' He expressed how he perceives the connection between kolam and art:

> Kolam makers are part of a ritualistic practice, you can't talk about them as professional artists/…/The kolam practice is a powerful tool to reach god. It also serves the purpose of bringing art to the people, to their consciousness. It incorporates aesthetics into people's daily lives. Without people being aware of it,

they intuitively become artists and aware of art… the tradition develops a sensibility for art.

Another contemporary artist, Srinivasan, told me how he first worked on the periphery of the MAM, and later established himself as an individual artist. The kolam images, which he described as graceful feminine movements, have always inspired his paintings. He belonged to one of the many families that were evacuated from Chennai to the rural areas during the Japanese approach at the time of the Second World War. His fascination with kolams began during his early years away from the city. He watched his sisters and cousins make designs in the streets, but as a child he only drew them for himself on paper. They later became part of his art works, although not in an explicit way. For Srinivasan, the kolam is an art form. He finds the lines, which encircles the dots, to be an essential component of South Indian art. KCS Paniker, who was the principle of the Madras School of Arts and Crafts at the time of the forming of the MAM, similarly emphasized the line in his work. The quality of the line, as a part of an historical Indian pictorial tradition, inspired the whole school. The importance of the line and Paniker's use of it is also described by Bhagat (Bhagat 2004: 293). Srinivasan contends that in a kolam as well as in a painting, the composition will be weak unless the lines are strong. He considers colours to be secondary, and tells his daughter not to use too much of them when she makes kolams. However, if he likes a kolam or not depends less on the design than on the kind of emotion it generates in him. 'If I don't like one [kolam], I think that the woman who made it was not in a good mood today', he said.

The owner of one of Chennai's galleries for contemporary art, Jancy, implicitly expresses a similar view to Srinivasan. She told me about how the kolam she had made the morning we met became bad because she was in a hurry and in a bad mood. The emotional aspects of art works are related to the Sanskrit term *rasa*. In Bhagat 's definition *rasa* is: 'an emotive theory first formulated by Bharata in Natyarshastra (2nd century B.C.) and later developed into a general poetic principle. Literally 'savour' *rasa* has come to mean 'aesthetic relish' generally taken to be a theory of emotional response to art works. It concerns two related ideas – the emotional content and the experience produced by the work in the viewer or the rasika' (Bhagat 2004: 288 n7). *Rasa* can also be evoked by religious experience, in the physical and psychological response generated through interactions with various images embodied by divine presence (Taylor 2005: 206). However, Jancy does not feel content in using the term *rasa* in connection with the kolams. She argues that it is a concept for Fine

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Arts, and although the kolam requires refinement and skill it is too much of a duty to be termed as fine art.

As mainly being associated with women's household work, the kolam does not have the status of being explicitly referred to in the institutionalised art world. Not even in an indigenous art movement focused on folk expressions has it been given much space. According to Bhagat , MAM was 'a conservative and male dominated patriarchal set up' in which only a few women managed to make art works. They were expected to get married and care for the household and children (Bhagat 2004: 285). The contemporary art world in Chennai is continuously dominated by male artists.

Discussion

As this chapter has shown, social relationships are embedded in the kolam image. Decisions on who will put which kolam where is based on people's perception of their position in the social hierarchy. Individual notions interact with social expectations in the organisation of the practice. The individual performance simultaneously affects social relationships. These relationships are sometimes re-worked, but they are more commonly reinforced.

Priya has been employed by one of her neighbours to make their street kolam, but not the one in the *puja* place. As the proximity to god gives the latter place a higher value, the spatial aspects of the arrangement underlines the social relationships (cf Hancock 1999: 84). The organisation of Priya's kolam practice in a context where people are of the same caste, is an example of how caste and class belonging intersect. It is the difference in economic means that makes Priya inferior to her employer. Their payment shows that she is however respected and appreciated for her skills. The mill owner on the other hand denies Priya's abilities and is more concerned in maintaining his higher position. In this case, it is in addition to caste and class constituted by gender. When Gayatri decides that her sister in-law needs assistance with her kolam performance, the weak images make Gayatri act according to her higher position as elder and more skilled. Her perception of the images as unfit is informed by her knowledge of what a kolam ought to look like, as well as by her position as a much respected auspicious woman. Some people claim to have greater knowledge, and depending on how they are perceived by others, this claim is acknowledged or not. With the support of the respected Gayatri, Priya develops her kolam skills and earns more appreciation among her neighbours.

The way Ambika became able to show her work expresses her position as daughter and of lower caste and class belonging. It was the skills embedded in her images that

convinced the high caste woman that Ambika ought to 'come out' with her work. Her father had to give in, and in this case gender was of less importance than caste and class. Orthodox Brahmin women continue to be the only ones making kolams at their temples. Lower castes are still excluded as they are considered as too low ritually to live nearby Brahmin temples. On the institutionalised art scene, the lack of kolam makers is related to gender and the perception of women's household work as lower, in terms of less individually creative, than fine art.

The possibilities to show differences in social identity through the kolam have increased during the last couple of decades, both through the new materials and the practices of employment. These changes have incorporated the kolam in the sphere of economic exchange. But the same ambiguity that concerns the new materials is often part of the practice of hiring a maid. Women with a higher position according to material standard and educational level, which often entails higher caste belonging, are able to not make kolams. However, the importance of moral ideals on family prestige and the values embedded in following the tradition of one's ancestors make it central for the majority to convey knowledge on the kolam practice to their daughters.

The publicly held kolam competition in Chennai can be interpreted as what V Geetha and TV Jayanthi describe as a public performance of a household ritual. According to Geetha and Jayanthi, BJP and other branches of the Hindutva movement have been organising these types of events as means to create a sense of togetherness among all Hindu women. By inviting Hindu women from all castes and classes, the idea is that the experienced Hindu unity during the events will engender a need for exclusion of other religious communities (Geetha and Jayanthi 1996: 260f). But the upper caste dominance in BJP and the strong anti-Brahmin movement in Tamilnadu make the connection more complex. When people claim that they are Tamil, they often mean that they are Hindu. With reference to the Tamil language and a Dravidian past, they regard Christians and Muslims as 'other'. However, some non-Brahmin Tamils include Hindu in 'other' because they regard Hindus as Brahmins and the Aryan invaders from the north (Pandian 2007). The conservative interests who organise the large competition/festival in a Brahmin area, with reference to a Tamil heritage, may be motivated by an intention to bridge the gap between Brahmins and non-Brahmins. In this sense, the event can be used as a tool to create a unity against 'other' religious communities, as well as to strengthen the position of the Brahmins in an anti-Brahmin environment.

The organisers express power, both in defining which part of the city is valuable and worth preserving, and in defining the kolam tradition by setting the rules of what well made kolams ought to be like. As many Brahmin women in this area today have maids who draw the daily kolams for them, it is likely that the maids will become increasingly more skilled in the practice than their employers. In a context where the kolam tradition is marketed as part of a cultural heritage essential to preserve, it is important to show that you continue to be a bearer of the tradition. The competition can thus be a means to revitalising the skill within the Brahmin community and preventing the knowledge being lost to the lower caste maids.

Since there are no historical references as to how the kolam performance or types of designs may have changed over the centuries, there is no way of telling for how long the grid of dot has been part of the images. What can be said is that in relation to women's general interest in combining old designs and materials with newer ones, the strict and conservative rules in the festival limit the scope for personal creativity.

The discussion on authenticity and adherence to cultural heritage in the competition/festival in Chennai echoes much of the discussion on tradition and modernity in the MAM. Local authenticity is sought for as a form of resistance towards influences from an 'other'.[87] But the movement's artists tried to reconfigure tradition and modernity through the exploration of new combinations. These categories have been essential in modern Indian art discourse in general. The art critic Geeta Kapur criticises the conformism they entail and holds that the concept of tradition must constantly be redefined in contemporary existence, as 'tradition-in-use' (Kapur 2000: 278f). Haridasan defines modernity as 'a psychological condition, nothing can really be defined as modern.' He expressed worries in that 'the kolam practice might wane as the new demands of life brought on by modern ways make people dismiss the kolam and go somewhere else. But it may also create a revivalism as people start to miss it and get sentimental when they live abroad.' This sentimentality may be a part of the competition/festival and links to how the urban elite has felt obliged to support Indian handicrafts as part of the romanticised view on Indian village traditions (as described in Chapter I). In addition, the organisers consider their definition of the authentic kolam

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[87] During the Navarattiri festival, women of upper castes and classes create steps of dolls, *kolu*s, as part of worship. Hancock has described a *kolu* competition in Chennai, and defines the participants' combination of traditional and modern elements as a vehicle for popular comments on, and critique of, perceived threats towards local identities generated by the penetration of global capitalism. The issue of the *kolu* as a cultural heritage was emphasized, as well as the display of dolls as status production (Hancock 2001). As I was among lower castes in the rural area during Navarattiri, I did not participate in any *kolu* events.

image as inherited from the era when this particular Brahmin neighbourhood was still part of a village.

Women in general are less anxious about changes in the kolam practice than the urban elite. Ambika's figurative realistic images are admired through an ideal that lies beyond the traditional notion of the kolam. The practice is a 'tradition-in-use' where tradition and modernity interacts. Loganayaki, a woman in her mid thirties who grew up in Hariyarapakkam but has spent her married life in a big town, agues that women will never stop drawing kolams. She holds that: 'Wealthy and large women in the cities will also continue because the kolam is their only exercise. They only get exercise when they go to the temple or put kolams. Because kolam is *yoga* and gives health, they will continue.' But people do share a concern on the amount of influences from Western culture. The rise in educational levels and material living standards are due in part to these influences, and related to positive notions of a modern life accomplished through development, *nagarikam*. Simultaneously, Western habits and values that concern family life are regarded as uncontrolled and disrupting, and threatening to violate *gauravam*. The importance of the kolam in the continuity of familiar habits and values, constituted through rhythms, will be outlined in the next chapter.
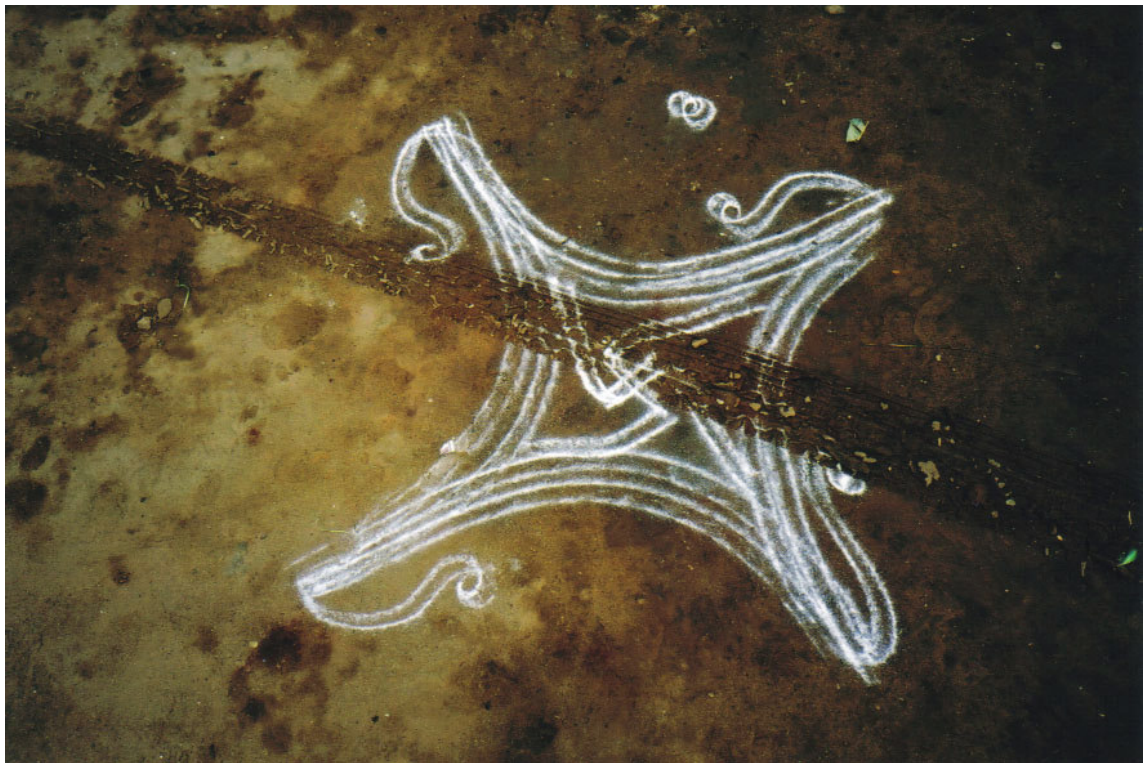
The kolam as materialisation and embodiment of rhythms

Rhythms are flows of repetitions that move in relation to time and space. Changes between strong and weak beats on a drum can be experienced as a piece of music, the continuous movements of a body as a dance, and a shift in the wind or the colour of a leaf as a change of season. The interval of a rhythm can be that between life and death, or of a woman filling her hand with sand, strewing it on the ground around a dot, and filling the hand again. Each morning, the rhythmical movements of the kolam makers interact with local perceptions of time. The symmetrical images materialise the movements, and they vary according to life-cycles as well as public festivals. Much of everyday life is lived through rhythms. Every instance a movement is repeated it entails a difference, it brings something new to the flow. Many rhythms, such as that through which the kolam is performed, are learned socially, and they interact with innate rhythms, such as the beating of a heart. The various rhythmical aspects of the kolam will be explored in this chapter, and it will discuss how the practice and image translates temporal dimensions into spatial terms. Further, it will consider how the learning process is situated in communities of practice, where apprentices rhythmically move from periphery to centre.

The month of Margali

At Gayatri's

Every morning before Gayatri begins to prepare the ground in front of her house for the kolam drawing, she makes an exchange with one of her neighbours. Unlike Gayatri's family, there are several others who live in Vellalar Street in Pelasur who own cattle. Well before dawn, Anjili crosses the street and turns up at Gayatri's door step with a heap of cow dung in her hand. Anjili passes over the dung and Gayatri gives her a big aluminium bowl filled with water that contains food scraps from yesterdays washing up. This mix is in turn given as food to Anjili's cow.

During the Tamil month Margali (Dec-Jan), this exchange is increased. The morning kolams are larger and more elaborate in this particular month, and on the completed image women place handfuls of dung beautified with bright yellow pumpkin flowers. Gayatri

has a flourishing pumpkin plant in her back yard, and every Margali morning she gives a couple of its flowers to Anjili, who in return gives more cow dung. The soft consistency of the dung resembles clay and it is easy to mould each handful into a rounded shape, and the big flower is placed carefully in its middle. Gayatri usually puts red *kungumam* dots on the petals which fold over the edge of the round heap. She explained that this enhances the beauty and auspiciousness of the kolam and that it will please the deities more.

The intricate Margali kolams can have up to seven heaps with yellow flowers, and the bright images make the village streets stunning. Simultaneously, the soundscape reaches new intensified dimensions. From the very early morning, taped devotional songs are played at immense volume from speakers put up in all directions. The rhythm of Gayatri's sweeping outside her entrances in preparation for the kolam drawing can no longer be heard, neither the bells on the oxen and the squeaking of their carts when Anjili's husband bring them to work on the fields. Facing west, while taking care of morning needs behind the house, the sound from the distant Shiva temple in Hariyarapakkam is loud. Walking out on the veranda towards the east, the sound from the worn out speakers in the closer Shiva temple in Tennampattu is overwhelming. Although Hariyarapakkam is further away, it is still clearly audible, as they can afford the best sound system. In the middle of this, the Pentecostal church, which has their largest annual celebration at the Christian New Year, plays songs which clash completely with the Hindu ones. From the nearby Mariyamman temple, female visitors' singing can be barely heard. The soft sounds caused by the friction between the grains of sand when Gayatri fills her hand, strews the handful on the ground around a dot, and fills her hand again, vanishes completely.

When Gayatri and Anjili make their exchange during the chilly mornings of this month, the surrounding loudness makes them speak less than usual. Before midday, they remove the blooming dung heaps and flatten them onto a tree trunk or a wall to dry. The dried dung cakes, *varatti*, will be used as fuel at Pongal, the coming harvest festival, when a part of the newly harvested rice is ritually boiled in each household.

Later in the afternoon, the women explained that when they rounded the dung and put the flower in it, they moulded a form of Vinayagan[88]. This god is always turned to at

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[88] Pullaiyar, Ganapathi, Ganesh etc, is usually worshipped before the other deities are turned to. As expressed by a local priest: 'See, Vinayagar is the first god. He should be worshipped first. Similar to if you are in a company, and if there is a manager and an MD [managing director], you cannot do anything unless you have the consent of the MD. Like that, Vinayagan is important. You will say: O, Vinayagar, I'm going to worship Perumal, Eeshwaran and Ambal, so grant me permission. He is the first god'.

the beginning of worship as a remover of obstacles, and as a guardian from evil (cf. Good 1991). Women particularly turn to him as a guardian during Margali, as evil forces are believed to be more present throughout this month. At the first of Margali, a special *puja* is made for Vinayagan in the morning kolam. Beside the dung with the pumpkin flower, dung is used to make an additional form of the god. He is made as two cones, and then placed on a foundation of the same material. *Kungumam* and turmeric are put as dots on the cones, and a particular kind of grass and flower are laid beside them. A small clay lamp, *velakku*, is then lit in honour of Vinayagan. Priya's grandmother, Nagammal, told me that in the olden days, people included a couple of straws from a broom in this *puja*. Brooms are believed to have a similar capacity to ward off evil. Gayatri continued that another important reason for using the dung is its antiseptic properties to protect from diseases.

The fruit of the pumpkin is used in rituals to ward off the evil eye. A Brahmin priest, who performed a *puja* in Gayatri's house at a later date, told me that the pumpkin flower has similar abilities to protect from evil as the fruit (cf. Diehl 1956). In Puduchery, the dung heap and the flower are only used during the celebrations of girls' first periods and this indicates a connection with fertility and auspiciousness. When the sun god Surya is celebrated at Pongal, the middle of the kolam is often marked by a sun, shaped as a yellow circle with beams or a swastika. Visually, the bright yellow hue of the pumpkin flower and its spreading petals can be associated with the sun. The use of the yellow flowers during Margali might be understood as a means to assist the sun god on his return, which brings vitality and new life.

The anxiety people felt during Margali was further expressed in its second name, *piidai masam*, which means bad, inauspicious month. Many said that there are more evil spirits around, and that it is important to take measures against them. The worries can be related to this month being the darkest period of the year. Evil spirits lurk about in darkness, and in Margali they have more time to be active. Due to the notion of uncertainty, no auspicious functions are held in this month.

But Margali has positive aspects as well. After the winter solstice the days become longer, and this new phase of the sun is considered to be highly auspicious. Another positive aspect is that Margali leads up to the harvest festival. Nagammal only wanted to express the auspicious aspects. She referred to the fact that the doors to heaven are open during this month, and therefore it is a good time to die. The soul will immediately reach

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In Chennai, many families have been advised by astrologers to put up a small Vinayagan shrine out side their doors, on the outside wall. As it is a must to make a kolam in front of deities, this has resulted in that many buildings having two kolams in front of them

heaven through the open doors. Further, she said that it is important to think about the positive sides in life, otherwise the outcome will not be positive. Gayatri continued that: 'The openness between the world of humans and deities makes it easier to get blessings, all gods are easier to reach during Margali. If you treat god well this month, you will get extra blessings the next, when auspicious functions again take place.'[89]

According to a local Brahmin astrologer, Guru Lakshmi is the presiding deity of Margali. Guru means teacher and Lakshmi as a teacher is thus easier to reach during this period. Lakshmi teaches women how to behave to get wealth and to avoid bad things, and how to make their households prosper. The astrologer stressed the importance of the open doors between heaven and earth during Margali. In many temples, representations of these doors are physically present and during a period of ten days they are opened for devotees to walk through. People stand in long queues, and those with limited means wait for hours. The real doors are considered to be in Sri Rangam (an important temple complex by the Kaveri river), and those who visit this place or pass through the represented doors, are able to come directly to heaven when they die. One year for a human is equivalent to one day for a god, he explained further. In the lives of the divinities, Margali is the early morning. At this time they are still resting, and this requires more effort on behalf of the humans to create auspiciousness in the homes. Through big kolams and a lot of *puja*s during Margali, women warm the hearts of the gods. They are more ready to give rewards to humans and all the living beings, and thus people pay more attention to devotion.

At Manjula's

At the house in central Chennai where Manjula's Chettiyar family rents from the Brahmin owners, the Margali mornings have a different emphasis. As described earlier, the servant who makes the daily kolams is now given leave from this task, and Manjula makes the morning kolams together with Uthra, the daughter of the owner family. Before the two young women leave for the university, they draw an elaborate image outside the gate of the apartment building. Few people in the city put the dung and yellow flower on their kolams, instead they take a great interest in coloured powders. At the majority of houses in this street the economic means are sufficient, and thus Manjula and Uthra fill the fields of their kolam designs with a wide variety of colours every Margali morning. The loudspeakers playing from

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[89] Trawick places emphasis on the role of ambiguity in the life of Tamils (Trawick 1996: 37f). She relates this for instance to the floating relations between the male and female aspects of the deities, and how divine, spirits and living beings flow into each other. The variety of possible interpretations of Tamil poetry is another important reference point.

the nearest temple are modest, and when the followers of Krishna pass by playing and singing their devotional songs, *bhajan*s, their performance is well heard above the speakers. People both in urban and rural areas said that the taped songs played in the temples have replaced most of the *bhajan* singers.

According to Manjula, she and Uthra have less concern regarding the prevalence of evil forces and protection of deities than the villagers and people of lower castes in general. Rather, they focus on having a joyous time together during their drawing. When they have completed the kolam however, they proceed to the adjacent temple. They gather there together with a large amount of women who mainly belong to the same castes and class as themselves. In the temple they make *pujas* for the *bhakti* poet Antal, and sing her second poem the *Tiruppaavai*. For Manjula's and Uthra's mothers, the special attention to the kolams during Margali is part of their worship of Antal. The saint was passionately devoted to the god Krishna, and during Margali she prepared for her wedding with him. After the wedding, Antal merged completely with the deity in his shrine (Dehejia 1990). Like the saint, women get up early, make large kolams and pray to the god in the temple. If they are unmarried, like Manjula and Uthra, they pray that Antal will help them to find a good husband, and if they are married that she will bestow them a continuously good marriage. Antal was a Vaishnavite saint, and some of the Shaivite women prefer to sing *bhajan*s to their own saint Manikavasaghan during Margali (Zvelebil 1974: 104). As stated in Chapter I, it is difficult to confirm whether Antal made kolams as part of her worship of Krishna. According to Nagarajan, women of diverse backgrounds regard Antal as the first kolam maker, and as the creative source behind the practice (Nagarajan 1998: 133f). I met women who placed importance on the worship of Antal in Margali, but among the non-Brahmins in the rural areas and other women of lower class, this saint is irrelevant and often not even heard of. Thus, women from all groups put more effort than usual into creating auspiciousness during this month, but with different emphasis.

Different qualities of time

The increased presence of auspiciousness during a certain period is related to particular valuations of the rhythmical movements of the planets. In Hindu life, there are times when certain things should or should not be done. Auspicious events ought to be performed during auspicious periods of time (cf. Good 1991, Hancock 1999, Fuller 1992, Madan 1982). Based on the movements of planets and how they influence each other, astrology, *jothidam*, defines time and its different qualities. Most of the people I engaged with hold that the interaction

between the planets influences their everyday lives in many ways, for instance, the risk of being attacked by evil spirits is considered to be larger during inauspicious periods. When people face problems, some take the advice of an astrologer and worship a certain planet as a remedy, while those who are affected by evil spirits may consult a sorcerer. People rarely speak about the latter, but it is openly considered important to confer with an astrologer, particularly when the right marriage partner is to be chosen. During a lunar eclipse that occurred during my stay in the villages, the movements of the planets where much discussed.

The influencing planets are the Navagrahas, whom, as described in Chapter IV, are regarded as nine gods. With the sun god in the middle, they stand together in a symmetrical form of nine anthropomorphic figures, next to large temples that has other main deities, or in smaller temples of their own. While some women worship the planet gods by drawing particular kolams in their *puja* rooms at home[90], others walk around them nine times in their sculptural forms in the temples. Sanni, the god of Saturn who governs Saturday, is considered to have an ability to cause bad influences in a person's life during a longer period. It is important to maintain a good relationship with all deities, no less with those of ambivalent character. To keep Sanni pleased, many women feed him cooling rice with sesame seeds in their back yards on Saturdays, which he consumes through his vehicle the crow.

Chandran, the moon god who presides over Mondays, also plays an important part in defining auspicious and inauspicious time in a monthly rhythm. Auspiciousness is at its greatest on *pournami*, the day on which the moon is full. In correspondence with the waning of the moon, the quality of time becomes more inauspicious until it reaches *amavasi*, no moon's day. With the waxing of the moon, time again becomes auspicious.

These general characters interact with how divine energy influences each week-day's division into good and bad periods. Certain hours are defined as *nalla kalam*, good time. During these hours auspicious functions are held, and jewellery and wedding saris are bought. There are two periods of inauspicious time in a day. One is Ragu *kalam*, unfavourable time influenced by Ragu, and Yema *gandham*, highly risky time influenced by Kelu. Ragu and Kelu are nodes of the moon, and they belong to the Navagrahas although they are not connected to particular week days. The unease of how Ragu and Kelu might cause problems is materialised in their forms as being partly snakes, an animal which is considered to have an ambiguous character. The forms are thus both anthropomorphic and theriomorphic. I was told

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[90] In front of the Navagrahas in temples there is usually not enough space to make these nine kolams. However, each of the nine has a temple of their own in Tamilnadu, and I was told that their particular kolam is made at these temples.

about a story that narrates how a planet god's head got separated from his body. At the same time a snake's body and head got separated, and accidentally the heads were joined with the wrong bodies, and the outcome was two ill minded deities[91]. Yema *gandham* and Ragu *kalam* occurs when the shadows of Ragu or Kelu falls upon the earth, in its worst form as a solar or lunar eclipse. There were many practices prescribed to avoid bad effects during such occasions, and particularly pregnant women had to take precaution. Additionally, people refer to *kuligey kalam*, a time of the day when it is bad to die or have funeral functions. Just as Hindu deities are considered to be inherent in all physical space, they are also embodied in time.

People in general do not keep the exact timings in mind on average days, but when for example the time for a wedding is to be set, or a new business to get started, the right day and hours are important. Calendars, which are commonly kept on the walls in several numbers, contain the precise hours of good and bad times, as well as days for particular festivals and *puja*s. The calendars, and sometimes an astrologer, are consulted before the time for a particualer event is set.

The Pongal festival

The harvest festival, Pongal, is the most popular annual celebration in Tamilnadu (cf. Gough 1981: 229). The yielded crops bring abundance, and hope of prosperity is at a peak. It is the time of the most intricate and grand kolams of the year. The prolonged time given for the task enables women to try out new combinations of forms and colours. Kolam makers often work together on the same images and generate a collective creativity, and the large images increase the joyous atmosphere in the community. The festival has developed within agricultural practices and is consequently given much more importance in rural areas. Pongal is compressed into one day among most of the city dwellers, but the value of intricate big kolams transgresses the rural/urban division.

At Gayatri's

As Margali proceeds and Pongal approaches, Gayatri tends to increase the pace of her rhythmical kolam performance. She no longer has time to chat with any friends or neighbours without working at the same time. Together with her daughter Aruna, she cleans every corner of the house meticulously. They start by brushing the ceiling, and then every shelf must be

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[91] Isabelle Nabokov discusses the frequent occurrence of decapitation in Tamil narratives in relation to sorcery (Nabokov 2000).

wiped, and each item in the kitchen has to be washed up and put in order. When the cleaning of a room is completed, Gayatri draws a kolam on the cement floor with a piece of white chalk. All piles of clothes are examined and refolded. Things that are regarded as worn out are temporarily brought to the backyard, while things less worn are mended. It is essential to buy new clothes at Pongal, and this is done in the nearest town. Before they can be worn, they are presented to, and blessed by, the deities during a *puja* at the family altar. For poor families, new clothes for Pongal are given through the ration card[92]. Ideally the house should be repainted, and as paint is expensive this is a matter of status. Gayatri's family 'had to' paint it this year as they could not afford it the year before. A close friend in Hariyarapakkam who together with her husband have a relatively large income, received many comments for not repainting. Instead, they had chosen to spend money on a computer for their son who had just begun a course in software engineering.

Around three o'clock in the morning on *boogie* Pongal, the day before the harvest festival, all families in the neighbourhood carry outside the old things they have put in their backyard during cleaning. Broken sleeping mats, finished notebooks, worn out brooms and clothes are piled up into a stack in the street outside their houses. The stacks are burnt, and people gather around the warming fires in smells that vary according to the items burning. When the fire has died out and the morning kolam is completed, Gayatri spends the rest of the day cooking. She sends her daughter to the potter to buy three new clay pots essential for the next day, *perum* Pongal, or big Pongal, which is the main day of the festival.

Late in the evening, the annual climax of kolam making begins. Gayatri is well prepared. The last few mornings she has been evening out the area in front of her house to enhance the smoothness of the surface. Pebbles have been plucked out and earth moved to enable the drawn design to become more distinct. She has made a new design in her notebook, with as much as twenty-four dots in each row. She has bought seven small bags of fine coloured powder, and Aruna and her elder brother have helped to mix the colours with the usual kolam *maavu* to enable a good flow. Around nine o'clock, family members have gathered outside each house to make their Pongal kolams.

Priya is late due to her work at the mill. Although she knows that she must work harder during harvest periods, she is angry with the mill owner for keeping her so long when she has so much kolam drawing to do. Priya begins with the house opposite her own where she is hired to make the daily kolams. The woman of that house who now has leave from her

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[92] A scheme by which the State Government redistributes essential goods to the poor. The amount of goods acquired is based on certain income levels.

job in Chennai is eager to take part. Priya makes the grid and the outer lines, and her employer continues with the colour fillings. Nagammal has prepared the area outside their hut with cow dung paste. Partly due to the insistence of her grandmother, Priya uses only white powder which she has mixed with some rice flour. When two great kolams are completed in front of Gayatri's, Priya has only come half way. Nagammal is almost asleep, but Gayatri crosses the street to help. Priya takes this occasion very seriously, and she does not allow anyone but Gayatri to assist. At midnight when Margali turns into Thai (Jan-Feb), the kolams outside Priya's are finally completed. Before they go to sleep, Priya and Gayatri walk up and down Vellalar Street to get a picture of what has been accomplished.

In the early morning of *perum* Pongal, one is greeted by a landscape even more intense than during Margali. Outside most of the homes, coloured powder has been used in the kolams, and there is only a path in the middle of the street which is uncovered.

At sunrise, people worship Surya, the sun god. Like most of her neighbours, Gayatri has constructed a temporary shrine for him at the back of the house, at a place which will be touched by the early rays of the sun. She has formed 'walls' in mud and the space is made into an auspicious 'house' through the drawing of kolams in it. The house is kept for a few days, and each morning Gayatri draws a new kolam in it. Parts of the newly harvested rice, together with other food items which will be cooked this day, are placed in the house and offered to Surya. Vinayagan, in his form of the dung heap with a pumpkin flower and *kungumam*, is placed beside the food.

Pongal is a dish of boiled rice and spices which Gayatri sometimes cooks for an ordinary breakfast. At festive occasions, the spices are replaced with milk and *jaggery*, a sweetening substance. During festivals for the goddesses, she gathers with other non-Brahmin women and cooks pongal outside the temples. It is brought inside and offered to the deity, and when she has blessed the food, it is taken back to the house and shared with the family members. According to Gayatri, women experience a sense of competition during this cooking. They regard it as though the goddess has paid particular attention to the woman whose pongal starts to boil first.

At the Pongal festival, the rice is cooked at home in front of Surya's temporal house on the dried dung heaps with flowers saved during Margali. When the rice starts to boil over, Gayatri and her family's chanting of 'oo pongal, oo pongal' fades out of the house into all the many other voices that today repeat the same words. Pongal means boiling over, and when the dish is cooked at the harvest festival, people make interpretations according to which direction the rice boils over. Gayatri's boils over to the east, the direction of the sun

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and the deities in general, and this is considered as the most auspicious. A new pot of clay has been bought for the occasion, and as mentioned in Chapter III, the pot is given a *taali* around the neck. The pot is like an auspicious woman, a *sumangali*, Gayatri explains. When the rice boils over, the pot thus becomes an embodiment of the life-giving married woman. The rice from the new harvest is imbued with notions of abundance, fertility, auspiciousness, health, and the continuation of life.

On this evening, large kolams are again made in front of all houses. Gayatri and her neighbours put as much effort into this work as they did the night before. The next day is *maatu* Pongal, or cow Pongal, and in the rural areas this is the annual event when both cows and Mariyamman are celebrated. For families like Anjili's who own cattle, this is the main day of the harvest festival. They also cook pongal and worship Surya on *maatu* Pongal. In the morning, Anjili beautifies both male and female animals with *kungumam* and turmeric dots, and together with her husband she ties multi coloured balloons on their horns. Their two bullocks are hitched to their cart and it is quickly filled with enthusiastic children from the neighbouring houses. Several bullock carts are more or less racing down the streets, and they all stop at the Mariyamman temple to receive blessings from the deity. The cows and calves are taken to her temple as well, and some families bring them into the house afterwards to convey the blessings into the home. Gayatri makes sure to pick up some dung left by the cattle. In this, she draws minimalist female figures on both sides of the entrance to her home. She said that the figures are forms of Kali, which offer protection from the fierce form of Mariyamman and her ability to cause chicken pox. The next day, *kaanum* Pongal, is the day for receiving blessings from one's living parents, and this concludes the festival.

Although Pongal mainly is celebrated separately within each family, the kolams play an important part in enhancing the joyous atmosphere in the whole community. During the making of the images, people come together. The majority of women, as well as some boys and men, join in the evening performances. Experiencing the streets filled with completed kolams, seeing them as well as being aware of the effort put into their making, gives pleasure. It also gives a sense of satisfaction in knowing that when the sun god appears in the morning, he will be pleased. For the people who have taken part in their creation, the experience is stronger. It is to recall the feeling of the powder trickling down between your fingers, the pain in your back at the ending of the process, the moments you did not recall the design and had to look it up in your notebook. And it is the satisfying moment of completion. On-looking family members share the joy which lies in the pride of what has been accomplished.

As described in the last chapter, the effort put into kolam making during Pongal brings about a sense of competition. The prestige at stake in creating grand perfect kolams makes Pongal a difficult time for women who do not take interest or consider themselves incapable. Some refrain from taking part and instead turn to a skilled neighbour for help.

At Manjula's

Due to the cooking and cleaning together with her mother, Manjula has neither had time to put kolams outside the entrance of her family's flat nor at their altar until lunchtime. Following her mother's advice, she makes use of rice flour mixed with water. The corridor outside their entrance is checked in black and white tiles, and Manjula draws small kolams that fit onto the black tiles. She forgot to soak the rice flour in water in time, and as she proceeds the drawing solution becomes less smooth due to undissolved tiny rice grains. In the middle of this work, her elder brother calls from the US, and she has to complete the kolams in a very uncomfortable position bending down while squeezing her mobile between her ear and shoulder.

The street kolam was made in the early morning, with many colours and a finish of glitter powder. Friends of the owning family, who live in the nearby area inhabited by orthodox Brahmins, dislike the colours and make only white kolams on Pongal. In neither area, do people celebrate Mariyamman or *maatu* Pongal. But owners of cows who live in an adjacent neighbourhood pass by and are given food and sweets by the wealthier inhabitants.

Manjula's father spent much of this years Pongal in front of the TV. He eagerly watched the new channel People's Television, which showed traditional Tamil practices performed in villages during Pongal and other auspicious festivals. This channel further promotes the Tamil language as an essential part of Tamil identity. When Manjula's father was young, he took an active part in the movement towards adopting Tamil as the main language in all Government schools. Today, he enjoys sharing his language commitment with People's Television. The programmes show a strong spirit of community, where the villagers engage in public dancing and singing performances, *kumi*, on a large scale. In the rural areas I visited however, the bullock carts were the only form of joint practice, and no one spoke about the *kumi*.[93]

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[93] Their largest annual festivals which are celebrated as public events are the festivals for the goddesses in the month of Adi (July-August). Due to lack of funds caused by drought and bad harvests during the last three years, this festival was much delayed during my visit in Pelasur.

In Manjula's family, the pongal is cooked in a steel vessel decorated with turmeric roots and leaves, on the gas stove inside the flat. The Brahmin owner family holds that it has to be cooked in a brass pot, as they regard this material as purer (cf. Hancock 1999). In a similar way to the village however, both families call 'oo pongal, oo pongal', when the rice boils over. During the following worship of Surya, performed at the most auspicious time of the day, Manjula's father brings the special food items to the open corridor outside the flat and offers it to god. He then performs a *puja* inside the house at the family altar. For this man, the breaking of the coconut is of particular importance. The liquid inside is not to be wasted, and he takes great care in how hard he splits the nut with his large knife. If he has a particular wish in mind when the nut breaks, the outcome will be fruitful if the water remains inside. The liquid is kept in the half on which the sprout would grow, and this is a means to generate increased growth.

The ceremony ended with the *kaanum* Pongal. Manjula bowed on her knees and her brother prostrated himself in front of their parents in gratitude. With their fingertips, the siblings first touched the feet of their parents, the lowest ranked part of the human body, and then their own eyes, the highest part of the body (cf. Beck 1976). Both parents gave their blessings, also to their two other children. Manjula's late elder sister was present through a photograph on the wall above the altar, and her elder brother through the memory of his recent phone call.

Ordinary kolams

When Pongal is over, people return to their ordinary routines. Manjula and Uthra leave the area in front of their home to be attended by their servant. As she also makes the morning kolam in front of the house next door, the two images resemble each other. Gayatri re-enacts her smaller kolam designs on Vellalar Street. The soft sounds of her strewing the powder, inaudible during Margali, can again be heard. Her morning kolams are firm and clear, while the ones made in the afternoon by her daughter are less steady.

The morning kolam is drawn as an act of welcoming the deities and the auspiciousness they bring. Danalakshmi, a middle-aged housewife who lives in the same building as Manjula, grew up in the adjacent orthodox Brahmin neighbourhood. She refers to the early morning hours between four and six, when the morning kolams should be made, as Brahma *muhurtam*. She considers this to be the time of the day when the god Brahma, and all other divinities, come to the earth (cf. Nagarajan 1998). Gayatri and her non-Brahmin neighbours instead spoke about the benevolence of this period in terms of the return of Surya

from Yema, god of death, in his realm in the underworld. The unease of darkness is brought to an end through the light generated by the sun god. In the afternoon, a new kolam should be in place before the sun sets.

The women in Manjula's house hold that it is important for the kolam to be made before anyone walks out of the house. If not, bad things might happen during the day. When Manjula was a child and they stayed in their own house, her mother welcomed both her husband and Lakshmi through her afternoon kolams. She said that they both stay in the house during the night, and in the morning when the new kolam is made, they both leave. This expresses the idea that Lakshmi is considered to bring prosperity to the home. As the husband is the bread winner, she watches over him during the day so that he earns well. Where they now live, the afternoon kolam is not always made due to the heavy workload of their servant, as well as lack of interest among the female inhabitants.

On Fridays, a weekly rhythm is visualised through enlarged kolams outside the majority of houses. This day of the week, the goddess is considered to be closer and easier to reach. According to the astrologer, this belief is related to the idea that Fridays are presided over by the planet Venus. Some women argue that Tuesdays are connected to the more fierce aspect of the goddess. In order to please her, they occasionally make *puja*s on Tuesdays during Ragu *kalam*. Apart from satisfying the goddess by means of a large street kolam, the whole house should be cleaned on Fridays. This cleaning is concluded by kolams made on the stove and sometimes on the floors. Special attention is given to the *nadu viidu*, the place of worship. After a thorough cleaning, a new kolam is made in front of the deities. Before midday, the goddess is worshipped at the family altar.

In Manjula's house, women make the Friday *puja* for Lakshmi, while the women on Vellalar Street do it for Mariyamman. Among the latter, the majority worship Mariyamman in the form of a neem tree growing in the back garden, with both a kolam and a *puja*. It is common to smear new *kungumam* and turmeric powder on the door frames, steps and places of worship on Fridays, to increase the beauty of the area. In addition to the attention given to the house, women extend the cleaning and beautifying to their bodies on Fridays. Before the morning kolam is made, the hair is washed, preferably with a mixture of ground plants. Faces, hands, feet and lower parts of the legs are washed with turmeric. The right appearance is completed with a clean sari and the *pottu* on the forehead. On Fridays, kolam makers are seen with a towel wrapped around their heads, and on women with lighter skin the yellow of the turmeric is clearly noticeable. Before the *puja* is made in the house, the hair is arranged in a plait, and a garland of jasmines attached to it.

Gayatri pays a lot of attention to the weekly rituals for the goddess. She sweeps her house thoroughly already on Thursday afternoons. As mornings are always busy, it is common to start the Friday work on the day before. Gayatri enjoys making kolams and therefore draws several on the indoor cement floors with a chalk when the cleaning is completed. Her interest in drawing has kept her from making any kolams in acrylic paint. The lines made with the chalk adhere well to the cement surface. She does not want to cause her family members to slip and fall over which might happen if she uses loose powder. When the floors are ready, Gayatri makes kolams at two places of worship in her house. Towards the front of the house, she has a *puja* room containing the images of her family's ancestors, and towards the back, adjacent to the kitchen, she has an open cupboard with several shelves filled with deities, both sculptures and prints. On the floor at both *puja* places, Gayatri usually makes Friday kolams which depict an oil lamp, *velakku*, a Tamil *Om*[94] sign, and foot prints. These images inhabit the deities Lakshmi, Murughan and Kamatchiamman respectively. As the *puja* place near the kitchen is passed by many times a day, the kolams which embody the deities need protection. To do so, Gayatri draws a *kambi* kolam in front of the others. In the evening, when all the dishes from Thursday's evening tiffin are washed up and the kitchen perfectly cleaned, a kolam is made on the bench beside the gas stove. The stove is not regarded as a place of worship in the same sense as the two *puja* places. The early preparations have given Gayatri extra time for the Friday morning street kolam the following day. But before she decides on the size and elaboration, she ponders whether it is water collecting day or not. She has a public tap just outside her door step, and she does not want to put too much effort in a kolam that soon will be ruined by water and people walking back and forth to the tap. When the usual morning duties are completed and the family members have left for school and work, Gayatri makes the weekly Friday *puja* for Mariyamman in her home. First, she puts turmeric and *kungumam pottu*s on all the deities on the shelves. Then she lights incense which she places on the floor, and the deities are given small pieces of a flower garland she made the day before. Oil is poured into the *velakku* lamps of brass and their white cotton wicks are lit. Pieces of camphor are placed in another *velakku*, and as they are burnt, Gayatri circles the lamp around the deities while she rings a bell. When the camphor flame has faded, she uses the soot it has left to put a small dot on her forehead together with a new *pottu*. Gayatri concludes the performance in an atypical way, by adding *pottu*s of *kungumam* and turmeric to her street kolam. She argues that this enhances the beauty of the kolam.

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[94] *Om* is a Hindu symbol of wholeness, which is used both as sound (as *mantra*) and image (as letter).

Women's Friday worship of the goddess continues in the evening. When the afternoon kolam has been made, and the sun begins to set, it is time to go to the Mariyamman temple. After I began to dress in a sari, I was invited to come along. The majority of the visitors were women, and many had brought their children. The calmness at sunset combined with people's trust in the goddess imbued the atmosphere with serenity. The experience of exchanging the touching gazes, *darshan*, with the divine was deepened by the way all senses became acute; through the feel of the warm dusty earth when making turns around the temple, the touching of the auspicious tree at the back in the form of a neem tree, *veepa maram*, and an ashoka tree, *arasa maram*, intertwined into one, the fragrance from incense and flowers, the intense light and piercing smell of the camphor lit for the divinities, and by the touch of marking ones forehead with *kungumam* and *vibuuti* blessed by the goddess. The ritual inside the temple concluded by the handing out of these powders was usually simple. The *pujari* or his wife made *aarathi*, the circling of the camphor flame in front of the goddess, and sometimes received a coin or two for their services. After ringing a bell put up on a string, we all went outside and sat down in front of the temple for a while. Women bowed on their knees, often on the elaborate end part of their saris which is connected to the husband, and men prostrated themselves. Some exchanged news, others taught their babies how to greet the goddess, and a few sat in private contemplation. The visits could never be long, as the evening tiffin had to be prepared in time.

The absence of kolams

Last Pongal, Gayatri neither took part in kolam making nor the worship of Surya. Her father in-law had just passed away, and the whole family was in a state of mourning. The new design she had drawn in her notebook had to be kept for next year. In both rural and urban areas, the area outside the entrances of homes is always left without a kolam when there is a death in the family, and when the ancestors are commemorated. The absence of kolams thus indicates inauspicious rituals related to life-cycles.

When Gayatri's father in-law died, she did not make any kolams for eleven days. During these days, the family was in a state of mourning and performed funeral ceremonies. Anjili, her neighbour, said that these ceremonies only took seven days when her grandfather passed away, and that these differences are connected to the economic means of the family. The deceased family member is commemorated by a *puja* on the anniversary of his or her death for another few years, and on these occasions there is a continuous absence of the kolam. But as religious festivals do not occur on the exact same date as the year before,

Gayatri could partake in the Pongal celebrations this year. A couple of days after the festival, she left the space in front of her house empty after cleaning it. Many relatives then came together in honour of the deceased man, and Gayatri's husband had invited an Ayyar (Shaivite Brahmin) priest from a nearby village[95] to perform the *puja*. An important part of this worship was prepared by Gayatri and her female relatives. They had cooked the favourite food of her father in-law, and through the priest as well as the sons of the diseased man (Gayatri's husband and brother in-law), the food was offered to him before any of the guests ate.

As in the case of Gayatri's family, the auspicious and inauspicious might clash in the complexities of everyday life. During the period I stayed in Hariyarapakkam, such a clash occurred on a much larger scale and this inconvenience had to be negotiated. The death of my neighbour's grandmother coincided with the annual festival for Angalamman. The festival was a time of joy, and twice a day, when the goddess was taken in processions through the village, the streets were covered in new kolams. The grandmother was very old, and had outlived her husband a long time ago. She was living with her younger son's family, and they were all engaged in the weaving industry. The old brick house they stayed in was only rented, and it was not considered appropriate to perform the death ceremonies for the woman in a house which her family did not own. There was another possibility as the woman's elder son had a house of his own for his nuclear family, and therefore the relatives wanted to move the body to his place. Because of the festival, the movement was a dangerous undertaking. A dead body is imbued with both inauspiciousness and impurity, and to bring such qualities into the streets during times of processions would be disrespectful to the goddess and might upset her. She could take revenge and ruin the festival. The neighbour's father, the elder son, and his uncle had to ask permission at the elder's council. A compromise was made, and the next day the goddess was not taken through the street between the two brother's homes where the dead body had to pass. The day after, Anglamman was brought through. But it took one more day before she stopped at the house to which the body had been moved, and finally enabled the elder son and his family to take part in worship of the goddess. The absence of the kolam outside their house signalled awareness to the goddess as well as the neighbours. It took another five days until the funeral ceremonies were completed and my neighbour could restart the drawing of the daily kolams.

The above clash in states of being incorporates two types of sound rhythms. During festivals, fireworks of various amounts are always part of the celebrations. The

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[95] Due to the Brahmin migration to the cities, the few Brahmin priests present in a village are occasionally not enough.

auspiciousness they contain can be defined by their fast smattering rhythm. When someone has died or a funeral is performed fireworks are let off as well, but at these inauspicious occasions the pace of the cracks is very slow.

On no-moon's day, *amavasai*, deceased ancestors are worshiped regularly in the majority of homes, and the sadness experienced at the time of death is re-lived. When the *puja* for the ancestors is completed and their spirits have left, a kolam is immediately made to invite the deities. Gayatri argued that the making of kolams, as an act directed towards the deities, cannot be made at the same time as the ancestors are worshipped. One either invites the gods or the ancestors.

The kolam practice is thus closely connected to auspiciousness and can never be made on sad occasions. An empty space at the entrance of an inhabited building communicates to the neighbourhood that the household is in a sad state of being. When people experience the absence of a kolam outside a house, they sense sadness and worry.

Auspicious life-cycle rituals

The absence of kolams refers to a rhythm of life-cycles which intersects with the common annual festivals and weekly changes. The rhythm of life-cycles is also re-enacted at particularly auspicious occasions, and at such events the size and elaboration of the kolams resembles those made during festivals. The main auspicious functions are at the first shaving of a child's hair combined with his or her ear piercing, the celebration of a girl's first menstruation, marriage, a woman's first pregnancy, and moving in to a new house. The majority of functions are a matter for family members, but may be held at different localities. Middle and higher class families, like those in Manjula's house, rent a semi-public place, *chattram*, while lower, like Gayatri's, conduct it in the home. Each household invited to the function will have a large kolam outside their own house, and a more elaborate one is made at the *chattram* or the house where the function takes place. A kolam is drawn on the floor inside this building, at the spot where those in focus will be seated. Another important rite performed during auspicious functions is *kalikiradu*, the removal of the effects of *drishti*. Camphor is lit on a pan leaf placed on a tray that contains a thin layer of red liquid, and circled in front of the person. The red is attained by a mixture of turmeric powder, lime, calcium and water. After the completion of this rite, the red liquid which has now absorbed the bad effects is poured onto the kolam in the street. The red formation on the kolam image visualises the progress of the function, and the enhanced auspiciousness inside the house flows out on the street.

Before auspicious life-cycle rituals are held, people turn to their family god, *kula deivam*. This deity is connected to a locality from which one's ancestors are believed to originate, or a deified ancestor. It is common to have a village goddess as *kula deivam*, but it can also be localised forms of gods like Shiva, universal to Shaivite Hindus in his more celestial form. When people have moved to other areas, they travel to the shrine of the *kula deivam* for worship on these occasions. Long distances may make this impossible. In order not to lose contact with the protecting power of the deity there are families which have created box-like forms of their *kula deivam* that are kept in the *puja* place in their home.

In Gayatri's family, the next auspicious function will be her daughter Aruna's coming of age, her first menstruation. Their family has two *kula deivams*, Muneeshwaran and Kattaeri, which both were referred to as non-Brahmin deities. Muneeshwaran is worshipped by all family members on the function day in a *puja* led by Gayatri's husband, whereas the women have the main role in the worship of Kattaeri. As I was never allowed to take part, Gayatri conveyed how this worship was enacted.

The fierce aspect of Kattaeri is strong, and only women of those families that worship her as a continuation of their ancestors' traditions may attend.[96] If others are in the vicinity at the time of worship, or enter the house of the devotees before they have had time to complete the following cleaning, the risk of being harmed by the goddess is large.[97] As women become a part of their husband's ancestors after marriage, the worship of Kattaeri can be a new experience for a young daughter in-law. Knowledge is both transferred to daughters before marriage who attend and assist from a young age, as well as to those who have become 'daughters' through marriage. Thus, whether Aruna will continue this practice as an adult depends on who she marries.

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[96] Kattaeri has an ambiguous character. My informants only used the word *penn kadavul*, female god, but Nabokov categorizes Kattaeri as a demon (Nabokov 2000: 51). According to Viramma, there are both the demon Kattaeri who eats foetuses, and the goddess Kattaeri who is benevolent (Racine and Viramma 1997). Meyer describes how the goddess Kattaeri in several regions of Tamilnadu plays a large part in the annual public celebration of Angalamman. According to her, Kattaeri is grouped with the meat eating goddesses Mariyamman, Kali and Angalamman (Meyer 1986: 165).

[97] Vidya Dehejia makes a connection between the worship of village goddesses in South India and the medieval cults of Tantric Yoginis. Yoginis were feared and people believed that death could be the consequence of non-initiates who came near the goddesses' places of worship. The worshippers were Shaktas, and the Yoginis were able to bestow magic powers on them which could be used for both positive and negative purposes. *Chakras* and *mandalas* (she uses *mandala* and *yantra* interchangeably) are 'exceedingly important in the worship of the yoginis, with some [Tantric] texts going so far as to say that worship without a *mandala* is fruitless and does not please the deity.' 'It appears probable that worship through such diagrams was the earlier mode of propagation of the yoginis, and that stone temples to house images of these goddesses came at a later stage' (Dehejia 1986: 42-43).

The women and girls who are to attend the auspicious life-cycle ritual worship Kattaeri during the evening before. Because of the risk of harming others, the *puja* is enacted in a secluded place, either by the well at the back of the house, or on the banks of a pond. The proximity to water is considered favourable. Kattaeri does not have a permanent tangible form or a temple. At the time of worship, a small house consisting of a square and a triangle is made for her in mud. The place is cleaned up, and the clay house is beautified with kolams. Nine Vinayagans are formed in mud and put in the middle and each corner of the square. Black bangles and beads, bananas, cigars, pan leaves, areca nuts, puffed rice, and sweets are placed on nine banana leaves and offered. A chicken or a black hen is sacrificed, cooked, and eaten, together with other food items prepared beforehand in the home. The goddess is given a black sari and blouse. Gayatri described how the goddess comes in the form of air, but at the same time she has the form of a woman's naked body. Kattaeri then picks up the clothes and dresses herself. It is the woman who is the main person in the following auspicious function that performs the *puja* and lights the camphor. In some families, she is naked as well. Informants have given the nudity as the reason why men are not allowed to attend. They may take part in the preparations, but they have to leave at the time of worship.

The threat Kattaeri imposes on those who do not worship her makes it important to take precautions even after the *puja* is completed. All items of worship have to be disposed of. They are thrown in a pond, never in the well which belongs to the home. When the participants return to their home, they must clean their house thoroughly before non-worshippers can enter. It is said that blood stains from the sacrifice might be brought back to the house, and if anyone comes into contact with them, that person will get caught by Kattaeri through the stains. If they are caught, the goddess might 'take out' their blood, thus kill them, or make them sick for example in the form of madness or infertility.[98] People offer animals to Kattaeri because she likes blood, but if she is not treated with enough *bhakti* and respect, it is considered that she will be offended and request more.

Non-worshippers of Kattaeri often find her frightening due to her ambiguous means of using her powers, especially if they are city dwellers. According to Manjula, all inhabitants in her house refer to this goddess as a demon, and she said that when an American film on vampires was released in Chennai the title was translated to *Rattam* (blood) *Kattaeri*. But there are also families that make *puja*s for Kattaeri without animal sacrifices, and this is

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[98] For safety reasons, I was never allowed to take part in her worship. One evening I did an interview in a house without knowing that a *puja* for Kattaeri would take place at the nearby pond. I only heard vague sounds, and did not share the worries of my interpreter. The next morning I was seriously ill, and one of the proposed reasons was my proximity to the goddess. Later on, children whispered about this in dread when they saw me.

not considered as less respectful by them. Different forms of worship are further apparent in the fact that some make her image in mud for the *puja*, with long loose hair, fangs, and a fierce expression on her face. Kattaeri is central as a tutelary deity in the religious lives of her worshippers. Gayatri strongly expressed that 'whatever level of education or development we reach, we will not stop this worship. We will carry it on to our daughters. It is very important for us.'

A completely different form of celebration of life's rhythms takes place annually in Chennai. On the birthday of MGR, the famous deified politician and film star described in Chapter II, colourful shrines of papier maché containing his photograph are put up on several streets. Women draw large kolams in front of the shrines and further beautify them with flower garlands, and party members conduct *puja*s for passers-by. At some places, representatives of AIADMK take the opportunity to give a speech on political issues. During the last election campaign, AIADMK constructed similar shrines accompanied by kolams to get the attention of their voters. But there was no sign of the present party leader Jayalalitha on these shrines. People held that MGR was still the main leader, Jayalalitha was just continuing on the path that her predecessor had staked out. A kolam was also drawn for Ambedkar, who represented the DPI (Dalit Panthers of India), on a more common type of digitally printed poster. Kolams can thus also be a means to visualising devotion to political leaders. But the wife of Shiva, the man in Pelasur who worships MGR and nurtures the presence of the former CM rather than the deities, does not share this commitment. She never draws kolams for the photos of MGR that her husband has put up in their home, but she continuously make the daily ones outside to invite the deities.

The learning process

At Gayatri's

Before she begins with her homework, Gayatri's daughter Aruna sweeps outside their house and makes the afternoon kolam. This has been her task during the last year, but Gayatri still hesitates in letting her daughter take care of the morning performance. To make mistakes in the morning kolam is seen to generate inauspiciousness, and causes people to worry. The deities might not accept such an invitation, and bad things might happen. The afternoon kolams are smaller and less important, and are thus a good opportunity for young girls to start practising. Aruna is able to make kolams consisting of up to eight dots in a row, so she is not yet considered to be knowledgeable enough.

Aruna's interest has not been as keen as her mother's, but this changed recently since she got company in the learning process from a neighbour. Sasi, a girl who lives a few houses further up Vellalar Street, spends a lot of time at Gayatri's trying to grasp how to draw kolams. Her own mother is a Protestant and has never paid any attention to the practice.[99] The religious matters are of no importance to Sasi. She loves to draw and she does not understand why there is no kolam at her own entrance as there is one outside every other house in her street. During many afternoons she has redrawn in a notebook she made at school what has been shown to her by Gayatri on a piece of paper. Every morning for the last couple of months she has watched her neighbours make kolams in the street. Finally, without any objections from her mother, it was time for Sasi to make an afternoon kolam outside her own door. Gayatri had given her consent, and asked a friend who lives next door to Sasi to assist the girl if needed. Sasi tried hard to convert her practise of drawing with pen and paper to strewing powder into the same design on the ground. The design came out correct. But Sasi had not yet learned the swiftness of movement. She made a lot of mess and spilled in between. Her lines became short and solid. The chubby design covered a much smaller space than it should. It took too much time and a lot of effort, but she was rewarded after the completion. Gayatri, as well as a couple of neighbouring women, walked over and complimented her. Since then, Aruna and Sasi sometimes practice together in their notebooks, or try out strokes and designs on the floor or at the back of the house. They have also bought booklets in town with printed designs which they struggle to copy. But Gayatri emphasizes personal creativity, and the girls try to figure out how to rearrange the prints in their individual ways.

When Gayatri was around four years old, she begun to help her mother make kolams. At that time, all designs had to be memorised as the family did not have any pen and paper. Notebooks or booklets were not affordable, but she practiced new designs with her friends by drawing them with sticks on the ground. Gayatri held that she had learned most about kolams from her grandmother. Her own mother had a large work load, and did not find the time. Gayatri recalled when she was a small child and played with her brother at their grandparent's house. They were trying to chase away ants from the kolam. Their grandmother told them off and explained that it was food for ants. Many years later, the grandmother explained more in detail about how the kolams are made to invite god. When Gayatri was

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[99] Whereas Sasi did not learn at an early stage due to religious belonging, the child workers are a category of girls that rarely learn any designs. In the rural area of my fieldwork, they constituted a not insignificant number of the people involved in the weaving industry. They had a work day from early morning to late night, and consequently neither time for learning how to draw kolams nor any other skills.

a young bride and had just moved into her husband's house, she had to engage in re-learning. Her mother in-law insisted that Gayatri made a particular kolam design in the *puja* place, as well as adjusted to other specific routines for how to enact the daily household tasks and family rituals. After some years, the mother in-law was more accepting, and showed appreciation towards Gayatri's experiments with new designs.

Functions and festivals are occasions when women come together and find more time to talk about matters such as the kolam. To partake in and watch public competitions in kolam making is another means to develop one's skill. So is reading women's magazines, which regularly publish new designs and articles on the reasons for making kolams. Such explanations can also be found in shorter versions in publications like calendars. Quite recent are TV programmes in which specialists perform kolams and explain to the viewer how and why the images should be made. Gayatri told me that watching TV was how she came to know about the particular connection between kolams and the goddess Lakshmi. TVs are present in the majority of homes, and therefore the spread of knowledge in this media is much more pervasive than women's magazines or competitions in the cities. If they have time, women enjoy finding new ways to expand their knowledge, but the newer media do not discuss different ideas as much as present a 'common knowledge'.

The kolam performance is a part of how the rhythm of the day is learned to be lived. Through years of practice, Gayatri has developed a sense of personal rhythm in her kolam making. When she walks out of the house to begin, she is barely awake and her breath is slow. The splashing of dung water, as well as the sweeping of the street and threshold gradually changes her state of being into her daytime rhythm. When she fills her hand with sand and begins to strew it around the dots she has put on the cleaned surface, her mind is clear and her movements have become fast and steady. The formation of the image requires a focused coordination between her mind counting the dots and recalling the specific order in which to join them, and her body enacting the precise movements. Each part of a line has to be extended long enough for complicated curves to become unbroken and even. At the moment of refilling her hand, she gets an overview of how the design progresses. The duration of a line of each handful depends on personal dexterity and technique. As she proceeds, her skilled drawing of the symmetrical designs brings about a notion of balance and harmony, and the effort put into concentration sharpens her attention. Through her movements and the satisfying result, she wakes up into a balanced state of being. The rhythmical flow of Gayatri's performance is materialised into the still dots and the curving lines of the kolam image.

When Gayatri experiments in her notebook with a new design, she uses a similar rhythm of movement. But, to draw with a pencil does not require that the movement of her hand repeatedly pauses for a split second. She has a good overview and does not have to look for the right direction, the lines automatically become even, and the powder bowl is not there to be filled. Yet, Gayatri's personal rhythm of strewing powder on the ground continues to be a part of how she creates the designs in her notebooks. Watching her figuring out the right order to draw an unfamiliar design made by someone else also reveals the rhythm embodied in her. Subsequently, the new designs become incorporated in her own rhythm of drawing. Gayatri memorizes the different designs, and when she has drawn a particular number of dots, she immediately knows which options she has to join them. It is only large new design that might require that she keeps the notebook beside her when she transfers the image onto the ground. The perception of certain kolams can also recall memories of physical pain. When seeing the ones made with liquids, there were stories of vanishing nails and worn out fingers. Discussions of making grand designs at festivals evoked the back pain they brought fourth in many women of Gayatri's generation.

Nowadays, Gayatri's thoughts travel beyond the concentration on the visual result during the everyday performance. As her skills have improved, the rhythm of the disciplined movements has become internalised as embodied knowledge. The practice has developed into a moment of reflection, whether it is on the day's tasks ahead, or in the hope of divine blessings.

At Manjula's

The children who are growing up in the apartment building where Manjula lives do not take part in daily kolam making. This change began around the time when Manjula's mother was young. But Prema, a close friend of her mother who often visits their home, has begun to re-learn how to draw kolams. Unlike Manjula's mother, Prema did not pay much attention to kolam making when she was a child. She took a greater interest in her studies, and her parents were able to send her to a university in Mumbai. By this time, she had forgotten all about the kolams. She returned to Tamilnadu when she had completed her education, and made an eminent career as an academic researcher. There have never been daily kolams outside her present house, but her maid insists on drawing one beside the stove in the kitchen every Friday.

Prema grew up in a joint family, but it was only her aunt Saraswati who made the daily kolams in their house. When Prema's mother entered the home as a new daughter in-

law, she was neither skilled nor particularly interested. As Saraswati enjoyed the task, the two women made an agreement where the aunt continued to take the responsibility for the kolams. While the aunt drew the kolams, Prema's mother was busy with other duties required of the morning rhythm. A mother must make sure that her children look neat and tidy at school. There were six daughters in the family, and girls' hair should be made into tight plaits knitted into a loop with ribbons behind the ears. Prema's mother described this braiding of six pairs of plaits every morning as her way of making kolams.

The aunt died a couple of years ago, and shortly after Prema tried to evoke her own limited childhood knowledge of the kolam. She described her new interest as a search into her personal history and identity rather than a sense of Tamilness or religiousness. It is her connection with the aunt that she is trying to re-establish. Instead of buying magazines with designs to learn from, she has been investigating among her relatives to find the ones she remembered that her aunt used to draw on the back of calendars. Some have been found, and while using them as models Prema contends that her body recalls the rhythm of drawing from her childhood. Her present practice is mainly something private, in a state of rehearsal inside her home. Only once has Prema made a kolam outside her home. It was when her brother came to visit with his family from the US, and she felt this was the best way she could welcome them.

Prema represents an individual who has made several choices of her own on whether to take part in the kolam practice or not. As a means to regaining and developing her knowledge, she could also have joined one of the kolam courses available for housewives who belong to the same high class as her. When their maids take care of much of the daily household duties, some of the housewives turn to art and craft to find fulfilment. These courses emphasize beautifying designs without much connection to religious devotion. Another type of course are kolam workshops held at highly stressed offices. Company owners have started to organise these as a means to enabling their employees to lessen the pace of their working rhythm.

There are also courses in kolam making for children. During the summer holidays, Manjula and Uthra took Uthra's niece to one of them. The phenomenon has thrived during the last five years, and is part of a larger trend where children from wealthy families are sent to both afternoon classes and summer courses in many different subjects. Apart from kolam skills, they learn for instance how to play tennis or piano, swim, sing *bhajan* songs and even how to fold their clothes. Many courses focus on how to develop management abilities and increase the children's studying capacity. The participants come from nuclear families

where both parents have jobs outside the home. The parents do not have summer holidays, and with no grandparents around there is no one in the home to teach the children new skills or to keep them company. It is important within this group to keep up with the trend, and it is not without importance to mention the cost of a course and make comparisons with one's peers. At the kolam course Uthra's niece attended, the teacher was thorough in explaining both religious reasons why kolams are made, and how to make designs step by step. Every day the children's homework consisted of practising certain designs. Very few participants were familiar with the performance, as most of them had maids who put the kolam or lived in apartment buildings without any kolams at all. The children were keen on learning and both boys and girls attended.

Parvati, a music teacher who lives with her family in the house next to Manjula's, focuses on the rhythmical aspects of the kolam as a means to enhance children's studying capacity. She has specialised in children with dyslectic problems, and kolam drawing is an important part in her pedagogy. Parvati is inspired by a music professor from Chennai, who in the 1950s worked out a method of teaching his students *talam*, rhythms used in Carnatic music[100], with the help of kolams. According to his pedagogy, each dot in the kolam is drawn to represent a musical note. The amount of dots in the horizontal row visualises the rhythm of the song, and the amount of dots in the vertical direction is decided by the length of the song. At the same time as the lines are drawn between or around the dots the performer sings, and the simultaneous acts produce the right rhythm. By adding the sound to the kolam practice, the professor argued that his method of synchronising the eyes, the hand, the brain and the mouth was an excellent way to make students learn the Carnatic *talam*. Parvati tries to develop the ideas of the professor. She holds that kolams made without dots can be connected to *ragham*, a freer form of Carnatic songs. The combination of drawing and singing kolams in her work with the dyslectic children has been fruitful. The creative coordination of their minds and bodies clearly improve their studying results, and Parvati has given appreciated lectures on her methods. She also conducts academic research on the convergence between kolam and music. Another context in which it has been used is the Bharatanatiyam[101] dance. At certain performances, the dancers generate kolams by dipping

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[100] Carnatic music is a classical South Indian music tradition.
[101] According to Barba, the Bharatanatiyam is based on the *devadaasi* performance *sadir nac*, and constructed as 'classical' by the British and Hindu reformers during the first decades of the twentieth century (Barba 2006: 237). The dance was thus separated from its association with prostitutes, and joined with gestures of temple sculptures and prescriptions in classical texts.

their feet in coloured powder and dancing fourth images on the stage. According to Parvati, it is particularly the combination of kolam and music that increases people's sense of rhythm.

There are sometimes conflicting views on women's capacity to learn. When women who had grown up in Chennai moved to Pelasur after marriage, it was taken into account that it would be the task of the mother in-law to teach the new bride how to make proper kolams. Gayatri and the other women I met in the rural area, perceive the city rhythm as too fast for kolam making. They held that there is neither time nor space for urban girls to become good kolam makers. Some upper class women in the cities on the other hand argue that village women are uneducated and lack the abilities to learn how to create intricate kolams. A few Brahmin women regarded their caste as the originator of the tradition. Non-Brahmin women argued that the Brahmins knew nothing as the upper castes all had maids that put their kolams. Such conversations erupted when women discussed why they in particular, not the 'others', were the better conveyers of knowledge for my research.

Discussion

The kolam practice constitutes and is constituted by rhythms. The morning street image materialises the rhythm of the day. The performance is further organised into a regularity of flows defined by weekly, monthly and annual circumstances related to the rhythm of planets and the following seasons. An intersecting rhythm is defined by life-cycles of individual household members. As the latter kind is dominant, the kolam performance in a certain home may contradict the public occasion. The elaboration of the street kolam initially communicates the state of being within the home, and secondly on the community level.

The image is a part of the larger rhythm of a street. In accordance with the temporal rhythms, the size or absence of the kolam causes changes in the street pattern which communicate the occurrence of events beyond the ordinary. The experiences of the variations induce or reinforce the emotional state of the people passing by, and sometimes bring on memories of previous events. The absence of the kolam is the pause in the rhythm of life, while the enlarged sizes on auspicious occasions intensify its flow. Through the different ways women enact, or refrain from enacting, the kolam practice, their performances materialise various rhythms of life.

In 'A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology', Eugenio Barba contends that a dancer translates the temporal dimension of music into spatial terms (Barba 2006:246). The kolam maker has a similar capacity, but the spatial terms include an image. The materialisation of the temporal rhythms is generated in the movements of the woman when she draws the image,

and become manifest in the image when she has completed the drawing. The performance and the symmetrical image it produces (the duration of which varies according to the chosen material) are rhythmical interactions in space. In this sense, the kolams connect and come to embody the rhythms of time and space. The skill requires an embodied knowledge of the right rhythm of drawing. For a performer, the perception of the images laid out in space is imbued with an experience of this rhythm.

It was my own direct participation in the kolam practice that enabled me to grasp the importance of finding one's rhythm of drawing, and led my interests towards rhythms in general[102]. I have experienced that seeing a kolam image in the street that one is familiar with generates an impulse of moving in the rhythm required by oneself in order to make that particular design. But my realisation did not come about until I had proceeded to some extent in the learning process.

The philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre holds that 'to grasp a rhythm it is necessary to have been *grasped* by it; one must *let oneself go*' (Lefebvre 2004: 27). He suggests the analysis of rhythms as a new field of knowledge. In his conceptualisation, rhythm is the interaction between time, space and energy (Lefebvre 2004: 15). This dialectical relation can be analysed by isolating particular ones among the multitude of rhythms we are surrounded by in our everyday life. Rhythm entails repetition, which in turn produces difference. There is always something new that introduces itself when a movement is repeated. To grasp a rhythm it is also necessary to have a referent. We should begin by listening and learning from the rhythms of our own body in order to subsequently comprehend external rhythms and their relations in an open ended whole. Lefebvre criticises the neglect of the body in philosophy and holds that the rhythm analyst must use all his or her senses (Lefebvre 2004: 21). The analyst needs to think with his body, and these thoughts are not separated from the conscious mind. In reference to the relation between physical flows and culture, Lefebvre uses the term social rhythms.

From a Hindu perspective, the energy that rhythmically moves time and space is divine. As shown in Chapter III, it is understood as *shakti* (or *prakriti*). It is the same source many women give for their skills in kolam making. People in general consider it to be natural for women to engage in the practice, and that the ability to develop the skill is part of their

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[102] Extended participation in the form of apprenticeship has been discussed as a method in fieldwork for instance by Michael Coy. He contends that it can be a means to increase the understanding of local conditions as the apprentice gains a second role and perspective that extends the participatory aspect. The expectations the new role entails, as well as the close relationship with the community it generates, requires that the anthropologist is increasingly aware of keeping a certain distance from the informants (Coy 1989: 127f).

feminine beings. They do not need to be taught through verbal explanations, girls simply watch their mothers and neighbours and follow.

However, the learning process is more than observation and imitation. Step by step, girls become useful as they partake in the kolam making and other household tasks. As they accompany elders to the temple and learn how to make *puja*, they gradually become aware of the religious implications of the kolam. Jean Lave and Etienne Wagner contend that 'learning is not one practice among others, but an inseparable part of all social practice' (Lave and Wagner 2003 [1991]: 34). In their theory of learning, they argue that learning takes place where participants are actively engaged in a social practice (communities of practice). Reflection and involvement, or cerebral and embodied learning, interact in the process. They discuss the gradual learning as a cyclic movement from periphery to centre. Apprentices become involved through the enactment of simpler tasks, and when the master decides, it is possible to be given more central responsibilities. In the same sense, girls do not start immediately with the morning kolam, but move slowly from one task to the next, figuring out their own ways of doing it. Some stretch boundaries, while others mainly conform. As put by Lave and Wagner: 'The knowers (full participants) come in a range of types, from clones to heretics' (Lave and Wagner 2003 [1991]: 116).

New values and materials occur in the kolam practice. They are negotiated within and between the performers, and whether a kolam maker's view is given prominence depends on that person's skill and social position. This mutual constitution of a practice between master and apprentice is held as a central aspect of the learning process by Lave and Wagner. It is not only an apprentice that changes in the process. Although the relationship entails aspects of power, both agents are active learners. The enactments of known routines, improvisations, and shifting meanings, give space for unpredictability as well as changing strategies. The practitioners and the activity are thus mutually constitutive (Lave and Wagner 2003 [1991]: 33).

While the learning process has an informal character for the majority, formalities have become part of the kolam practice among those who have less connection with the performance in their everyday life. For women who participate in courses, the process contains more teaching and instructions. Written texts and TV shows can be understood as limitations as they lack a dialogue between master and apprentice.

Lefebvre contends that from the perspective of political power, the involvement of the authorities in learning rhythms has a goal. Individuals are for instance rhythmed through military training in order to strengthen or re-establish eurhythmia (balance and

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harmony) and avoid arrhythmia (conflict) (Lefebvre 2004: 68). These precautionary aspects can be translated into the kolam context. The learning of the practice can in a similar way be understood as a means to strengthen a balanced state between a multiplicity of rhythms, to uphold continuity and circumvent disruption. To learn the rhythm of drawing kolams is furthermore to learn how to achieve a balanced state between body and mind. Rhythms inherent in the body of the individual performer, such as breathing, interact with the socially learned rhythms of drawing.

Learning to make kolams can also be described as a rhythmical mode of becoming a feminine being. Through the repetitive movements women learn, and come to embody, the flow which is their morally correct way to interact with the rhythms of seasons and lives. The difference generated through repetition is both conscious and unconscious in the practice. Every time a woman repeats the performance, she tries to make the design different. But the overall daily practice appears similar from last time. New rhythms are incorporated through the different qualities of the new materials, without causing complete disruption. However, some kolam makers seek to diversify the established social rhythms, and have to be cautious of not becoming defined as disruptive. The next chapter concerns the moral implications, for kolam making, of womanhood and female gender.

Chapter VII

Constitution of female gender
and the creative agency of individual kolam makers

While the street kolam seen at a relative distance materialises the rhythms of life, its details are connected to the individual character of its maker. The ability to make kolams is linked to the ideal of the married auspicious woman, *sumangali*. A good kolam maker is perceived as a good wife and mother. Adherence to this identification gives a woman moral recognition in the community, and she is considered to be paying attention to the family prestige, *gauravam*. But social processes have brought forth changes. In her dissertation on the kolam, Nagarajan contends that: 'The movement of women into public [kolam] competitions mirrors the outward movement of women in the society as a whole'. She further holds that the participants in the city competitions 'tend to be those who have free time, and want to win prizes or make a name for themselves' (Nagarajan 1998: 208, 210). Among these competitors, there is a shift from an emphasis on auspiciousness through blessings directed to family members and the community towards an increasing interest in individuality.

This chapter investigates how the kolam is related to the identity of its performers, among those who have free time for competitions, those who hurriedly draw the images as part of their daily household work, and those who have employed maids to do it. The chapter concerns perceptions of the ideal woman, possibilities to negotiate the norms, and the various significances of the kolam practice in these experiences. The position of the kolam in the constitution of female gender and agency will be discussed, also in reference to the few male kolam makers. It will be argued that although people in general perceive it as natural that women develop a skill in kolam making, the continuous performance of the practice is part of what constitutes a person as female and feminine.

Ideal feminine characteristics

On Vellalar Street in Pelasur, Gayatri is considered to be one of the most auspicious women as well as the best kolam maker. She performs her daily tasks with love and care for her family and the deities. She upholds the family respectability through her chaste behaviour and dedicated attention to her husband and the upbringing of their children. Like several women

I met, Gayatri underlined that the right kind of character in a woman is related to the kolam practice. They described that as a woman develops her skills in making elaborate kolam designs, she is also developing her abilities to become a good wife and mother. The most important characteristic is the ability to adjust, *anusaranai*. Like the newly wedded woman has to adjust her movements and words towards her in-law family, the lines of the kolam have to be bent and adjusted around the dots on the ground. Some even perceive the dots as daily problems, while the line is the path you have to figure out in order to get through the difficulties. A patient character is required for both kolam making and abilities to adjust to the in-laws. Both tasks call for commitment. Neatness and cleanliness are other important aspects of womanhood which the practice engenders and the image materialises. It is a matter of prestige that your daughter is able to make kolams, as well as to cook, before she gets married. When Gayatri was little, she was told off harshly by her mother if she did not pay enough attention to learning. The elder woman knew that they both could get problems with Gayatri's future mother in-law if the girl had not learnt properly when it was time to move into the in-law's house. Gayatri explained: 'You cannot look your mother in-law in the face if you have not made the morning kolam before cleaning vessels and washing clothes.'

In addition to the ability to adjust themselves and their kolam lines, women expressed the importance of developing the related characters of *adakkam* and *odukkam*. Both qualities signify self-control. *Odukkam* is self-control of movements and voice. Ideally, as Gayatri put it: 'you should walk like a swan, slowly and never take long steps… if you walk with your chin up, or fast, they will call you a boy or a man.' Women are taught to not let out their hands or run. A male person outside the family must not be physically touched. The movements of the eye should be controlled in a similar manner. It is not correct to glance around in all directions, one should gaze straight forward. Women of Gayatri's mother's generation were taught not to meet the eyes of their husband until a few years of marriage had passed, whether working in the kitchen or having sex. The voice should not be loud or fast. One speaks when it is necessary and never answers back to men. The meaning is linked to *adakkam*, which means self-control of emotions. Women ought to be timid and respectful, and not express strong emotions.[103] One of Gayatri's neighbours said that arguments with one's husband had to be held inside the house, with a low voice in order not to let the neighbours hear and have bad thoughts about the woman's capacity for self-control. But according to Gayatri, loud arguments could never be had with one's husband.

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[103] Trawick connects the meaning of *adakkam* to the evil eye, the harm caused by eyes invested with too intense emotions. She translates *adakkam* with 'containment of love' (Trawick 1992: 93).

Correct behaviour is linked to the space women are situated in. In their home streets, the women in Pelasur generally have a relaxed approach. They feel free to talk openly and share many of their experiences with their neighbours. When the work load permits, they chat during kolam making or on each other's verandas. As there is very little traffic, the soundscape also allows for conversations across the street. But neighbours pay attention to people's whereabouts. When a woman leaves the street, there are usually neighbours asking where she is going, and keeping track of whether she is alone and that she comes back in time. This applies especially to adolescent girls. It is preferable that they have company and not stop on the way when they go to school, workplaces or run errands. Gayatri knows that this has come to concern her daughter Aruna. For the last couple of years, the girl has not been allowed to play around with the boys in the street. While boys are supposed to learn how to manage by themselves, the do's and don'ts are many for girls. Aruna will soon attain puberty, and then she should neither be with, nor speak to boys. Gayatri is not worried about outside threats or improper behaviour on behalf of her daughter, but more so over the gossip which might start among the neighbours. Mere rumours of a young girl having an affair and planning to run away with a man can ruin her and her family's name. If Aruna would stretch the boundaries of her movements in the public sphere too far, the prospects of a good marriage would be destroyed. Apart from keeping an eye on Aruna's general behaviour, Gayatri makes sure that her daughter learns to make kolams. When it is time for a potential in-law family to enquire if the girl is suitable for marriage, her skills in kolam making is one of the issues under scrutiny.

The correspondence between a good kolam maker and a good wife is often expressed in Tamil cinema. As narrated in a recent film: when the two main female characters are first introduced, the chaste heroine makes an excellent kolam at a contest, while the antagonist who later threatens the heroine's marriage has no patience with her drawing. The latter argues loudly with the participants, spills out her powder, and leaves the scene without completing her task. As described in Chapter III, the right character is embedded in the right appearance. Beautiful kolams correspond with beautiful women, and the images may be attractive for men in another sense than for in-laws. According to Nagarajan, beautiful kolams are used in films as the incentive for a man to fall in love with a woman (Nagarajan 1998: 56 n2).

In Chennai's low class areas, the female ideals resemble those in the villages, but among the upper caste women I engaged with, particularly the orthodox Brahmins, strictness on proper behaviour is more important. The connection between a good kolam maker and a good wife is no longer self-evident within the latter families. Much attention is

transferred to higher education, yet the concern about chaste behaviour and the ideal of the *sumangali* continues to be emphasized. The importance of showing respect to men is more firmly articulated among these women. Men are considered to be superior in knowledge, and therefore women are taught to accept everything men say and not develop their own ideas. Women should be soft, delicate, and shy. Even smiles are part of what must be confined by self-control. Women may smile towards their father, husband and children, but a smile towards men outside the family is perceived as an invitation. It would make the man think that the woman has given him her consent to a love affair, and she would be accused of strongly violating the ideal of chaste behaviour. If a woman does not watch her conduct, she will be accused of being *timiru*, too proud and disrespectful, and causing *asingam*, shame. Then she would make both herself and her family lose their dignity, *gauravam*. As expressed by Padmini, an orthodox Brahmin woman:

> If you as a woman try to expand the boundaries too much, you take a risk on behalf of your children. If you become known as a woman who is not behaving as a proper *sumangali*, you will have difficulties in getting your daughter married, no one will think that she can be a good wife for their sons if you have not been a good example for her.

Padmini conveyed how the strictness of the norms affected her daughters' marriages. The eldest of the two met a man when she studied abroad, and they both fell in love. After some time, the man asked to marry Padmini's daughter. He was from a non-Brahmin caste, and therefore Padmini could not accept him as the future companion for her daughter. Her husband on the other hand argued that it was a good choice as the two shared interests, and after all the man was from the same city as themselves. Following a long period of persuasion, Padmini had to give in to her husband's and daughter's wishes. But they were strongly condemned by many people in their community. Several of the closest relatives did not even turn up for the marriage. Padmini's younger daughter on the other hand could not have the man she wanted. This girl conveyed that she had fallen in love with a man from a family which was close to their own in terms of friendship as well as status, and that she wanted to marry him. But the man's parents refused. Their reason was that a girl who expresses her personal wishes in terms of marriage has badly misbehaved. Padmini's daughter could therefore not be fit to marry their son.

Post marriage, women gain more acceptance as they are considered to belong to a man. Apart from the necessity of showing respect to their husbands and other men, women's position depends on their age and the relationship they develop with other women. Danalakshmi, the orthodox Brahmin woman who rents in Manjula's house, faced difficulties with her mother in-law. When women give birth to their first child they spend the last months before and the first months after at their mother's house. It is only one's own mother that is considered to be able to give a woman what she needs at this crucial period of her life. Women do not feel able to ask their mothers in-law for help in any matters, and certainly not in taking care of their new born baby. When it is time to bring the child back to its father's house, an astrologer is often consulted to make sure that the day will be auspicious. The return is celebrated, and larger kolams are made in the street. Within Danalakshmi's community, it is common for women to move to their mother's house also at the birth of the second child. But in her case, she was not allowed to go there at all. When she was newly married and moved into her husband's house, the father in-law died just a couple of days later. The blame was put on Danalakshmi. As she was a person coming from outside, she was regarded as the bringer of inauspiciousness and death. She felt as though she was punished by her in-laws, and sensed a double guilt in not being able to be the auspicious wife.

Danalakshmi, Padmini and Manjula's mother learned to make kolams with devotion when they were little girls. Since the last one to two decades, they have employed maids to make their daily kolams in the street. It would not be good for their family prestige if their daughters drew the images during this period. This is a continuation of the emphasis on seclusion of adolescent girls among the higher castes. Manjula's mother explained that when she was young, it was not permitted for girls to make kolams outside the house between their coming of age and marriage. They had to remain in the house during this stage in order to not cause any misunderstanding regarding their behaviour. Any communication with men that passed by could instigate suspicious gossip. Women of higher castes further seclude themselves inside the house because of the proximity to strangers in the busy city streets. Among people who live in their own apartments or houses, informal conversations usually take place indoors or on a common terrace.[104] High walls surround them, and there is often a guard at the gate. People of lower castes, particularly those who lead their lives on the pavements, are disrespected due to their less strict behaviour.

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[104] Young unmarried women who belong to the upper class and live in the wealthy areas in South Chennai (which is not part of the present study) may sit on the pavement of their own street dressed in jeans and chat with young men. They even go dating. When they leave their street, they use their own car or motorcycle.

The orthodox women still hold that their daughters should learn the kolam practice. Padmini argues that: 'Kolam making develops the artistic character of women, and a beautiful kolam adds an artistic character to the house'. But the daughters also learn that the daily kolams are considered as too simple for them to be involved in. They learn to dedicate their afternoons to homework to get good grades and a seat at the university. The girls are able to find time to develop their individual skills in kolam making along with the studying, and draw intricate kolams on auspicious occasions. Manjula has also earned a good reputation for the prize she won at a recent kolam competition. Women of the younger generation gain more space through their education and new opportunities for work outside the home. At the same time, emphasis on good grades and future prospects has created heavy demands which have become unbearable for some girls. The lack of the daily space for a moment of reflection during the kolam performance can also be perceived as a loss.

In spite of the general connection between good kolams and the high demands on women's behaviour, the performance has always been a means to extend individual space in Gayatri's life:

> I draw kolams with *aasai* (love, desire). We draw big kolams on Fridays, and on the days of the festivals… I could draw big kolams every day even, but the duties in the morning prevent me from doing that. Otherwise I would love to draw big kolams. Sometimes [when I do], my mother in-law complains and asks why I strain so much… When I was at home, my mother said that I will take an hour to get back inside the house when I went down to the street to make the kolam… I will keep on drawing while everybody around me will shout at me for delaying… I always draw kolams like this with love and interest, so I find time to draw.

Gayatri does not perceive the performance of the kolam as a duty, rather as a means to getting away from her duties. Like most of the women I met, she draws kolams with love and care, *anbu padugattel*, for the family members, and sincere devotion, *bhakti*, for god. Several of those who do not have enough time for the performance have expressed regrets and pointed out how much time they were able to spend on kolams when they were younger. They connect kolam drawing with joy. In the families where education of girls was given greater value than the kolam practice, and for those girls who did not have an artistic interest, the performance was sometimes perceived as a form of constraint.

Women like Gayatri, who adhere to the ideals, become respected and auspicious and may have much say in their everyday life. She feels like the leader of her family, and

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suggests that most women have a similar view: 'Even though it is the husband's duty to bring in money, women take care of all other responsibilities in the household. It is women that attend to the well-being of their families.' Padmini shares this notion of women's capacity and strength, and argues that it develops through hardship. She contends that any woman is able to be the leader of a big company, as they all know how to run a joint family with maids. For Danalakshmi, it has been her leading role in a charity organisation and starting a local singing group that has helped her through the low position she was given by her in-laws.

Experiences of self-confidence

The ideals are demanding, especially for women who lack support both from family members and neighbours. One of them is Tulasi, a young mother of two girls in Tennampattu village. Early in the mornings, she hurries past her neighbours on her way to nearby sites for temporary construction work. She keeps her eyes on the ground and makes no outward movements. The only sound comes from the bells on her anklets. She hopes that the neighbours will pay as little attention to her as possible. Yet, she knows that they have started to talk behind her back. The arguments she has with her husband have become too frequent, and too loud. She can no longer seek consolation and advice among the experienced and respected women in her street. Because she married the man she loved, she is considered to only have herself to blame for the increasing problems. Since her husband tried to set her and their children on fire after tying them with the electric cables, the path Tulasi has to walk is thin as a spider's web. Her being is in a state of desperation. Whenever her husband has completed a weaving assignment in Hariyarapakkam, he spends most of the money on drink and does not take on a new job until the money is finished. Tulasi smiles from deepest within when she speaks about the love that made them marry. Then fear makes her tremble. It is not yet possible to know whether she will come out on the other side.

When a woman has difficulties in her marriage, it is possible to stay at her mother's house for a few days. But neighbours notice if you go there with too much luggage. As it is the responsibilities of the wife to maintain and increase the well-being of the home, it is not suitable to openly admit that you have problems. Abuse of alcohol and physical violence from husbands is a part of everyday life in many families, and the limits of what wives are supposed to endure are fluid. For women like Tulasi who has entered into a love marriage without her parent's consent, hardly any support can be expected. The only place which gives Tulasi some piece of mind is the Mariyamman temple. She always feels that the goddess listens, and she wishes that her workload permitted more visits to the temple. In

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Tulasi's life, the kolam entails no space for negotiations. It is part of the daily work she must do.

It is not unlikely that Tulasi's state of being develops into possession by a spirit or goddess. Fear is considered as the most risky emotion to cause such incidents. Women's possibilities to negotiate their position and express discontent about their lives during possession have been discussed by several scholars.[105] Throughout my time in the villages, I did meet women whose experiences of possession, of god coming over them, *silirkiradu,* can be interpreted as means to cope with problems and enact individual female agency.[106]

In Pelasur, Priya's grandmother Nagammal often experienced how Mariyamman 'came over' her (see also Chapter IV). It happened once when she had an argument with her employer, the mill owner. As usual, the possession started with a shivering of her body, and the empowering force of the goddess gave Nagammal strength to burst out towards the owner and yell out her anger. She conveyed both worry and pride when she narrated how she was able to scare the man. 'It is because of Mariyamman I exist', she continued, 'otherwise they

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[105] Isabelle Nabokov has written on spirit possession in Gingee district, and she argues against the interpretation of possession as a way of extending space (Nabokov 2000). According to her, the possessed are those who have failed to follow moral order and customary rules, and the process of exorcism which follows possession (as well as counter sorcery rituals which remove spells) rather re-incorporates the individual into right behaviour. On the other hand, Hancock contends that women are able to let go of their ordinary duties and earn respect during possession (Hancock 1999: 168). Fuller argues that female possession by evil spirits provide 'culturally tolerated opportunities to complain about female inferiority and subordination' (Fuller 1992: 233). He connects possession of spirits with female sexuality, and contends that it is assumed that the spirit engages in an illegitimate sexual relationship with the possessed woman. Nabokov describes the typical *pey* as 'the spirit of a man who took his life because he was prevented from wedding, or because his marriage did not work out, and who henceforth 'catches' other men's wives.' (Nabokov 2000: 126). In a similar sense, Sudhir Kakar holds that a large number of women who search for healing 'are possessed by the ghosts of forbidden sexual and aggressive wishes' (Kakar 1982: 76) Fuller describes female possession only in terms of evil spirits, and Kapadia connects female possession to evil spirits, and male possession to the deities. She differentiates between the former as malign, and the latter as benign. She contends that the benign version is 'solely a male activity' (Kapadia 1995: 125). In Meyer's effort to separate them, spirits are unpredictable and generally destructive, while a deity can be both destructive and creative (Meyer 1986: 208f). Their distinction in character would consequently affect the possession. But more importantly, she holds that there is no clear difference between spirits and deities. Meyer argues that Angalamman has developed from an evil spirit, because of their similarities in tastes (dead bodies and children) and dwelling place (cremation ground). This convergence is also expressed by some of my informants, where family members are regarded as having been transformed into tutelary deities. According to Nabokov, children or teenagers who have died of small pox (diseases cased by Mariyamman's presence) never die completely but become deified and protect the households in which they were born (Nabokov 2000: 117).

[106] Possession is also part of public events, such as the annual festivals for the goddesses. During these occasions, both men and women may embody the deity. During festivals when Amman was taken out in the streets, priests were possessed in a formal, planned way and they performed as oracles. As such, they are not in control of themselves, they can be unruly and speak the words of the goddess as answers to people's questions. At the same time, people who were part of the audience could become spontaneously possessed. Meyer has observed that these devotees, who usually were women, have been discouraged, people have cooled them with ashes on their forehead and led them away (Meyer 1986: 258). During one of the festivals in Pelasur however, a spontaneously possessed woman became the villagers' oracle and took a large part in the event. One of the young men who performed a *venduthal* for Mariyamman described a much calmer form of the goddess' presence. According to him: 'When god comes over people who are performing *venduthals*, god will take away their pain. We won't be able to realise the coming and going of god. We think about Amman, and so she will come by herself… we become like god, but we are in control of ourselves.'

all [people who are causing her problems] could have destroyed me.' It is the goddess who gives her the courage to go out both at midday and midnight, despite the risk of being attacked by evil spirits during these hours.[107] The fact that Nagammal's husband left her alone with a daughter for another woman has made it impossible for Nagammal to be perceived as an auspicious woman. The trajectory of the *sumangali* is not available for her.

Their neighbour Usha is a woman in her thirties and the mother of two daughters and one son. She is neglected by the others due to her uncontrolled behaviour, although she claims that it is caused by possession of *shakti*. Usha has recently returned with her family to her home village after several years in Chennai. People were suspicious of why she came back, and she is accused of having had sexual relationships outside her marriage and for walking outside their house in the city screaming and ripping her sari off. Usha's husband hoped that she would calm down if she moved back to a known place. However, the woman continuously lacks self-control, she is anxious and unstable, she publicly yells at, and is yelled at by, family members as well as neighbours. Her husband is rarely at home and her brother did not even perform his obligations at the younger daughter's coming of age function. It is the daughters who take responsibility for the daily household duties, the elder cooks and the younger puts kolams.

Dana is an elderly woman in Pelasur who was married for seventeen years before she got pregnant. Then she finally gave birth to a daughter. Dana claims that her pregnancy was given through the help of Amman, and she has been in close contact with the goddess since her daughter's birth. She also has the ability to become possessed by male deities. Under Dana's supervision, her daughter and neighbouring girls of various ages sometimes became possessed. During their changed state of being they 'practised' dancing and expressing the words of god.

These three women faced a certain amount of disbelief by the surrounding community, but at the same time people did not dare to question them openly. Nagammal's closest neighbour always turned away, and her granddaughter instantly made her drink turmeric water to cool her and thus make the goddess leave. But other women came with sick children to have them cured by Mariyamman's work through Nagammal. Dana was sometimes accused of exploiting the girls, but she was shown much respect by the Brahmin

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[107] The worshippers of Kattaeri, described in the previous chapter, also have a capacity to fearlessly neglect the risks of being out at night. Women walk through darkness to ponds off public areas and come home late in the evening. The opposition against ordinary rules moreover applies to eating. Instead of giving the cooked food to men first, it is they who are given the leftovers after the women have eaten.

priest in the Shiva temple. Usha was the least acknowledged, and openly condemned for her behaviour.

Many of the young women in the villages have to start working for the family income at an early age, some even before they have completed twelfth standard, the basic level of education. While Priya works at the mill, her friend Meghala attends a stitching course. Meghala's father has borrowed money and bought her a sewing machine, and both parents hope that their daughter will be able to have a better future than to be dependent on agricultural work. It is her parents' decision that she should learn to stitch, and their concern gives confidence to their daughter. The status of the family increases if Meghala learns an occupation which requires less physical effort than replanting rice or carrying sand at construction sites. The salary for a dressmaker is higher, and this can also be an advantage at the coming dowry negotiations. After finishing a six-month course, Meghala will start to receive customers in her home. The thought of sitting in a street shop (brought on by me) however evokes insecurity. She tells me that: 'We [the apprentices in the course] wouldn't want to have a tailor shop in the street, our parents wouldn't allow it… it is for men to have shops in the street.' The young women in the course feel that when they are outside, the fear of being teased by men, both young and old, is always present. 'They [men] might pull your shawl, *dupatta*, or make embarrassing comments of for example if you have attained your puberty yet… This is why we avoid wearing jeans and short tops', they continued. Teasing by boys often comes out as whispers because they fear being scolded by the elders. If a girl complains in front of her family, the father or brother might take revenge on the boys. But one elder woman who visited the course told me that if her granddaughter was teased: 'I would beat them with a chappal! I would get angry. It is not necessary that we should accept everything!'

The apprentices value their teacher highly and they try to encourage her to come forward as a candidate in the coming election in the village council, *panchayat*. None of the women in Pelasur attend the 'open' *panchayat* meetings. The married women are busy with their household work and cannot find the time. The unmarried are not allowed to go by their parents because there are only male attendants.[108] Meghala said that: 'If we went, it would only be embarrassing for us, the men would not listen to us… they say that because we are young and women, we don't know anything.' During one stitching class when we have a discussion on the lack of female space in the political sphere, the *panchayat* leader turns up in

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[108] In all three villages, the reservation of one third of the seats for women in all Indian *panchayats*, installed by National Government law (Anandhi 2002), was ignored.

the house. He does not pay any attention to us as he has come to visit the man of the house. But the openness of our discussion comes to a halt. The difficulties and anxieties over having transgressed their allotted space through our conversation, makes the young women change their behaviour completely. In whispering voices they ask me to change the subject, and their worried restlessness soon makes the group split up.

Whereas I attended a couple of meetings held by the official *panchayat*, I was not allowed to go to those held by the elders.[109] The leader of the former, who felt he was responsible for my well-being in 'his' village, argued that my security would be at stake if I went: 'The members are immoral, they are drunkards and might tease you. No women go there. They will not show you any respect… and the meeting starts late in the evening, it might not finish until midnight. Why don't you go to the kindergarten and do an interview instead?'

Many women are content with the structure of decision making at the public level. They trust in their male representatives and hold that a wife always has a possibility to make her husband bring fourth her own opinion on important issues. But several argue that it is not possible to come forward if a woman wants to, she would only be ridiculed by the men.

Shivahami, the woman on Vellalar Street who has hired Priya to make her kolams in the street, is an exceptional woman in the village context. She has not paid attention to those who have questioned her decision to get a high education and work outside the village. Every Monday morning, Shivahami leaves for her State Government job in Chennai, and she comes back on Friday nights. During the weekdays she stays at a Women's Hostel in the city while her husband who works closer to home takes care of the household and their two sons with some help from a servant (in addition to Priya). According to Shivahami, she does not have any time off when she is home, the whole weekend has to be spent on cleaning. Since she was young, she had the ambition to make a career. Her strong determination was supported by her natal family as well as her in-laws, and she never paid attention to other people's comments. When Shivahami's sons were small, she continued her education through distance learning. During the last five years, she has had employment with a good salary. Shivahami feels that she has earned a lot of self-confidence, and through her assignments on investigating child labour she feels that she makes a difference. She argues that village

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[109] Apart from the official *panchayat*, most villages continue the older tradition of the elder's *panchayat*. The members in this council are not elected. Ideally, it consists of elder men who have earned their seats by experience and knowledge. Decisions on arrangements of temple festivals or solving family conflicts are taken in this forum. Informants held that it would be shameful for a family to have to bring a conflict in front of these men. It was a sign of weakness and lack of self-control among the members of the family.

women do not take part in the *panchayat* because they have no possibilities to develop personal aims. The work loads within the household and in the fields or construction sites are too great to allow for further interests. If they do find interest, they will not get the permission from their husband, or they lack the confidence it takes to believe that they will be successful. Women lack both self-assurance and time to reflect on other possibilities. A few months after my fieldwork was completed, Shivahami and her family had left the village for a nearby town. The main concern was better education for their sons. Shivahami argues that the children need better opportunities to learn English than the village school can provide: 'English is like money, they both cross borders of caste.'

Negotiating new knowledge

Sathiya, twenty-two years old, has recently returned to her family in Pelasur after a postgraduate education in a large town. During her absence, her relationship with the kolam practice has changed. Although she showed a lot of interest and often put the daily street kolams before she left, she never does now. It is her mother who makes them, while Sathiya draws elaborate images at auspicious occasion. She insists that they buy coloured powders, but as they only can afford it during Pongal, this is the event that Sathiya mainly engages in. The neighbours who lack extra rupies to spend, admire the new brightness that Sathiya's kolams bring to their street.

Sathiya and her family are Mudaliars, a caste that is ranked rather high in the present village context. They struggle to be considered as middle class, and to send the children to higher education is a part of this effort. Sathiya has been taught the importance of following the ideal of Sridevi and Lakshmi (see Chapter III). Following her education, the capacity of finding a job has been added to the eight qualities of Lakshmi. Sathiya feels that if she belonged to a rich family, the job would be a means to earn her own pocket money and socialise with friends at a workplace. She would get greater freedom in not having to ask her parents for money, but they would not see it as central that she took a job. The higher education would be enough as it increases both her and her family's status. But in her personal life, Sathiya feels a big responsibility to increase the income of her family. If she managed to help with money for a fridge, it would quieten the neighbours who comment upon this lack. According to this logic, the most difficult position is that of the middle class. Sathiya said that: 'If you belong to the lower [class], no one expects anything of you, and if you belong to the higher, you have what you need. But in order to climb in the class hierarchy, you are constantly scrutinized.' When young women behave more like the upper

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class, their status increases and the prospects of a good marriage will be larger. It is important for the whole family to never move downwards. 'If you are able to pay a high dowry for your first daughter, you will pay the same for the second even if your business has become less prosperous' said Sathiya.

The town where Sathiya studied is situated in South Tamilnadu, in the same area as her father grew up and where they have relatives. As is common for women in Sathiya's situation, she stayed at a Women's Hostel during the education. Parents' anxiety in allowing daughters to live far away before marriage is expressed in the many rules concerning how the girls could move around. The times they wanted to go in and out of the hostel had to be signed in a book beforehand, and the director always made a phone call to the parents to check if they agreed. The girls were expected to stay inside the hostel premises, and consequently none of them were allowed to make kolams in the street. An employee took care of this task. During festive occasions, girls who were interested made kolams inside the hostel walls. If a hostel did not have strict rules, Sathiya argued that no parents would let their daughters stay there.

The possibility Sathiya had to be out with friends during her time in the city is something that she misses. With permission by her parents, the girls went to markets, coffee shops, and occasionally to the cinema. But they were not allowed to see the evening shows. Young women who care about their reputation can not go out late without the company of a male relative or friend. At that time, the audience consists mainly of unmarried young men. In the villages, adolescent non-Brahmins girls have a possibility to move around in their own street and neighbourhood. But in all contexts, women must not walk alone in the dark. The major motivation is the threat of evil spirits, described in Chapter III. While most young women express that they have trust in their parents and believe that the parents want what is the best for their children, Sathiya shows anger towards the rules of not letting women move around in the evenings. From her point of view, the threat of evil spirits is only made up by men to keep their women at home and under control. But although she travels alone by bus to her workplace in a nearby town, she would not confront her parents by demanding to go out at night.

Another habit Sathiya has taken up since she lived in town is to spend a lot of time keeping her facial skin in a good condition. People generally hold that the complexion ought to be as light and soft as possible, especially on women. When it is time to go for a visit, mothers put white powder on their own as well as their children's faces. Many adolescents with darker skin buy creams that on the TV commercials show an amazing difference after

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only a few weeks use. Some young women in the village told me that nowadays only men buy these, because women have become aware of the roughness of the creams and opt for what is perceived as more natural substances. It is not unusual with skin diseases that cause irregularities both of tone and evenness, and particularly women with such problems underwent a lot of grief. Marriage arrangements can begin with sending photos of a woman to presumptive distant in-laws, and she might be rejected on the grounds that her skin is not fair enough.

Since Sathiya reluctantly came back to Pelasur after her education, she pushes the limits of her restrictions. She tries to keep up with new habits such as getting up later in the morning, travelling into town by herself, and finding a steady job in a call centre. She considers the daily kolams to be her mother's task, and she hopes to marry a man that will make it possible for her to employ a maid to do this work for her. Sathiya's mother is proud of her daughter's educational achievements, but yet worries that she might get too demanding in the coming marriage negotiations. Both women contend that the education has increased Sathiya's self-confidence.

Much of the worries of Sathiya's mother, and other middle class women in her generation, concern Western influences on her daughter's character. In daily speech, Western and modern are often interchangeable terms, and these influences are perceived as more common in the cities. Sathiya's aunt left Pelasur for Chennai when she married eight years ago. She is happy about the changes which she holds have given her much more freedom, space and abilities to make choices. Less control from relatives and neighbours than in the village gives relief, but even more important are the larger possibilities for good education and jobs outside the home. Education gives women better self-confidence and the ability to disobey. According to the aunt, the adult generation below the age of thirty-five is the first generation among which it has been possible for all women to get education. But notions about the West and the modern are ambiguous. Sathiya's mother and aunt are happy about the increased possibilities for getting knowledge from other parts of the world through media, that the world is globalized, and that India has become developed. However, there is a risk of becoming 'too Westernized', which is to lack self-control, to be without character. This expression contains neglect of family values, and was voiced by many informants across caste and class borders. On different levels, people are anxious about the changing traditions. A common worry is the change in dress among young women. Tiny tops and skirts are considered to be a Western influence that will cause more opportunities for sex. It will become more difficult to uphold sexual morality and the ideal of chastity, and thus *gauravam*

will be violated. The main issue is that young women might develop an inability to keep their marriages together and divorce as easily as Western women. Another concern is the loss of the joint family. People are anxious that in nuclear families, children will not get enough love when both parents are working and there are no grandparents around. They will miss physical closeness as well as possibilities to learn from the elders' experiences. Kindergarten is not perceived as an appropriate option.

In spite of the ambivalence towards city life, Sathiya's parents have agreed that it will be best to search for a suitable husband among the city dwellers. After marriage, Sathiya will have to learn to adjust to her in-laws, and her parents contend that it is more likely to find an open minded family that approves of their daughter's habits in a city.

Radicalisation

Although most women negotiate disagreements on a smaller scale in their everyday life, some have taken on the task of creating radical change. Akka, a young woman from the Dalit area outside Pelasur, took the initiative to found the first local Women's Self Help Group (SHG) in the area. She made this commitment shortly after she separated from her husband in Bangalore and moved back to her mother's house with her two sons. Akka's aim is to make a difference by supporting women without individual possibilities to make claims in their lives. Since the last decade, the SHGs are increasingly essential in the political support of lower class women in Tamilnadu.[110] Women who are organised in the groups are able to get micro loans with a low interest, and are encouraged to start up businesses and saving accounts.

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[110] The SHGs were first formed 1982-83 under the DWCRA scheme, a part of the Union Government's Integrated Rural Development Programme. Introduced in May 1989 in Dharmapuri, Salem and South Arcot districts. Jayalalitha later claimed that she was a founder but she was not in government at that time (*The Hindu* 20060504). In May 2006, there were about 260 state government groups in Thiruvannamalai district, and as many planned to be formed. www.tn.gov.in/dtp/shg.htm 2007-08-20 The SHGs in this area are run either by the State Government, the Central Government, or private agencies. The State Government has emphasized the importance of giving economic resources to women's empowerment through the SHGs, and the amount has become an issue in the bargaining for votes. But the local SHG has to pass many levels in order to get in contact with the State Government and receive money from the distributing trust company. The application written by the group leader first needs the signature of the *panchayat* leader in the village. Secondly, the application form is examined at the Block Development Office, BDO, which is responsible for ten to fifteen village *panchayats*. Thirdly, it proceeds to the Union Panchayat, and finally to the Collectors Office, the main political body in a district. At each level there are individual economic interests which may interrupt the proceedings. According to my informants, SHGs administered by the Central Government are preferred because the communication is clearer, and the control on possible bribes more strict. The private interests, which can be private agencies or Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO), are considered as less beneficial. When several different organisations run their own SHGs in the same area, women argue that it will be more difficult to organise themselves on a larger scale. The organisations can induce competition rather than cooperation. Moreover, the economic conditions given by private agencies, as for example the interest amount, are perceived as more demanding.

Akka does not connect her dedication to the SHGs and the increase of women's self-confidence with the kolam practice. Since her divorce and resettlement in her mother's house, she takes care of their daily kolams. Much like the other participants in the Dalit SHGs, she experiences such pressure through the social inequality that it was irrelevant to talk about the kolams in terms of increased self-confidence. They are not the women who have free time to experiment with new designs or take part in competitions. They rather devote any time they can spare to their meetings.

We sit on a couple of mats on the ground below the only street light in Ambedkar Nagar, and it barely lights us up. The women present have met here once a week over the last six years, when their group was founded. It is named Muthumariyamman after the goddess who has her temple in the vicinity. The meeting starts with a Tamil anthem, and then the participants ask god for blessings. Next, Akka's thirteen year old son reads out the group's pledge with the help of his mother, and the present women follow in chorus:

> For the welfare of the women who live in poverty – and their development – we have gathered as a Self Help Group – and united! – to pave way – for the economic growth – by giving training – for small scale business – and to encourage them – to involve themselves – in social work – for the progress of women – I will work hard – women also – must grow equal to men – and this we will realize. – We will wholeheartedly – face the obstacles – that would come in its way…

And Akka continues:

> I will be strong against the injustice, violence and tortures against women. Without marring the women's freedom, I take an oath to bring out and develop their skill and capacity. I, through this, take an oath to pave ways for the development of the women, their families and their children in the society. I will work for the women to have complete freedom to work and do business and to developed themselves through education and to live with dignity and self confidence wherever they go. I solemnly swear to create a world where there is no discrimination with respect to caste and for women.

Akka started the Muthumariyamman group with financial aid from private interests. She was encouraged by a friend who worked in a private trust to start the group, and the trust invested money which was lent to the group members. After some time, Akka had a disagreement with the administration of the trust and reorganised the group under the State

Government. Since then, the members have experienced the difficulties of being dependent on the *panchayat* leader within Pelasur village. The women need his signature on their applications for Government funds. The *panchayat* leader, who belongs to the dominant caste in the village, has used his power in the Block Development Office (BDO) to manipulate funds granted to the SHG's in Ambedkar Nagar into the hands of his own community. He started a new SHG in the name of his daughter in-law, and made the BDO transfer the money to her group instead of the Muthumariyamman group. Much of the funds have thus been spent for the benefit of the Vanniyars, whereas the Dalit women gained nothing.

In spite of this backdrop, Akka's group is developing well. All the thirteen members were able to construct a terraced house for their families with their first granted loan. Most members invest the loans within their families, for instance children's education, dowries and agricultural expenses. Hardly anyone plans to use the money to start businesses, and this is related to the heavy daily work load they have already. When a member does not have the money to pay the interest and the required savings amount, usually a person who has no income of her own, the members sometimes lend to each other. But as the possibility to get new loans depends on all members joint efforts, those who do not keep the agreements are severely reprimanded.

When it is time for the regular election of the *panchayat* leader in Pelasur, the members of the Muthumariyamman group usually discuss different aspects of the candidates and sometimes take a joint decision on whom to vote for. However, such conversations are not allowed by the loan givers. According to the Government officials, the SHG members should develop personal businesses and not involve themselves in politics. Disputes within the families of the members are also discussed. When Tulasi's husband was about to set her and their children on fire, they were rescued by a woman who is active in an SHG in Tennampattu. This woman has encouraged Tulasi to become a member. Within the group, she would be supported to not give in to her present situation, and helped to leave her husband. So far, fear of his revenge and not being able to manage economically without him keeps her in a tight grip. Lakshmi, a relative of Akka, leads a life which has similarities with Tulasi's and contains most of what the group works against, and she explains that she often thinks about separating from her husband, like Akka managed to do. One of the reasons that make Lakshmi hesitate is that she is afraid that this would cause shame, *asingam*, on Akka:

> The others would say that I and Akka are the same… she managed to get away from
> her husband, right? So they say that I will have her kind of thoughts only, since I

work with her… so, I thought of not bringing a bad name to her…. And so adjust, thinking that somebody else should not have problems because of me… but I'm sure that one day I should put him in jail! When he treats me worse than a dog, how am I to live with him?!

Akka is an ambitious woman and full of self-confidence, which she argues has developed during her time as a leader of the SHG. Through this work she has learned how to handle bank accounts, and to defend her group in the Collectors Office in Thiruvannamalai where she hands in petitions about improvements she and the other SHG members find relevant. She is also trying to teach the group members how to read and write. When the attendance list is signed at each meeting, some women are still using their thumb to make a print. The SHG members enhance their self-confidence by extending their networks and working together in learning new skills. Through the groups and their meetings, they get acquainted with women outside their own street and develop support for each other in their everyday problems. To a large extent, men have realised that the whole family benefit from the accomplishments of the SHGs. Yet, it is common that women must leave a meeting in advance in order to take care of the household work, as well as to cancel meetings because not enough women are able to attend. It takes negotiations to leave the home for many women.

Kolams and decision making

The specialist Ambika, initially described in Chapter V, has extended her public space and possibilities to negotiate her position through her personal development of the kolam practice. She has made a name for herself, not only by winning prizes in competitions, receiving assignments of kolam drawing, giving courses and performing TV shows, but also as a judge. In judging kolam competitions, Ambika has the final word on what beautiful kolams look like. Her words and the images she judges are transferred to the media and, like her TV shows, they reach a large amount of kolam makers.

During the months of Margali and Thai, the frequent number of competitions keeps Ambika busy. The organisers vary, from private associations like Rotary, to women's magazines and daily newspapers. Ambika has never been a judge at the large competition in Chennai which only allows for 'authentic' kolams. Rather, she embraces new styles and has her own ideas of how they are used best. Her judgements of the images are based on three features that she holds as central for a beautiful kolam. First, she looks at the finished work, that the image is as attractive as possible. This includes perfection of the lines and a complete

symmetry. Secondly, she gives attention to how the allotted space has been used. Each competitor usually has just over one square metre at their disposal, and this space should be filled evenly. It does not look good if there is too many empty spaces between the patterns, or if the design crosses onto a neighbour's square. Thirdly, Ambika judges the colour combination. She has a preference for contrasts which increase the power of the image. These may be between dark and light colours, or contrasting colours like blue and yellow or red and green. At a competition, she gives ten points maximum to each feature. The actual performance has no relevance in this ranking, it is only the material result which is important. Ambika contends that the addition of flowers or designs in the form of oil lamps, *velakkus*, makes the kolam more attractive, but her judgements are not based on the choice of design.

At a recent commission in Puducherry, organised by the newspaper *Dinamalar*, Ambika shared the role as a judge with two other women. Fortunately, the five hundred competitors were divided between the judges to avoid conflicting opinions about the images. To make judgements is still a difficult task. The many exquisite images to rank is one issue, but Ambika also has to pay attention to her social relationships with their makers. To avoid disputes she is not announced as a judge until the kolams are completed, but most people know about her profession. She does not try to hide it, but walks around with a pen and paper to write down some of her points even before the announcement. There are several dilemmas for Ambika during the competition. Conflicting situations sometimes arise when women from her evening courses come up to her and try to use their higher social position to affect the judgements. She must be careful to not pay too much attention to a friend, otherwise she might be accused of showing partiality. Being in her mid thirties, there are many competitors who are older and she is obliged to show them respect. This intersects with their caste and class belonging, and according to these categories Ambika's position is often low as well. Numerous participants have taken part in her classes, and some have a role in her life on other levels. If her judgements modify how the women are positioned towards each other, this might influence their future relationship. For Ambika who tries patiently and delicately to remain neutral, it helps to have worked out her features of judgement formally. And according to the notion that a person who is knowledgeable also requires reverence, most of the participants respect her decisions once they are made. As a consequence of the hierarchy, Ambika sometimes feels that the honour of being given the assignment prevents her from asking for payment.

The kolams that Ambika has to judge are varied and imaginative. They are based on designs drawn in ordinary white kolam *maavu*, and some show traces of tips that

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Ambika has given in her TV programmes. The majority are filled in with colour. The colours are constituted by powders, flowers and flower petals in pink, yellow, white, orange, and purple, or vegetables and fruits like sliced orange and cucumber, tomatoes, and grapes. Beside the number each square is given, the kolam maker often writes her signature.

At the large two day competition in Chennai, the practice of signing one's kolam is common as well. But the colourful images would be disqualified from being kolams and described as *rangolis*. The rules are given by the organisers before anyone begins. Whereas most competitors follow the rules, some add a few flowers or other colours, or make designs where the dots are covered. Last year, the music teacher Parvati was the only judge during both days. She looks for a sense of rhythm in the designs, and prefers those where the *kambi* kolam is combined with figurative elements. Like Ambika, she holds that exact symmetry is essential. Parvati explains that it takes more skill to achieve a perfect symmetry when the dots are kept visible, and that is why the organisers maintain this rule. It is the organisers who have set rules, and she cannot judge beyond them. Due to her high social position, she does not have the same dilemmas as Ambika. But conflicts may still arise, and to avoid them she was not announced as a judge until the competition was over. During the event, she discretely wrote down the numbers of the best kolams in her palm. She also had to keep an eye on the appearance of the participants as some try to take part both days but under different names. In the evening, when the winners were declared and the prizes given, the traffic had already disintegrated the images. Comparison and discussions of the result was impossible.

Parvati's husband has a progressive attitude. He encourages his wife to develop her educational interests and kolam skills outside their own neighbourhood. He even suggested that Parvati wore a *chudidar* during the competition which he held would make it much easier for her to tread around the kolams all day. Ambika however, had much to work against (see Chapter V). It was a rich high caste woman who was able to challenge her father's restrictions. But Ambika does not want to talk about the difference between them in terms of caste. She prefers to relate it to class, and rather talks about the Chettiyar woman's wealth. This is the only visible sign of their social difference. For Ambika, caste categorisation is connected to former oppression and conflicts, and she says that people nowadays want to move on and meet as friends. When she thinks about her daughter's future, she can imagine that the girl may marry across caste borders. But she contends that it would be difficult if the in-law family belonged to another religious community. In that case, her daughter would end up in many conflicts with her mother in-law. Like many of the women

I met, Ambika discussed her children's future married life in terms of relationships between women. In everyday life, different beliefs and habits is an issue between the mother in-law and daughter in-law, not between woman and husband. Ambika is not worried about whether her daughter will have problems with her kolam performance after marriage. Among the middle class in the city to which they belong, it is possible that a daughter in-law who does not perform the kolams well can be accused by her mother in-law of ruining the *gauravam* of the family. But according to Ambika, the requirement for kolams is less strong nowadays. She also knows that her daughter makes them well and would never be confronted with such accusations.

Ambika tries to increase her daughter's self-confidence by allowing her both to ask questions and to answer them for her. When she grew up, she was allowed to put questions to her mother, but she never got any answers. Her mother told that when she was young, she was not even allowed to ask, she just had to do what she was told. Ambika also regards her kolam courses as means to increase women's self-confidence. Due to the employment of maids, many partakers have lost the connection with the kolam practice. One way that Ambika tries to encourage the housewives to draw is to teach them new uncomplicated techniques.

Developing female gender

Michael, a nine year old boy who lives in a slum area in Chennai, likes all kinds of drawing. He makes a kolam in front of the family altar in his home every Friday. His notebook is full of kolam designs and on special occasions he makes a large one in front of a nearby Catholic church. The appearance of the church is similar to a small Hindu temple, but it houses a statue dedicated to Queen Mary (the local conception of Virgin Mary). When Michael makes a kolam for her, he makes sure that some adult relatives are around. Otherwise the teasing of neighbour-hood boys becomes unbearable. The risk of being made fun of is the reason why he never makes kolams outside his home, not even on Pongal. The others would say: 'You are a boy and you draw the kolams like a woman, splashing water…?' His mother is, however, proud over Michael's talent. She explains that: 'Some will praise him for his skill and the excellent way he has drawn the kolam, but some make fun, that is why he has got that shyness.'

When I brought up the subject of the possibility of male kolam makers, it often resulted in giggles and women turned away in embarrassment. When I pushed the question further, I conveyed ideas that so far had been unthinkable for some informants. My interest was at times perceived as challenging towards women's identity. Many women express pride at being in control over the kolam practice. They hold that there are so many things that

women are restricted from doing, and therefore they should not give away the knowledge of the kolam to men. It was their right as women to draw kolams, not their duty. But several explained that they would still appreciate a husband that had such a soft character that he would help his wife with household tasks in public.

The negative perception of boys or men who engage in the kolam practice is a continuation of the idea that good kolam makers are good wives. It is the wife that will be blamed for not attending to her responsibilities if her husband sweeps and draws the image. Gunasundari is a Dalit woman who lives with her husband and first child in a slum area in Chennai. She worked in a leather factory before she married, but now she only has time for household work. At the thought of her husband making kolams in the street, she argues that:

> It would be shameful (*asingam*) for me... the onlookers would say something like …
> a man doing the kolam!... the onlookers would question us. It is the woman who
> should do that. But my husband likes to draw kolams with a chalk piece inside the
> house. Sometimes he gives me ideas on new designs.

The impossibility of male kolam makers are often related to natural states of being. Malliga, the teacher in Pelasur, holds that boys lack the concentration and patience which is needed to develop the practice, they get bored too quickly. Parvati, the music teacher in Chennai contends that: 'It is in women's genes to see the difference between what is beautiful and not.' Women are supposed to have a softer character than men, and a larger sensitivity for beauty and gracefulness. When a person draws a kolam, the quality of grace, *magimai*, is considered to increase within her or him. Boys should not involve themselves in tasks such as the kolam practice, and thereby develop female characters. In the public discourse, both men and women make fun of male kolam makers and accuse them of acting girly. However, it is not all that unusual for young boys to create kolams in the streets. Especially in families without daughters, sons make them in order to help their mothers. Others draw the images out of interest.

Even if boys reluctantly can be accepted as kolam makers, it is unthinkable for a man to continue the practice after marriage. But after some time in the field, I was told in confidence about the embarrassing issue of grown up and married men that yet make kolams regularly. This signifies that something is wrong within the home. The wife is not fulfilling her responsibilities, or there might not be a wife or any other female members in the family. If there is not even a female neighbour who is willing to help, the man is not considered to be

a good person. In order not to sully his reputation, a man who wants to make a kolam in the street has to get up at three o'clock in the morning. Then he is able to clean the entrance and draw the kolam before anyone else is up and able to see his failure. Only during the harvest festival or public competitions may a man take part. On these occasions, the family status is at stake on another level.

Many believe that the gods and goddesses do not accept kolams made by men. Brahmin priests explain this as related to men's development of desires for females, land and gold. They make a person less devotional and are in the way if we want god to appear before us. Women are believed to lack these particular desires, and therefore their capacity for *bhakti* and attracting the deities is much stronger. According to one of the priests, this attractive power is termed charisma, or *vasigaram shakti*. He contends that this power, along with grace, becomes a part of the kolam image when it is drawn by a woman. It is never there when the kolam is made by a man. Only a *sannyasin*, a man who has renounced family life and given up the three desires, is able to perform kolams accepted by god. But such a man would make kolams in a temple or during *puja* inside a house, never in the street.

Some Tamils who neither perceive themselves as men nor women ascribe their gender to a third category, the Aravanis[111]. They used to be dancers at the kings court, and the protectors of the queen. Their capacity of giving blessings made them sought after during auspicious family functions and openings of new businesses. They continuously sing, dance, and bless the participants during functions, and their performance is a means to make a living (cf Reddy 2005). The main part of the group consists of people who cannot be physically determined as either men or women, but want to become women.[112] Those who physically appear as men after puberty often have their sexual organs removed. The transformation is completed by the same coming of age function that is done for girls. They want to be like women, and they never have sexual relationships other than with men. Where they live in

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[111] Their name derives from the Mahabharata epic. The god Krishna took a female form as Mohini in order to enable Aravani, the son of Arjuna who had to be sacrificed to the gods, to marry. No woman would voluntarily marry a man that was about to die and thus immediately make his wife into a widow. The Aravanis see themselves as Mohini, the androgynous wife of Aravani. The Ramayana epic tells the story about how god gave the Aravanis the power of giving the blessings of Krishna. It was given to them by Rama after they had waited for him on the same spot for sixteen years when he went into the forest with his brother Lakshman and wife Sita. He only told the gentlemen and women to leave the place, not the people in between, so he felt regret. The Hindi/Urdu term is *hijra*.

[112] There has also been some space for trans-sexuality within local theatre companies. These companies have been an important part of rural temple festivals. However, they have been restricted to men performing as women, never the opposite. The only time I saw a woman dressed as a man was in a photo of one of the women in Pelasur. She went to a studio with her husband, and in the black and white image from the early days of their marriage they were both dressed in checked down folded *lungis* and short sleeved shirts.

houses and are able to create homes, Aravanis put kolams as part of developing their womanhood.

Since the increase of HIV and AIDS, the status of the Aravanis has changed. Their second source of income as sex workers is one of the reasons that the government has campaigned against the Aravanis as causing the spread of HIV. The negative attitude is increased by the practice of a few to demand too much payment of their hosts at functions, lest they would use their powers to curse and cause harm instead of auspiciousness. The Aravanis are stigmatised. They get harassed in school and cannot continue their education, and in the streets people walk away from them or shout derogative names. As a discriminated group, they have difficulties in finding proper accommodation and many live on the streets.[113]

One of the insults hurled at the Aravanis is the term *oombodu* (nine). The figure which becomes another one when turned upside down refers to the ambiguous character of their gender. *Oombodu* is often used as a teasing name towards boys who make kolams in the streets. Even if adult Aravanis identify mainly with female gender, children also use the term to ridicule girls who appear manly. As far as my knowledge extends, there is no acknowledgement of women transgressing their gender towards the male.[114]

Discussion

Although the majority of women in Tamilnadu make daily kolams, their individual relationships with the practice are varied. It occupies most of the creative capacity among some, whereas others enact the performance without much reflection. In spite of all the differences, there are few women without any direct contact with the kolam practice. They might draw an image once a month, annually, or at least change the plastic adhesive in the *puja* room occasionally. The variations are context dependent, connected to where a woman lives and which status she and her family have as well as aim for. It further depends on the kolam performer's perception of the norms accorded female behaviour.

Sathiya's lack of engagement with the daily performance since her return to Pelasur from her urban education can be interpreted as an attempt to make a statement of her changed position. She no longer identifies with village life and the tasks that it requires of women. Her aim is to reach a higher social level which includes a job outside the household

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[113] Positive changes are occuring, such as works for an entry on the ration card for the Aravanis in addition to male and female, see further Thamilnadu Aravanigal Association http://www.infosem.org/thaa.htm

[114] Some Indian feminists are in conflict with Aravanis because the latter voluntarily want to become women, who they consider as discriminated and without rights. The Aravanis are perceived as working against the feminists who in line with the Self Respecters even refuse to wear the *taali* at marriage ceremonies as they connect this tradition to slavery.

and a maid that will draw her daily kolam. In the case of the specialist Ambika, an increased engagement in the practice has extended her self-confidence considerably. She has moved outside her home, beyond the role of the competitor in large contests and makes decisions as a judge according to her own features. She has made a name both for herself and for her family. Through these achievements, Ambika has earned respect even from her doubtful mother in-law. Sathiya and Ambika both negotiate the morally correct behaviour expected of them through the kolam practice, but in quite opposite ways.

Women with low social positions have few possibilities to negotiate through kolam making. Lack of income makes it impossible for them to spend much time on kolam experiments, or money on new materials. Within their circumstances, there are yet women who, like Gayatri, become known as the best kolam maker in their street. Members of the SHGs and apprentices in the stitching courses earn individual self-confidence through the support the women give each other within the groups. When states of divine possession are recognised, Nagammal and Usha experience increased respect from the community. The creative agency of the kolam makers that forms part of the title to this chapter is thus not necessarily expressed in the kolam practice.

To not make daily kolams is part of most upper class and caste women's identities, and although it is not explicitly articulated it separates them from the majority. Their relationship with the practice is rather distinction than identification. If wealthy women wanted to make a statement through the kolam practice, it would be to actually make them often. According to Parvati, a city girl can say no to making daily kolams without causing commotion, but a village girl cannot. But she contends that this difference does not concern a general urban/rural divide, it is due to the fact that village girls continuously lack proper education. Higher education is linked to women's sense of self-confidence. Beyond the concern of well-being for their families and a rise in status position, many women discuss the importance of individual self-confidence. It is considered to enable them to pose questions and negotiate their space.

Kapadia argues that women in the lowest castes 'have far more autonomy than those in the upper castes' (Kapadia 1996: 14) and that recent trends of people in the lower strata who try to move upwards within their caste along the lines of class threatens this autonomy. When men get salaried jobs through higher education women are withdrawn from wage-work in the fields and become semi-secluded housewives like upper-caste women. Wives lose their ability to contribute economically to the family through agricultural work, both in their mother's house and the in-law's. Therefore women become burdens, and this

engenders a class difference between husband and wife. She contends that '*the status of women falls when that of their husbands rises*' (Kapadia 1996: 251, her emphasis). Further, changes in kinship discourses are given as reasons for why women in lower non-Brahmin castes lose status. Kapadia describes how non-Brahmin women have historically had a higher position in their families in comparison with Brahmin women. She refers to the emphasis on the mother's brother among the lower castes which engenders a closer relationship between women and their mother's house, and to the recent change from bride wealth to dowry, and a larger possibility for the woman's family to approach a prospective marriage partner instead of waiting for approaching men. Kapadia argues that the importance of economic assets has replaced previous emphasis on kinship relations (Kapadia 1996).While I agree with Kapadia that the increase in dowry has become a large problem for low caste families with many daughters, I hold that her analysis of an emerging class difference between husbands and wives is too focused on economic aspects of the public sphere. Firstly, it is as though women's household work is without value, and secondly, the women in Pelasur and Hariyarapakkam expressed it differently. Low caste women that worked, or had been working, in the fields, did not convey an experience of loss of status if they were withdrawn from the demanding tasks of planting and weeding. Rather, they held that they would be happy to become housewives and not have to bend their backs in the water filled fields, day in and day out. Those who had become housewives were regarded as having the same enhancement of social status as their husbands. This relates to the kolam practice, as it is increasingly showing higher status to be capable to employ a maid to clean in front of the house and make a daily street kolam. In both cases, it is the ability to withdraw from menial work which is considered as positive.

In his examination of Tamil individuality, Mattison Mines discusses public and private aspects of personhood (Mines 1994: 13). The additional spatial dimension of individuality limits the public recognition of a person to a context in which he or she is known. Mines holds that it is difficult for women to gain leading positions in the public unless they belong to the known elite. While the elite minority provides opportunities for apprenticeship, the majority of women are confined by norms on gender behaviour. According to Mines, 'honour requires women to be good wives and dutiful daughters and daughters-in-law, roles that constrain the freedom that political and business aspirations require' (Mines 1994: 16). This exterior dimension of individuality is intertwined with its interior dimension. The latter is the inner voice of the self-reflecting person: 'the inner voice

is the creative force behind agency, decision making, and direction taking. It evaluates and interprets experience' (Mines 1994: 22).

In the present study, the creative agency that forms part of the interior individuality is defined as female agency. It is female as it refers to the agency of the female kolam makers which evaluates and acts on the norms that define female gender. As shown in this chapter, negotiations through female agency do not usually concern radical changes. In the context of struggles with economic problems and power issues, the kolam practice as a means to negotiating one's position might seem limited. However, it appears to make a difference in how individual lives are lived. The daily street kolams materialises that women's household work is not confined to the interior of the house. During festive occasions, the time and space for creativity increase. Large and elaborate kolams cover the main part of the streets during family functions, at temple festivals, and the whole month of Margali which ends with the Pongal festival, the annual climax of the performance. Festivals and auspicious functions are joyous, and women who refrain from making daily kolams often partake along with male family members. As women's movements in public space are confined in relation to men's, it can be argued that when women extend their kolams over the whole street during Pongal, they materialise female agency.

When competitions are held, the sense of individuality expands. Nagarajan holds that the movement of the kolam from the threshold to competitions in large public spaces 'is actively supported and guided by the women kolam-makers themselves, as a way of increasing their participation in the public culture' (Nagarajan 1998: 211). With reference to Mines, she argues that the public recognition women earn in these events increases women's sense of exterior individuality (Nagarajan 1998: 210). Nagarajan gives important attention to how changes in the kolam practice influence women's identity. But the everyday practice outside the home is closely connected to women's identity as well. It affects the constitution of female gender.

The people who are a part of this study consider men and women as different kinds of beings. A female person does not learn to become female, she is born as a girl and will grow up to be a woman. Male persons are correspondingly understood. As shown earlier (Chapter II), some describe the difference between men and women in terms of *jaati*. This term refers to a person's origin, that he or she belongs to a certain species that is defined by birth. At the same time, the term is flexible and context dependent and designates various categories such as a caste, a population, or the followers of an occupation (Quigley 1993:4f). According to Gayatri Reddy, who has conducted research among people of the third gender,

her informants hold that they belong to a third *jaati*, they were born as different from men and women (Reddy 2005: 134). As told by Parvati, the differentiation between men and women is also understood in terms of divergent genes.

While female and male persons are born with a certain unchangeable ability, the development of their characters depends on what they do. This is expressed in the identification between the kolam maker and the kolam practice/image. A female person is born with ability for patience and sensitivity for beauty and grace, whereas characteristics like the capacity to adjust, be artistic and in self-control have been described as needed to be learnt. The female is also born with a lack of desires for land, men and gold. Through the constant re-enactment of the kolam practice, abilities that are considered to be both innate and learnt are developed and strengthened. At the same time as the girl increases her capacities to follow the norms, her skill in making kolams increases. The individual skill in cleaning the surface and drawing the kolam lines is considered to be revealed in the preciseness and symmetry of the pattern. The kolam image materialises that she is a good woman who is able to adjust and be committed to her work. Among the majority, the kolam continues to be an important skill to learn in the process of becoming an adult woman. Furthermore, a female person learns how to recreate well-being and auspiciousness, and to increase the prosperity of her family. She learns that if she fails to marry or have children, she will never become a *sumangali*. And if her husband dies, she will lose much of what she has gained. But a *sumangali* who is recognised as a good kolam maker does not lose this ability if her husband dies. Thus, the identification concerns a good kolam and a good woman, but not necessarily a *sumangali*.

From this gender perspective, the kolam practice can be interpreted through Busby's framework of gender performance. Busby does not discuss a relation between sex and gender, but describes gender as a fixed attribute of a person that has both bodily and performative features (Busby 2000: 21). Gender is an innate quality, and its main capacity to reproduce can be reinforced or undermined, according to the kind of practices a person engages in. Practices are differentiated into female and male, and by enacting those that are ascribed to a person's gender, the efficacy of that person's gender increases. A woman can only be efficacious in a female way, and in order to enhance her efficacy she needs to perform practices defined as female.

Busby takes Butler's performativity theory as a point of departure in her analysis. They share the idea that the reiteration of appropriate gender performances establishes a person's gender (Busby 2000, Butler 1999 [1990]). According to Butler, both

sex and gender are culturally constructed through performative acts produced by discourse. The notion of a prediscursive sex is an effect of power relations existing in discourse, such as the norm of heterosexuality (Butler 1999 [1990]). However, Busby holds that even though Butler is interesting for anthropology, there are also problems. Busby finds that the emphasis on performativity, conceptualised in Austin's speech act theory as the means by which speech has an effect on subjects, makes it difficult to create a concrete understanding of performance as actual material practice. She argues that the discursive frame should not be more important than the acts (Busby 2000: 12). Busby combines performativity with practice theory to make her analysis of gender performance more concrete. She reads Butler through Bourdieu's conceptualisation of how socially constructed practices become embodied and naturalised within the individual as habitus. Hereby Busby is able to give emphasis to physical bodies which can be materially altered (Busby 2000: 18).

To comprehend the notion of gender as both fixed and reinforced in the South Indian context, Busby tries to expand the ethnosociologists' accounts of substance and code. Marriott, one of the main adherents to this perspective, emphasizes a fluidity and irregularity between substances inherent in all persons, things, places and relationships. All entities are involved in various forms of transactions. Persons should be comprehended as 'dividuals', divisible units, rather than indivisible individuals. The substances in humans have a code of moral order which can be modified by actions (Marriott 1976:125f). There is therefore a close relationship between acts and the character of the person who performs the act. According to Busby, scholars like Daniel have altered the notion of the fluid person in South India, 'pointing out that there is a distinct part of the self which is not affected by transactions – the actor is not entirely identified with the act' (Busby 2000: 20). Busby suggests that gender is part of this distinct fixed part, and that it develops through processes of exchange. When a child is born, it embodies a gendered capacity transferred from its mother, if it is a girl, or from its father, if it is a boy. Women can only transfer female substances, and men only male. The person is identified as female or male in accordance with the genitals' capacity to transfer female or male substance to their children. Gender is 'demonstrated and in some sense constituted' in how women are giving and transacting with female things, and men with male things (Busby 2000: 19-22).[115]

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[115] Busby has further described how gender is stabilised through kinship (Busby 2000: 220, 1997b). The perceived differences in substances between men and women make sisters more related to each other than to their brothers, and vice versa. These differences increase through their respective children. Gender and substantial links determine marriageability. According to Busby, these notions of relatedness underlie marriage rules where cross-cousin marriage is the ideal, but parallel cousins are considered too closely related. Her

Busby's perception of bodies as having an ontological existence is productive in the present study, but possibilities to undermine one's gender are not given much attention in her analysis. She does not discuss an individual agency that enables a person to negotiate his or her position. According to Butler, agency is located in the possibility of variation in the constant reiterations of signifying acts (Butler 1999:185). In performance lies an opportunity of transcending gender norms. Mines criticises earlier ethnographic descriptions of India for their lack of consideration of the person as an agent. He argues that Dumont, the ethnosociologists, and Trawick focus too much on the Indian as Other.[116] Daniel's description of the Tamil concern with finding a balance between substances that for instance affect hot and cool states of being (Daniel 1984) is found relevant, but Mines holds that Daniel's semiotic perspective is incomplete as it has left out people's sense of individuality in the reality of daily life (Mines 1994: 7f).

In the kolam practice, there is clearly a notion of a close relation between act and character.[117] The performers have conveyed that if they appear or behave against the norms, they will be judged as having a bad character. They would be regarded as too proud, *timiru* and immoral. However, they do not act out these norms without reflecting on individual concerns. As discussed through Lave and Wagner in the previous chapter, learning a social practice is not about miming. It is a creative process in which both master and apprentice are changing. In this process, bodily involvement is constantly interacting with the reflection of the mind (Lave and Wagner 2003 [1991]). The self-consciousness among the kolam makers regarding certain characteristics as required by female and male persons varies.

analysis is very different from Dumont's who has been considered the main scholar on Dravidian kinship systems. Bourdieu and Busby ascribe their insights to people's practice-based knowledge, while Dumont focuses on structural principles. He contended that rules of marriage were determined by an interest in creating alliances between groups (Busby 1997b). Although the gender relations in the fishing community, where Busby conducted fieldwork, were characterised by equality and complementarity, they were sometimes contradicted by an emphasis on male authority. In reference to existing literature on gender in India, Busby contends that the discourse on equality and complementarity is mainly adhered to in the South or by low castes in India as a whole. The discourse of women as inferior or encompassed by men is largely deployed among high castes and the North. Explained in ideas of substance, women of the latter groups are substantially transformed into her husband's kin group following marriage (Busby 2000: 233).

[116] The ethnosociologists, as well as Dumont and his distinction between Indians as homo hierarchicus and Westerners as homo aequalis (Dumont 1980), have been exposed to further criticism in being too rigid in their categorisations. Jonathan Parry contends that the ethnosociologists have missed the point in not realising that the monistic Hindu perspective they present is an ideology, one aspect among others on how Hindus perceive their world. Neither Indians nor Westerners exclude monism or dualism, both cultures are much more complex (Parry 1989:513f).

[117] Among my informants, a person's character as well as health condition is held to be dependent on what kind of food the individual eats, and the appropriate items depends on the climate that surrounds him or her. Innate qualities in reference to men and women are acknowledged as well. But in terms of differences according to caste belonging, the idea if innate qualities is contested. It is recognised by Brahmins, but refused by Dalits.

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Michael and other boys who insist on drawing kolams are aware that they are not acting in accordance with the ideal of the male person. So are the girls that tease them. Awareness of further implications of belonging to a gender appears to depend on a matured sense of self-reflexivity, but may also be related to an individual's ability for verbal expression.

The kolam is a central daily practice that reinforces female gender. But there are different notions of what both the kolam practice and female gender contain. Through subtle acts, Gayatri extended her time for kolam making and simultaneously developed an acknowledgement of being a *sumangali* and attending to the family *gauravam*. Ambika's father did not hold that norms on female gender allowed his daughter to give courses outside the home or make kolams at a stranger's wedding. But according to the Chettiyar woman who helped Ambika, both the kolam practice and female gender contain these opportunities. For Sathiya, the issue is to make a change by withdrawal from the daily practice, but to maintain her performance on festive occasions. Through female agency which creatively negotiates new aspects of the practice as well as women's notions of their own female capacity, the kolam offers possibilities to negotiate female gender. This negotiation does not only concern the reiterated practice, but also its visual material result.

Chapter VIII

Concluding discussion

Social aesthetics

The fresh morning air, the smell of dung, the feel of cold water in which it is mixed, the stiffness of waking limbs transcending into a flow of movements accompanied by the sounds of cleaning the space and drawing the image, and the bare feet changing positions on the damp street as the image develops, are part of the daily kolam practice. Whereas some kolam makers contend that the way they bind the dots together as they draw the lines comes automatically, others reflect on a particular design before they begin. Another dwells upon the tasks ahead, such as fixing packed lunches for family members leaving for school and work, or going to the fields to replant rice. The body and mind work together as the right direction of drawing is recalled in memory. There is a sense of satisfaction in completing the image and once again recreating an auspicious atmosphere that loved ones will perceive and appreciate. The multisensoriality of the kolam concerns both the enactment of the practice and people's perceptions of the image. Its presence, elaboration, or absence affects the mood of the surrounding beings, and changes in the daily pattern make people reflect on the causes of the variations.

As outlined in the introductory chapter, Pinney uses the term corpothetics, as opposed to a detached Kantian aesthetics, to define and better comprehend the efficacy of Hindu religious images. He contends that this efficacy depends on the devotees' sensorial bodily engagement with the images in everyday practice (Pinney 2001, 2004, 2006 [2001]). Crucial to this understanding is the underlying Hindu notion that seeing, positive as *darshan* and negative as *drishti*, is perceived not only through the eyes but multisensorially. This study shares the interest among contemporary scholars in how our senses are related to each other, and how particular processes of learning may construct our perceptions differently. Cynthia Cohen Bull has studied various forms of dance and their respective priorities of perception. As ballet gives precedence to sight, improvisational dance gives it to touch, and Ghanaian dance to hearing. Cohen Bull suggests that the engagement in each practice influences the nature of the participants' perception, and that generally, our sensual and conceptual understandings are influenced by the practices we engage in (Cohen Bull 1997). According to

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Ingold, perceptual skills become fine-tuned through an 'education of attention', learnt in interaction with the surrounding environment (Ingold 2000: 22). In the expanding field of visual anthropology, Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz discuss the education of attention as partly constitutive of a professional skill in 'observational sensibility' (Grimshaw and Ravetz, forthcoming). They contend that this multisensorial observing practice, closely linked to art practice, has the capacity to produce other viewpoints of anthropological knowledge than methods based on a detached gaze or on textual interpretations. Similarly, Cristina Grasseni holds that vision is a skill that is embedded in sensory practice, and it is differently skilled in accordance with particular professional contexts. For example, what a laser surgeon learns to see differs from what a cattle breeder needs to pay attention to (Grasseni 2007). Grasseni connects Ingold's emphasis on perception with Lave and Wagner's theory of learning (described in Chapter VI), where reflection and embodied involvement interact in a learning process that takes place in communities of practice (Lave and Wagner 2003 [1991]: 34). According to Grasseni, the 'enskilment' of vision includes the learning of local norms on moral order and aesthetic appreciation, and as knowledge of how to employ one's vision is successively obtained, it becomes part of a person's identity (Grasseni 2007: 11). From this perspective, it is possible to suggest that those who regularly draw kolams perceive and understand the images differently than others do. However, both kolam makers and other community members are involved in a process of learning a local moral order and aesthetic appreciation.

In order to grasp what the kolam is and does, I propose an understanding of this practice through the notion of social aesthetics. The 'social' here for me has two aspects, which respectively take the ideas of Bourriaud and MacDougall as their base. The notion of 'aesthetics' is based on recent scholarly work where this experience is defined as multisensorial and embodied in everyday life.

The kolam, both as artistic practice and completed image, constitutes social relationships. It produces intersubjectivity, and can therefore be connected to relational aesthetics, the term Bourriaud uses to evaluate the contemporary art on the institutionalised international art scene that has a capacity to bring about direct relational experiences (Bourriaud 2002:18). The efficacy of the kolam image is founded in its ability to create certain moods within the deities as well as human beings. Intersubjectivity is accomplished as beings act on these moods; the deities enter the house and give their blessings where a beautiful kolam is made on a clean surface, a neighbour responds by showing joy when he or she enters a home where a large kolam has been drawn. When the street in front of a house

is empty, the deities will not enter and people respond by sharing the distress among the inhabitants. The pleasurable sensual experience of the beauty, or the anxiety produced through the lack of it, are both part of how social and religious relationships are constituted and re-enacted. The absence of the image is part of how the practice is carried out, and it can therefore be said that the kolam also re-establishes relationships with deceased family members. The actual performance of the kolam has several social aspects. During the early morning hours, women communicate hastily when they clean the street and draw their images. The time given for drawing on common auspicious occasions allows for much more interaction between kolam makers in a neighbourhood. In apartment buildings or other houses where the number of women who wants to make kolams is large, their organisation of the practice produces a network between them. The employment of maids reinforces differences in status, while competitions can transgress them. Engagement in the learning process, such as the exchange of experiences in making elaborate designs or discussions regarding a girl's progress, maintains and develops social relationships. Women have further contended that the kolam is suitable as the first household task to learn because drawing is something that young girls enjoy.

The second aspect of the social in the social aesthetics of the kolam is the context which produces the norms concerning how the practice and image ought to be perceived. In this social context, the issue of whether a certain kolam is considered as beautiful or not can be contested and negotiated. To various degrees, its quality depends on form, the type and cost of materials, religious devotion, and the character of its maker. The street kolam is situated in a public space, and new explorations within the practice are available to the community to be experienced, reflected upon, and criticised. This relates to MacDougall's idea of social aesthetics. He conceptualises social aesthetics as a culturally defined order of sensory experience, which our individual responses are able to oppose and modify (MacDougall 2006: 58, 90). According to MacDougall, this kind of social aesthetics is continuously reshaped in a social context, it changes through daily interaction. Similarly, the denial or gradual acceptance of changes in the kolam practice is an ongoing intersubjective process.

Social aesthetics in the Hindu context are presented by Leela Prasad in her investigation of how ethics is constituted through oral narrative (Prasad 2007). Prasad analyses the relationships between Hindu scriptures and everyday practice, mainly through a combination of the *rasa* theory (described in Chapter V) and Western linguistic scholars. She suggests that *rasa* does not have to be confined to literary based performances enacted

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and better understood by specialists. Aesthetic emotions can be evoked through all forms of oral narratives, no less in informal conversational stories of everyday life. According to Prasad, the essential moral content of a narrative can only be conveyed to the listener if the teller is able to bring forth a mood of morality in the listener. This reproduction of ethics enacted in a situation of exchange between teller and listener is dependent on the narrator's capacity to oscillate between morality and artistry (Prasad 2007: 188). It is the artistic capacity of the teller which has the ability to invoke emotional experience in the listener. The listener's assimilation of the narrative is an intersubjective experience, and aesthetics is thus social in the conversational situation.

Prasad's notion of social aesthetics entails the two aspects described above. The storyteller produces a mood in order to convey morality in a social situation. The meaning of morality and artistry is culturally organised as well as socially contested. When women draw the street kolams, their artistic capacities similarly produce a mood in the family and the surrounding community. People learn the morally correct way to perceive and respond to variations in the kolam, and depending on a particular image and its context, people's reactions reinforce or push the boundaries of this morality.

The definition of morality and artistry is also contested among the contemporary international artists that focus on the creation of intersubjectivity. Often critical of present socio-political relationships, some of these artists try to bring about change in an immoral social situation through direct dialogue with members in a community[118] (Kester 2004). The artists do not present their work in the form of permanent objects, but initiate interventions that are collectively generated with a local 'audience'. According to the art historian Grant Kester, aesthetics is thereby formed in an ongoing process of conversational exchange, both through speech and other forms of interaction, which becomes an integral part of the art work. Aesthetics is something durational rather than immediate, and he terms this process 'conversational aesthetics' (Kester 2004: 12). In the case of the kolam, verbal dialogue among neighbours often occurs during the many hours of drawing on auspicious occasions when women create large images in the streets, and these conversations sometimes influence the completed images. This influence is more evident when several people make one kolam

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[118] The use of the concept community in definitions of this art genre has been criticised by Miwon Kwong. She argues that it is sometimes imbued with a notion of essentialism, unaware of differentiations within communities, and suggests the term 'collaborative art works' rather than 'community art works' to avoid misinterpretations. Furthermore, she pays attention to the risk that in spite of social interests, the agenda of the individual artist, or his or her curator, might cause community members to become passive (Kwong 2002: 143, 153). The risk in objectifying the Other in this type of art works, that sometimes claim to have an ethnographic approach, has also been pointed out by Hal Foster (Foster 1995).

together, like the joint effort with the new image created outside the Mariyamman temple (described in Chapter V). During ordinary days, the kolam image is not directly affected by a process of verbal exchange, it is an individually made object which has a sensory character in that it engenders moods. However, verbal as well as gestural responses can influence all future drawings, and are therefore part of both the learning process and the negotiation of changes. Prasad and Kester refer to artistic practices which focus on spoken communication, but I would like to suggest that even though the relation between the kolam image and the beings that dwell in its vicinity is often expressed non-verbally, it can be understood as a form of dialogue or conversation. The kolam is an ongoing performative process that engenders aesthetic experience, which in turn brings about social and religious relationships in a community. As such, it is positioned in a situation of dialogical exchange. In addition to this exchange, the kolam practice constitutes women as moral and artistic selves. The moral order is continuously reproduced, both in the kolam makers and their 'listeners', and at the same time, individual explorations can alter the social aesthetics that define morally correct experiences and responses.

Creative agency in a space for exploration

Creative agency

This study tries to comprehend where the efficacy or agency of the kolam is situated. Is there a power inherent in the image, or is the capacity to influence transferred from its maker? How is the agency of an image related to the agency of a person? Mitchell argues that we generally have a double consciousness in relation to images (Mitchell 2005). Although it is recognized that images and representations do not have a life and will of their own, we act as though they have. We allow ourselves to become influenced, for instance by advertisements and political propaganda. We can also experience the presence of a dead relative through a photograph of that person. At the same time as the power of images is believed in, it is also doubted. Rather than acknowledging that we as modern rational sceptics have this belief, we ascribe it to the 'Other' (Mitchell 2005: 7).

The daily enactment of the kolam is an example of the fact that materialisation of religion in the form of images is central in Hindu faiths. Even the Pentecostal church, which subordinates the material in favour of the Word, indirectly acknowledges a power inherent in images and appearances by their condemnation of the kolam, along with the *taali* and *pottu* that women wear. Whereas the Christian church, historically, has destroyed religious images that have caused too much emotional response (Freedberg 1989), the

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practices surrounding Hindu images rather enhance this response. Images of the Hindu deities are considered to embody god after a ritual of consecration, and the presence of an acting god is maintained through regular acts of worship. According to Pinney, the capacity of the images to affect the devotees through *darshan* is accomplished through the work and affection of the devotees (Pinney 2001, 2004, 2006). The kolam images, however, do not need any further attendance to become effective. After the completion of the performance, the image has the capacity to make the deities present in the home. In the kolams that are considered to embody a deity, the efficacy is similarly brought about through the completion of the image. In the case of the images discussed by Pinney, it takes re-enactment of work towards the deities to receive their blessings. In the case of the kolam, it is the continuous repetition of the dedicated cleaning and drawing that is the work. Both kinds of images channel the wishes of the devotees to earn the blessings of the deities, and the deities' capacity to do so.

Other aspects of what images can do in the Indian context are exemplified by Ambika's kolam of the man-lion Narasimha whose violent power overwhelmed her and required priestly intervention at the time of drawing (see Chapter V). In another case described by Jain, an artist had depicted a fierce scene of a battlefield narrated in the Mahabharata epic. He made two paintings of the same scene, and during the completions of both, sudden riots broke out at places distant from the images. After the second time, the artist decided to avoid this motive (Jain 2007: 270). The efficacy of these images was thus not related to consecration. They had the capacity to generate the emotions they depicted, and in the case of the battlefield scene the effect was seen to extend into people who had not even seen the image.

The presence or absence of the kolam image does make a difference in the majority of people's everyday lives in Tamilnadu. In line with Latour, the image therefore incorporates its own agency (Latour 2005). But as accounted for in the present study, there are contextual differences in how a kolam is perceived and understood. When experienced as a part of the rhythm of the street, emotional states in the community are engendered or intensified by the image in a general sense. When looked at in detail, its agency is linked with its maker. The identification between the image and the person who has drawn it gives relevance to Gell's analysis of the social agency of art objects (Gell 1998). The character of the individual performer is considered to become embodied in the image, and affects this person's status in his or her social relationships. The skill in drawing is important, but I contend that Gell's notion of captivation, that the spectator becomes overpowered by the artistic agency within the object, is too strong in relation to the efficacy of the kolam.

A presumptive mother in-law can judge a young woman through her skills in making kolams, but however exquisite the image is, the older woman cannot be fully captivated. She remains in a position of superiority.

The agency embodied in a kolam image can sometimes be linked to more than one kolam maker. During temple festivals and auspicious life-cycles, several family members, or a group of neighbourhood women, can join in drawing one large kolam. If the agency and efficacy of the image is regarded as coming from its maker, it is, in these cases, collective rather than individual. The many competitions move in the opposite direction, and increase the level of individuality in the practice. On such occasions, personal identification with an image is often expressed through the addition of a signature to complete the drawing. The judges described earlier have to be careful when they evaluate a kolam in order to maintain a good relationship with its maker. Depending on the context, the agency of the kolam makers can thus be both jointly or individually embodied in the image. But as shown in the previous chapter, many kolam makers do not invest their agency in this particular practice. They might prefer to direct their efforts towards education or political engagement. At the same time, they can be judged by the kolams they make. If the kolam makers do not intentionally invest the images with their individual agency, I suggest that the efficacy that can still be perceived is related to an agency of the image itself.

Hallam and Ingold downplay an efficacy of material objects in favour of a creative process of engaging with the world, and they describe the attention to objects as a backward reading (Hallam and Ingold 2007). However, I hold that the kolam image is not an endpoint from which one can read backwards. There is a moment when the image is completed, and its physical appearance, often along with the embodied character of its maker, is aesthetically experienced and evaluated. The image makes a difference in how people relate to their environment, the particular house where the kolam has been drawn, and the beings that dwell there. Rather than end, the image carries on a constructive process that is generated by the creative agency of the person who has drawn it. As Hallam and Ingold suggest, I do not recognise an opposition between daily creative improvisation with tradition, and individual innovation of the completely new. Kolams are made through these intertwined modes of acting, and therefore take part in constituting a creative process of making continuity as well as change. In a performance where the kolam maker intentionally invests her own agency, the image can be described as being embodied by a 'creative agency'.

On one hand, the efficacy of the kolam concerns how people in a cultural context learn to understand it, on the other hand, it concerns an agency within the image itself.

The image makes a difference in people's daily lives, and therefore the agency is part of the image itself. It is also transferred from the kolam maker, as this person can be identified with the image.

Continuity, and a space for exploration

A central aspect of the kolam practice is that it serves as a space for exploration. It is not a means to resist or overthrow existing norms, but a platform to investigate and experiment with surrounding changes. The creative agency performed in the practice interacts with, not against, social change. Nagarajan defines the large competitions as 'sites of significant cultural activity that reflect complex, shifting values and preferences within the broader Tamil society' (Nagarajan 1998: 216). The present study argues that the daily practice, as well as the competitions, both incorporate and constitute contemporary changes.

In his account of how photographic subjects often experiment with various idealized images of themselves in front of the camera, Pinney suggests that 'the inventive posing that characterizes much of the imagery produced within studios is concerned with the transcendence and parody of social roles. The photographic studio becomes a place not for solemnization of the social but for the individual exploration of that which does not yet exist in the social world' (Pinney 1997: 178). I understand the kolam as, in contrast with the circulation of private photographs, being too public to provide a possibility to transcend social roles completely. But within certain limits, where the family prestige is not violated, experimentations in the practice affect a person's identity and position, and can therefore be understood as a form of negotiation.

None of the kolam makers that I have engaged with stated an exact amount of time and money that could be spent on kolam drawing in relation to other household chores, but in every family this was implicit knowledge. To push the boundaries of these amounts is one way of exploring one's present social position, and the possibility to change it. Gayatri, the middle-aged housewife in Pelasur, was scolded by her mother in-law when she was young and spent too much time on kolam making. However, the skill it helped her develop and the effort she puts into the performance have come to be considered as devotion, *bhakti*, for her family as well as the deities, and she has earned respect from the community. She is identified as a truly auspicious woman, a *sumangali*. Sathiya, the young woman from the same village who has completed a higher education in the city, has learned new habits and does not want to take part in the daily kolam making. This has made her mother worry about Sathiya's future married life, such as in-laws suspicious of laziness or pride. If she had these characteristics,

she would be considered as unable to create auspiciousness, *mangalam*, in the home. At the same time, the mother is proud that Sathiya has also developed a skill and interest in using coloured powders. On auspicious occasions when she makes kolams filled in with these powders, the neighbours show appreciation. But the cost of these powders is another reason for being anxious. Ambika, the urban specialist who also works as a judge in kolam competitions, negotiates several boundaries through her way of enacting the practice. Conservative interests argue that the type of figurative colourful images Ambika creates are appropriated from the North, and therefore *rangoli*s, not real kolams. Others admire them and pay her to make kolams when they rent a *chattram* for a family function. Before she married, Ambika's father's concern with the prestige of their family, *gauravam*, prevented her from performing kolams beyond their own street. He argued that it would be shameful if his daughter moved around too much in public, and the conditions did not change until he had been convinced by a woman positioned above their caste and class. Currently, Ambika has entered into strangers' homes and distant women's kolam practices through the TV-shows where she teaches her personal ways of making kolams. She has incorporated elements from surrounding visual practices in her images, and some of these are being re-appropriated by other women who see her work. This has now increased the prestige both of Ambika's natal and in-law family, as well as her individual social position. Within this partly formal practice, I suggest that it is the possibilities for personal explorations that make it appropriate to define the kolam as artistic practice, rather than, for example, ritual. This openness can be linked to the performance of the classical dance form Kathak, which Pallabi Chakravorty describes as, in spite of its rigid structures, containing 'spaces for improvisations' (Chakravorty 2004: 5).

Whether the creativity and experimentations of the individual maker are acknowledged or not, depends on the position that person already has. This takes us back to the second aspect of the social aesthetics. As has been shown, the norms regarding what a kolam ought to be like are changing and this continuous process also involves acts of aesthetic judgement. Judging responses to the sensory experiences of the kolams can be made according to authorised rules, or one's individual conviction. Kolam makers found it difficult to answer my question of what a well-made kolam ought to look like. Instead, they referred to how it felt: 'A good kolam feels right when you see it.' Particular designs or materials were sometimes mentioned, but I interpret this answer as indicating how a particular image is related to its context. Like the deity Vinayagan can be embodied in a simple heap of dung on a street kolam, he requires a detailed form inside a temple. Similarly, the kolam should be elaborate on auspicious occasions, while ordinary ones can be comparatively simple. The

kolam my urban-based interpreter made in Pelasur during Pongal was considered to be inappropriately city-like (as the maker herself). On the streets of the nearby Hariyarapakkam however, her type of design was commonly used. Thus, the social aesthetics of the kolam is localised. Criticisms of the way a kolam was put sometimes created joyous responses as well. A woman in Pelasur who originated from Kerala had not learnt the practice when she grew up[119], and when people came to know that she put the dots into the design after she had drawn the lines, she was laughed at hilariously. Norms regarding when a woman can draw kolams differ between Brahmins and non-Brahmins according to rules on impure states of being, but I never heard of anyone experimenting with this issue. Aesthetic judgements are often explicitly formalised during competitions. Depending on the organisers, these rules can be either conservative or progressive. While some, for instance, appreciate the text 'Save Nature' in a figurative drawing of green parrots in a landscape, others restrict both colour and form to the *kambi* kolam type (in which white lines encircle a grid of white dots). In the large competition organised by an urban elite that emphasized the *kambi* type as authentic, there were participants who let their creative agency take over the prescribed rules, even though they knew that this would disqualify them from winning a prize.

While changes are investigated in the kolam, continuities are also upheld. The practice continuously makes the house into a home, it facilitates the movements between inside and outside this home, and it marks and reproduces the rhythms of time and space. On one level, it is an ambiguous undefined space to explore, on another level, its completion defines space as an ordered auspicious place. The most common way to make kolams is to begin with a grid of dots, and when they are laid out, certain parameters have to be followed. Much of the exploration therefore takes place before the performance is commenced, for instance in a notebook or as thoughts reflecting on comments on a previous image. Too much experimentation is discouraged as this would maintain or create disorder, arrhythmia, rather than allow for the essential ordering aspect, eurhythmia. The primary aim is to generate auspiciousness and a sense of completeness, *purnam*, not to cause anxiety, or shock as in avant-garde art works.

The re-creation of auspiciousness and well-being is the most important continuity of the kolam, and this is linked to the constitution of female gender. This study argues that a central feature of the process of kolam making is that it generates a person as feminine and female. As the ethnography has shown, what the kolam is and does is closely

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[119] According to my informants, kolams are not part of women's daily household work in Kerala, the state situated to the west of Tamilnadu.

related to what women are and do. To be a good kolam maker is in the majority of cases to be, or have the capacity to become, a good mother and wife. The controlled movements which are essential for the enactment of the performance produce and increase the ideal of self-control in the individual identity of the young woman. The characters of adjustment, patience, endurance and artistic capacity are hereby learnt from an early age. To learn the skill of drawing is part of how female gender is produced and reinforced, but it is perceived as natural that women develop dexterity in kolam making. However, what is morally correct according to one's gender is also an issue that is experimented with in the practice. As described in the previous chapter, boys who are interested can be allowed to engage in kolam drawing, but men who continue the practice after marriage are considered as disrespectful towards the ability of their wives, and as violating both their own and their family's prestige. The necessity of the kolam performance in making the house into a prosperous home, and that it is enacted by women, materialises the importance of women's household work. Furthermore, it is an acknowledgement of women's capacity to communicate with the deities.

To account for a more complex understanding of our ambivalent attitudes towards pictures, Mitchell suggests that we ask pictures what they want (Mitchell 1996). Aware that this question might seem odd, he argues that a focus on images' desire is a neglected aspect that, in addition to issues of meaning and power, can provide insights into the social field of visual interaction. If we think about the kolam image in terms of its needs, the answer would include a notion of altruism. The kolam wants to be appreciated for its devotion and beauty, but ultimately, I propose that it wants the well-being of the household and the surrounding community, not for itself. The kolam as a space for exploration might be a need of the kolam makers rather than of the image. Like the image, their main desire is other's well-being rather than their own. But this does not stand in opposition to personal experiments with contemporary changes.

In line with Jain referred to in the introduction of this study, Partha Chatterjee argues against the idea of preserving traditional practices of art and craft from modern influences. To understand the dynamics of modernity, he emphasizes a focus on changes in actual local practices of popular culture rather than to assume that such practices express systems of meanings or conceptual structures (Chatterjee 2008: 333). Moreover, Chatterjee suggests that it is possible to articulate a scholarly critique of popular culture and define issues of artistic quality and aesthetic judgement. To do so, the criteria of judgement should be sought within the practice. According to him, issues of whether there is 'freedom' to reinvent a practice or question its institutional norms, why some practices are abandoned and others

modified, is locally defined. To comprehend local aesthetic judgements within the kolam practice has been part of the present study. But its aim is not to voice a critique from an outside perspective. It has sought local notions of agency and sensory experience as well as discussions and ambiguities in ongoing changes. Underlying concepts such as *mangalam* (auspiciousness), *sumangali* (the auspicious wife), *purnam* (completeness), *bhakti* (religious devotion), *darshan* (vision) and *gauravam* (family prestige) have been found valuable in this task. Like the notions of aesthetic judgement, the meanings of concepts are not static but embedded in the same tension between continuity and change.

A response to the contested issue of whether the kolam practice is art or not requires a personal judgement, and will thus remain unanswered in this study. At the same time, I find it relevant to allow for this possibility. The kolam, as practice and image, is not embedded in a network that produces economic value in the sense that art works on the international institutionalised art scene are. But as this study tries to show, occurrences on the art scene have since recent decades brought contemporary art closer to the kolam. Many artists have moved their works out of the gallery space, and been concerned with an erosion of the differentiation between high and low art, and the following separation between art and craft. They have criticized the commercialisation of their practices, for instance, through making ephemeral immovable objects in the landscape, bringing materials into the gallery space that have been rejected by the elite (Boettger 2002), or by engendering social relations through performative acts (Bourriaud 2002, Kester 2004). The notions of relational and conversational aesthetics are founded on ideas that try to reduce the separation between art works, artists, audience, and the places where the works are made. Like the kolam, such works are often site-specific, and they are concerned with social aspects of everyday life. Consisting of both an object and a performance, the kolam transgresses object-based modernist works, and performance-based collaborative art works. The kolam blog, mainly visited by Tamil women in the diaspora, has positioned the practice in what the art historian Miwon Kwong terms 'the dynamics of deterritorialization' (Kwong 2002: 8). This implies that the kolam, as presented on the website, has been detached from the Tamil territory and then re-linked to new circumstances. It remains to be explored how the kolam practice, and its connection to Tamil female identity, might be transformed in the dynamic reconfigurations of previous relations between subject, object and place.

A well known problem among anthropologists is the issue of influencing the conditions in the everyday life one wants to understand 'as it is'. This is emphasized by Chatterjee, and he wants to enhance our awareness of how academic scholars that study

popular visual and performing arts, for instance in India, partake in the ongoing changes of local artistic practices (Chatterjee 2008: 344). The words of a scholar can legitimize a particular opinion, authorize a new institution, or influence how a local practice is advertised in the media. Inevitably, my influence in conducting this study began already when I was introduced in Pelasur. The mere fact that I came 'all the way from Sweden' to learn about the kolams made some men reconsider their lack of attention towards the practice, while most women showed increased pride as well as curiosity.

Aware of the importance on continuity, the creative experimentation among many kolam makers have, in opposition to earlier discourses on degeneration as well as newer on cultural heritage, motivated this study's emphasis on the kolam as a space for exploration. My conclusion might not be appreciated by all, but this is what I understand the practice to be among the majority of the people I have engaged with. I believe that the kolam will continue to reinvent itself and be vital in this open space. If it is confined, it appears more likely that the practice will lose its centrality in the everyday lives of Tamils. To conclude, I would hope that this study may contribute to possible future works generating an ongoing productive conversation on what the kolam is, does and wants.

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