

RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AND SOCIAL IDENTITY:

THE SOCIAL AND RITUAL ORGANISATION  
OF SOUTH INDIANS IN MELAKA

by

David James Mearns B.A. (Hons) M.A. (Econ)

Department of Anthropology  
University of Adelaide

November 1982

: DAVID J. MEARNS ..... Course : Ph.D. ANTHROPOLOGY .....

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the contemporary and historical process of the production, reproduction and transformation of social identity amongst a population labelled 'Indian', in the urban context of Melaka, Malaysia. Initially, it analyses the role of colonial expansion, the development of capitalist industries, and contemporary urban and political processes. Central to this aspect of the analysis is the location of these processes within the framework of an ethnically defined, State system. This provides the basis for the dominant analytical concern of the thesis which is to understand the importance of the practice of religion in providing a major context for attempted resolutions of contradictions which emerge over time. These contradictions become manifest in both the 'social structure' and the 'culture' in which Indians are engaged, and which they are continually recreating. However, this process of social and cultural reproduction is shown itself to generate further contradictions at every level. The discussion demonstrates this in part by examining in detail some aspects of the religious practice and belief systems of those Indians who originated in South India and Ceylon. A prime focus is the major cultural symbol, the Hindu temple, and performances which take place there. The analysis highlights the effects of both caste and class divisions in the repeated failure of a category to become a simple unified 'interest group'. The conclusion is that Hindu ritual is far from necessarily cohesive in its basis or its effect, and that the production of an ethnic identity, even in a supposedly constitutionally defined, multi-ethnic society, is highly problematic. The argument shows that divisions within the category "Indian" are basic to understanding the processes which reproduce their location in this wider historically concrete social formation.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except when due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

David J. Mearns

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is "our custom" in formal statements such as these to leave until last the public recognition of the debt we owe our spouses and families. Without Lesley, my wife, this project would have had no beginning, no middle and, certainly, no end. Not only did she share the problems of our simultaneous fieldwork but she has also borne most of the burden that the circumstances of the writing up of that work have produced. In the last three years that burden has been shared by our twin daughters Bryony and Freya and by our small son Alexander. All four have suffered on my behalf, for the sake of my work, but they remain the sources of my inspiration even in the most difficult moments. For that reason, my immeasurable debt to them all must be acknowledged first.

Bruce Kapferer converted an itinerant lecturer in English to Anthropology in 1972, in Sri Lanka. As Professor at Adelaide he encouraged me to join the department and secured a U.R.G. scholarship for my Ph.D. research. Before he left for further research in Sri Lanka he was my main supervisor and became so again on his return, briefly, before going overseas once more. Bruce's own work and his incisive approach have been major influences on my development. In the latter stages of writing he once more took on the thankless task of reading several chapters. His perceptive comments have always proved very pertinent and useful and I owe him a great deal.

Dr. John Gray has acted as a 'second string' supervisor for much of the period of my research and writing, and has taken me on full time in the

absence of Bruce Kapferer. He has always been a sympathetic but astute critic and has added much of value to the refinement of my arguments over the years. I owe a lot to John and to his friendship, and to that of his wife Jacki who has typed this manuscript so superbly.

To Dr. Kingsley Garbett, my main supervisor in the last couple of years, I owe the completion of the thesis. At a time when the muddle seemed hopeless, his clear-minded approach and most helpful suggestions of directions made it possible for me to put together a coherent position out of seeming chaos.

I would also like to thank Marian Thompson for redrawing the diagram of the house in Chapter 3 and Debbie Oakley of the Geography Department at Adelaide for redrawing all the other maps and diagrams.

An incalculable and generalised debt is owed to all my peers and colleagues in Adelaide. Much of my anthropological and sociological understanding has been forged in departmental and post graduate seminars. In their own ways and at different times three fellow post graduates have been specially important for their friendship and support; they are Jeff Collmann, Neil Maclean and Deane Fergie.

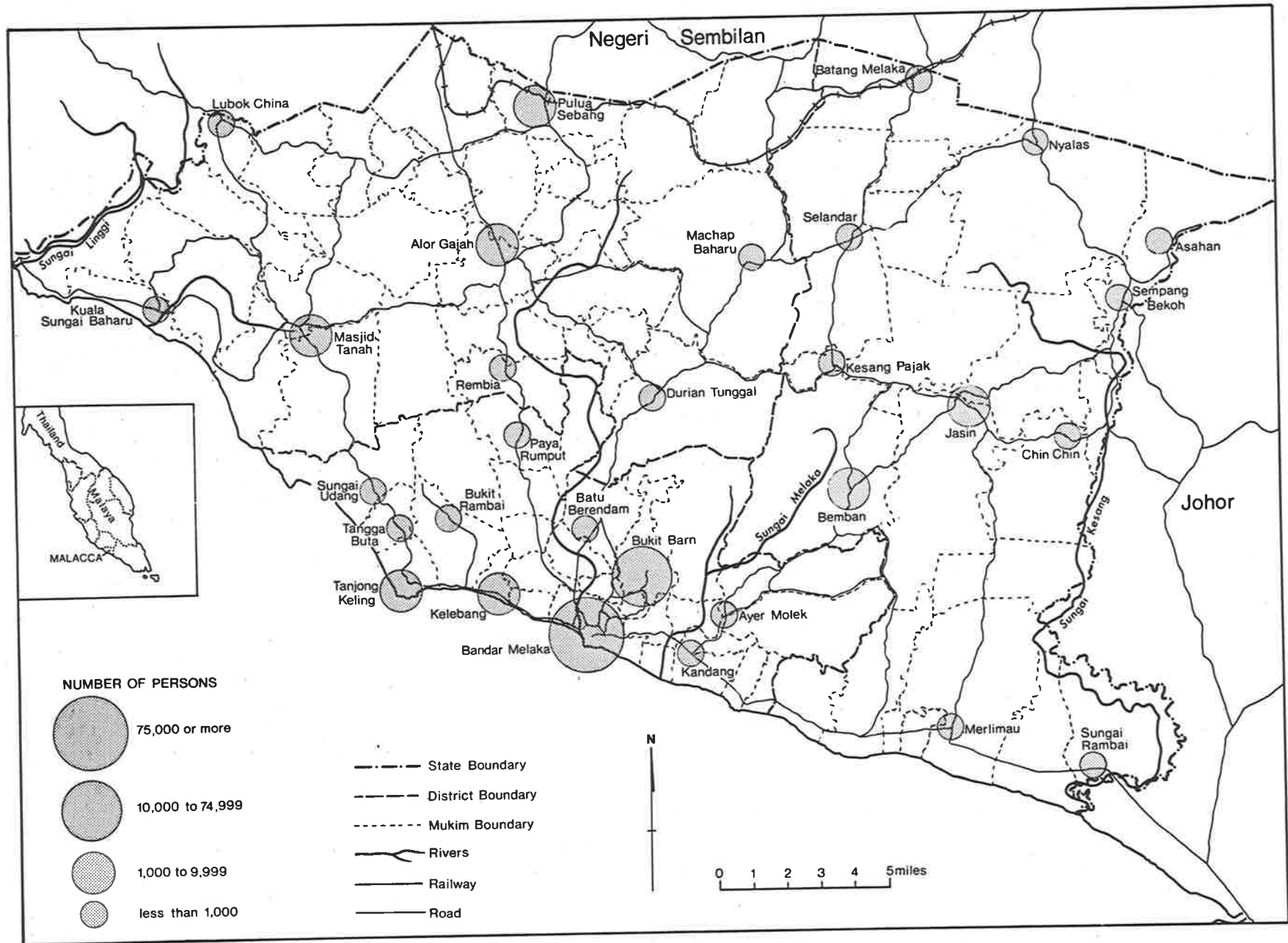
As always, I owe my greatest debts to the friends and acquaintances in Melaka whose lives this thesis is about.

## A NOTE ON SPELLING AND TRANSLITERATION

The Melaka Indians dealt with in this work mainly use Tamil forms in reference to their religion and ritual practices, even when they do not usually speak Tamil themselves. However they frequently render these in romanized script rather than solely in Tamil, in such things as publicity posters and local religious publications. They also use Sanskritic forms when referring to deities of the Indian 'great tradition', as well as to certain ritual events. In this thesis I have sought to be consistent with most commonly adopted local practice in Melaka. This means that I have not rendered Tamil source words in a strictly transliterated form. I use few diacritical devices and do not adopt either the method of the Tamil Lexicon or that of Beck (1972). I believe that the terms rendered by local forms do not cause confusion and are not ambiguous.

In addition to adopting local usage for transliteration of Tamil words, where Malay is used (indicated by (M) in text) the form of spelling employed is that of contemporary 'Bahasa Malaysia'. Thus, for example, Melaka is the new spelling for the English form Malacca.





MELAKA STATE

## INTRODUCTION

The research on which this work is based was done between May 1976 and March 1978 in the town of Melaka, Malaysia. The population in the metropolitan area of Melaka as a whole at the time of research could be estimated from government projections of the 1970 Census to number some 110,000. Of this number some 7.9 percent were categorised as 'Indian'<sup>1</sup> in the census data. The initial project of the research was conceived as a complete study of the Indian population, primarily from the perspective of the performance of public Hindu ritual. However, the complexity of Melaka's urban structure and the size of the Indian population combined with the diversity of social and cultural forms encompassed by the deceptive label "Indian" in such a way as to render such a project untenable. As a result it was decided to concentrate on collecting ethnographic data from that part of the population who could be identified as having originated from the South Indian mainland, from Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), and from a mixed local population of Malay-speaking Hindus. This latter group derived from immigrant populations of Indians continually intermarrying with earlier Hindu populations whose own origins probably lie in the very founding of Melaka. Together these three categories comprise some 88 percent of the Indian population of the census.<sup>2</sup> The majority are Tamil speakers or believe it or another Dravidian language to be their lost 'mother tongue'.

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<sup>1</sup>The 1970 Census (Chander 1970) subdivides this 'Indian' population into the following categories: "Indian Tamil", "Telegu", "Malayāli", "Punjabi", "Other Indians", "Pakistanis", "Ceylon Tamils", "Other Ceylonese".

<sup>2</sup>Of the South Indians and Ceylonese, 17 percent were Christian and 7 percent Muslim, both groups being mostly South Indian. Six percent

The research strategy required a suspension of any systematic concern to record practices of two important smaller sets of Indians, the Sikhs and the Gujeratis, both of whom have their own vital and significant ritual lives as well as constituting important sections of Melaka's citizenry.<sup>1</sup> The omission is regretted but inevitable. Even with a reduced number in the primary research population, the Indians of Melaka represented in this thesis still number in excess of 6,000 people. As a result, this thesis cannot be said to be an attempt at a complete ethnography of that urban population in this category. It is, rather, an attempt to represent and to understand a number of important social processes in which that population studied is engaged by virtue of its presumed distinctiveness in this multi-ethnic context. That presumption is encoded at the political level in the according of the term "Indian" with the status of a 'race' for the purposes of Identity Card categorisation.<sup>2</sup> We shall examine other contexts which manifest other presumptions in the course of what follows:

Much of the day-to-day research was conducted in and around Hindu temples. In the course of my research it became clear that while "the public ritual of the [Hindu] temple provides contexts for the

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(continued) of the population claim to be Buddhists Bahais, or to have no religious affiliation. Thus, conservatively, at least 62 percent of those categorised as Indian in Melaka are Hindus of Southern Indian or Ceylonese origins. It is they who dominate the Indian population culturally and it is upon their lives that this thesis concentrates.

<sup>1</sup>Bengalis and Sindhis are also significant if not large in number, amongst those categorised as "Other Indians".

<sup>2</sup>All Malaysian residents over the age of twelve must carry an Identity Card which is colour-coded for citizenship and describes the carrier as belonging to a 'race': Malay, Chinese, Indian, European or 'Other'.

codification or manipulation of the rights and privileges of groups in complementary or competitive relationships with one another" (Appadurai and Appadurai Breckenridge 1976:188-9), such public ritual would not be adequate in itself to provide a high degree of understanding of the Indian population's position in Melaka or, indeed, an understanding of the role of the temple itself. Any approach which would have entailed viewing the temple simply as some sort of 'reflection' of social life in the wider context, became rapidly inadequate for understanding the relationship between cultural forms as embodied in ritual practice and the complexity of the urban processes in which those called 'Indians' were engaged. Moreover, the major distinctions which locals made, such as those between "North" and "South" Indians, or, indeed, within the sub-category "South Indians", soon proved to be problematic notions which were elusive, shifting, and yet clearly crucial to any adequate understanding of what was being observed, both in the temples and in the wider social practices.

In order to facilitate exploration of the divisions within the Indian population, a greater effort was made to collect material on socio-economic locations of families, on educational and occupational experiences, and on patterns of worship and attendance at temples. Accordingly, a large-scale survey was undertaken of as many Indian homes as it was possible to cover, limited as I was to the efforts of myself and a part-time assistant. The results of the survey are of doubtful statistical or sociological value, on their own. However, they significantly increased the confidence with which it was possible to assert the form and content of some of the relationships represented in the body of this thesis. Perhaps the most useful aspect of the

survey was the largely unstructured conversations which followed the formal collection of raw data. Those interviews supplemented the many unstructured contexts in which information, interpretations and opinions had already been gathered. As the survey was taken after some eighteen months of fieldwork, I was reasonably sure of the veracity of the material gathered and able to guide conversations towards subjects of special interest. However, I have decided to omit the survey results as a formal set from this thesis because, as it stands, the argument seeks to relate macro-sociological insights to the interpretation of highly laden symbolic contexts of interaction, observed in the course of my time in Melaka. As such, a survey has little to add directly to the discussion and would almost certainly divert attention to spheres other than those which are reckoned to be central for present purposes.

What the survey confirmed was that which I had already learnt by less formal methods and which might best be summarised as the appreciation of the complexity and selectivity of social identity. What became increasingly clear was that, as M.R. Barnett (1974:243) put it, "whether cultural nationalism arises at all is not a function of the direct translation of objective conditions into political identity", notwithstanding the imposition of a categorical identity "Indian" within the political domain. Indeed, Barnett's own work in South India pointed up the problems in assuming any relationship between a posited "primordial sentiment" and the process of creation of a political ethnic identity. It was, however, not the work of an academic anthropologist which indicated to me the problematic nature of the label "Indian" as a descriptive, let alone analytical notion for the people being studied. It was, of course, the understandings and

perceptions of the people as they articulated them; and the observed discrepancies and inconsistencies in interactive contexts which brought such people together, which presented the ethnographer with the difficult question "Who precisely am I studying?"<sup>1</sup>

*on "overseas Indians"*

Unlike other major writers, such as Jayawardena (1963, 1971), Jain (1970) and Mayer (1961, 1963), in my case, the population studied in Melaka was not a rurally based or plantation based one in which the "overseas Indians" formed a clearly defined set by virtue of their physical and social location in a rural industry. Nor, indeed, were they an homogenous population of entrepreneurs from similarly ranking caste groups (see Schwartz 1967 and Hilda Kuper 1960 for some comparable material). As a disparate urban population which ranged in class location from ex-plantation workers and urban proletariat, through entrepreneurs, financiers and petty officials to professional people, there is no 'natural' or organic solidarity inherent in the category "Indian". Moreover, as we shall see, caste as an organising principle is in no sense 'holistic' in Dumont's (1970) terms.

Nevertheless, in searching for a basis of possible integration and common identity, Melaka's Indian population itself engages the notions of a cosmological order, the Hindu, as a starting point. This in itself would make examination of that cosmological order, in its present local form, a crucial part of any analysis. However, the

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<sup>1</sup>The problem is not, of course, a novel one. Moerman (1965) is one ethnographer who sought to make this a basic question for his research data. His ethnomethodological response, however, differs markedly from my own.

argument set out here goes further and shows that the cosmological order, far from being mere superstructure in a Marxist sense, actually remains fundamental to processes which give form to the division of labour within this category of people and gives meaning to the basic structure of relations which are externally imposed. It is also central to the thesis, however, that ritual enactments of the cosmological order continually act in ways which are far from any supposed role as functional integrator, as people seek to come to terms with their new and uncertain position.

Local patterns of self-labelling and regular interaction divided the category "Indian" in a number of mutually contradictory ways. In order to begin to sort out the complexity of the system in which Indians could become at different times "South Indians", "Tamils", "Ceylonese", "Melaka Chitties", or even, more rarely, "Indians", it was necessary to begin beyond the realms of the directly observed contemporary circumstances and look for historical processes which helped produce those circumstances.

In order to achieve these aims, the analysis employs an approach which builds critically from Giddens' (1979) notion of 'structuring properties'. That is to say, in the history of social forms, their "structures do not exist in time and place" (Giddens 1979:64-5) but have "a 'virtual existence', as instantiations or moments". The advantage of Giddens' position is that his notion entails a dynamic view of structure which leads away from the more fixed universe of French structuralism. "Structural properties of social systems are both the medium and the outcome of the practices that constitute those

systems" (ibid.:69). The position involves a theory of the duality of structure in which "rules and resources are drawn on by actors in the production of interaction but are thereby also reconstituted through such interaction" (ibid.:71).

The analysis at the broader historical level also employs insights which are among the more useful from within the neo-Marxist traditions, without, it is to be hoped, seeking to reproduce Marxist dogma or any particular version thereof. A specific concern is to consider the role of colonial and post-colonial State formations, and the effects of the forces of international capital in the historical production of the contemporary context. It is this context, seen as a social formation dominated by a Capitalist Mode of Production which is represented as generating contradictions in terms of its own logic, and further contradictions, in its confrontation with cultural forms which exist within and prior to it. It is these "intersystemic" and "intrasystemic" contradictions (Godelier 1978 and Friedman 1979) which are seen to provide a dialectical dynamic potential.

The approach adopted in the chapters which deal with broader social contexts is not restricted to neo-Marxist or structural Marxist concerns. As indicated, the recent work of Anthony Giddens (1979) is employed in developing the dynamic aspects of the situation encountered. Although this might initially appear to be contradictory inasmuch as the neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian approaches might appear incompatible, it is intended that their utilisation in this particular way will enable an emphasis in the analysis which is available to neither alone. That



emphasis is on the role of agents, as cultural beings, in the resolution of essentially structurally engendered contradictions.

Chapter 1, therefore, deals with the emergence of the present social formation of Melaka. The history of the town is examined particularly from the perspective of Indian involvement in the developing social complex. It is an analysis designed not simply to relate historical events but to elucidate them within an analytical framework which is directed towards understanding the role of Indians in the emergence, reproduction and transformation of their own social context. Indeed, the argument of the whole work might be summarised in this last sentence. Having established the role of Capital in the creation of an Indian population in Melaka in Chapter 1, Chapters 2 to 7 inclusive concentrate primarily on developing the contexts in which Indians are found contemporarily as locations of the processes of reproduction of both the structuring properties of the wider social formation and those of the cultural order which that formation entails. By 'reproduction' here, I mean not a "cloning" process of straight replication of an existent form, but rather a process which entails transformation, as does biological reproduction under normal conditions. Thus, Chapters 2 to 7 move through three major regions of reproduction which are interpenetrating. The first concern is with spatial relations as they are embodied in the 'built form' as Harvey (1973) calls it, of the urban environment itself. Here too the view of urban forms offered by Castells (1975) is examined. The second region of analytical concern in these chapters is the relations of the religious system of the Hindus which is shown literally to inform the built structures of the temple and house, and which also give form to perceptions of urban

space. The third major set of relations highlighted in the analysis are those of political ideologies and their connection with the distribution of power through the State. This latter concern is the special focus of Chapter 8 which also seeks to discuss problems of transformations in the structuring properties of Melaka's social system. This discussion derives itself from a concern in Chapter 7 to show how ideas contained in spatial, religious and political relations are attended to in the course of a major ritual sequence. The analytical strategy, therefore, is one which employs the device of beginning at the wider reaches of the social formation (Chapter 1) and proceeding to narrow the focus through the urban context (Chapter 2), down to the domestic unit (Chapters 3 and 4) and thence slowly out through the temple as focal point of community activity (Chapters 5 and 6), to the temple as the centre of reflective interpretation and creative response of the Indian population (Chapter 7). Finally, Chapter 8 relocates the population in its wider context in terms of the politics of ethnicity and leads to a brief reconsideration in the conclusion (Chapter 9) of how religious ideas and practices, 'culture' and 'ideology', are to be understood in analysing a minority population in a multi-ethnic nation like Malaysia.

In engaging in the analysis through such terms as 'social formation', the thesis necessarily addresses the problems on which recent writers such as Wolpe (1980:Introduction) and Kahn (1980) have focussed. That is, the argument considers how the concrete conditions of material existence are to be understood for a population with a particular history of incorporation into a world dominated by the social relations of a Capitalist Mode of Production. The sufficiency of an explanation

which talked simply in terms of the 'articulation' of two or more modes of production is critical here. This thesis presents a view of the social lives of Malaysian Indians which says that any conception which reduces 'material conditions of existence' to purely economic or politico-economic relations is essentially misconceived. Religious practices as elements of 'cultural relations' are both 'material' and 'conditions of existence'. They are not superstructural and purely ideological because they are fundamental to the "emergence, reproduction and transformation" (Kahn 1980) of the concrete reality of social relations of production, exchange and distribution in the contemporary Malaysian social formation (see Chapters 1, 2 and 3). Moreover, the religious practices and ideas relate to the continually emergent forms of social identity in a complex fashion, but one which is basic to the existence of Indians as a category and to Indians as individuals.

Thus in discussing the dynamics of Malaysian social life and the influence of different social relations of production or forms of the Capitalist Mode of Production, I have employed an "extended concept of the mode of production" (Wolpe 1980:36) in which "the laws of motion" (ibid.) are shown to incorporate 'culture' inextricably. Such features of existence for Indians as caste, religious notions, ethnic identity and class perceptions all inform relations at the economic level in such a way as to make them inseparable from those 'infrastructural relations'. Similarly, therefore, there is no disembodied "culture system" which has meaning independent of its social context and symbolic import in the political and economic domains.

The emphasis in this thesis on the role of religion in the processes of creation and recreation of social identity should not be taken as representative of a view in which either religion or social identity itself are seen as merely functional within a reproducing social formation. Apart from the fact that religious practice is demonstrated to be productive of social divisions which are far from functional to the abstract rationality of expanding capital, there is a great concern in what is presented here to show ritual and religious conceptions to be at the centre of what it means to be Indian. In other words, Indians are described practising those acts which define them both as individuals and as members of collective categories which they recognise as important and invest with essential meaning.

Further, ritual is here considered as much more than the location in which understandings of one's position in this world are achieved. Important though such understandings are for comprehending the 'laws of motion' of social relations, they are only themselves developed in situations where actors seek to resolve apparent contradictions between their socially prior cultural conceptions of a cosmic order and the dynamics of their present social situation. The seemingly external derivation of many of the forces acting upon Melaka's Indians should not obscure the fact that those forces are never experienced in a cultural vacuum and, indeed, are always given a concrete form through the mediation of culture.



## CHAPTER 1

### THE CREATION OF A MALAYSIAN INDIAN POPULATION

In the introduction to this work, I outlined three ways in which the analyst may view the Indian population in Malaysia. I stated that relations underlying caste, class and ethnicity were each fundamental 'structuring properties' of contemporary Indian social life. My aim here is to examine the history of Malaysia, and more specifically the history of Melaka, in order to analyse the way in which these structuring properties or principles emerged as crucial features of contemporary Malaysian social life. The importance of this analysis for the overall argument of the thesis lies in the understanding it provides of the processes which led to the emergence of a category of people called Indians, while at the same time allowing initial discussion of the bases of social divisions within that category.

A major concern of the chapter is to consider how the development of an ideology of ethnic differentiation in Malaya/Malaysia produced contradictions which were both internal to that ideology and which are evident in the relations between that ideology and an expanding and changing productive system. It is a basic tenet of the position taken here that social systems manifest structural contradictions in the form of conflicts. It is the resolution of these conflicts and the attempted resolution of the underlying contradictions which provide the most important basis for the dynamics of a social system.

The role of the State in the development of ideologies which are fundamental to the form of social organisation now found in Malaysia is a second major focus of the chapter. The early forms of State formation provide the framework for a discussion of the processes by which the contemporary complexity of the town of Melaka came into being, and of the location of Indians in those processes. I shall show how a Capitalist Mode of Production came to dominate the social formation of Malaysia, and how Indians were inextricably bound up in that process.<sup>1</sup> Thus, for example, the shift from a situation in which Indians were engaged in the economy primarily in the role of traders to one in which they became local producers and permanent residents marks the first important change which is considered as a function of the transition to a colonial state.

It is argued that the shift from trading to production constitutes the first context in which locally produced class divisions within the Indian population emerge. Divisions based on differing locations in the relations of production are present in the earliest accounts of Indian trading trips. These always appear to have involved a 'principal' and various 'servants', as they are usually described. However, these divisions do not have a significant impact on Melaka until a resident Indian population develops. This is because the major condition for the emergence of this particular form of class division is the existence of a caste system in India. Caste is crucial to the creation of local divisions within the Indian population, though it is often entailed in class relations. Caste is also shown to have been a significant ideological force in the very creation of a resident Indian population.

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<sup>1</sup>The analysis will proceed employing the concept of 'social formation' as it is used by Poulantzas (1975) and others. That is, as the concrete context for the articulation of two or more modes of production.

In the remainder of this work, the contexts and meaning of the use of the term "Indian" are central concerns. Control over these contexts and meanings, in relation to the power of the State, is an important aspect of the discussion of the symbols of Indianness which are created by Indians themselves and by others and which are discussed in later chapters. For the moment, however, I shall heuristically suspend these concerns in order to operate with the most common use of the term, i.e. to designate a native of the Indian sub-continent.

### The pre-colonial context

#### 1. The earliest period

The earliest influences in what is first recorded as Suvarnabhumi or Suvarnadipa (roughly equivalent to contemporary peninsular Malaysia) are still the subject of great debate and confusion.<sup>1</sup> Much of the archaeological evidence which we might normally have expected to have found for any early presence of Indians in the area is thought to have been destroyed in the iconoclasm which went with the advent of Islam to this part of the world. That evidence which has been found to date suggests that 'Indianisation' was a force which had its earliest and prime effect in the northern and isthmian regions of the Malay peninsula, and in the surrounding islands of what is now Indonesia.

Both Wheatley (1961) and Sandhu (1969) emphasise that Brahmanical influences were major factors in the culture of the region from the

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<sup>1</sup>See Sandhu (1969), Wheatley (1961), Coedes (1964), Arasaratnam (1970), Mahajani (1960), Hall (1970) and Windstedt (1962) for decreasingly elaborate discussions of the problem.

beginning of the Christian era, if not before. The earliest forms of government in the region were Hindu and Buddhist in form and emanated from India. Sanskritic elements still play an important part in the installation rites of the rulers of some of the northern states of Malaysia, and in the nation-state, though they are now proudly proclaimed part of Malay custom or adat.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. The Melaka Sultanate

Parameswara, the accepted founder of Melaka, was initially a Hindu from a Hindu kingdom.<sup>2</sup> He and his retinue remained Hindu for at least the first ten years of his reign, which began circa 1402. Under Parameswara, known after his conversion to Islam as Iskandar Shah, Melaka grew rapidly from a small estuarine village occupied by reputed pirates to a large town able to control shipping through the Straits of Melaka. It thereby became the paramount market and trade centre for spices and other goods being transported between India, the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

Records show that Indians, originally Hindus and later Tamil Muslims, were of major influence in court politics during this early period, and throughout the whole period now known as the Melaka Sultanate (1402-1511).

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<sup>1</sup>The tales of the classic Indian epic, the Ramayana, still provide the basis for the stories of the wayang kulit, the Malay shadow puppet dramas. Both the installation and the puppet dramas are important contemporary symbols of Malay culture, in Malaysia. This is but one example of the appropriation of meaning by a dominant political group and the long-term transformation of that meaning to take a contradictory role as marker or identifier of a group to that which it held originally.

<sup>2</sup>The major importance of the early Indian influence on the region lies in its effect in Sumatra and Java, in the Kingdoms of Palembang and Majapahit. It is now generally agreed that the founder of Melaka was a Sumatran prince allied by marriage to Majapahit, who had fled north from Tumasik (Singapore) probably after attempting to usurp the throne there (see Hall 1970:208).



The earliest period of Melaka's history is used both by Malay Muslims (especially governing elites) and by locally born Hindus as the basis for claiming an 'original' status which in turn legitimates political action (see below, especially Chapter 8). The "Straits-born Hindu community" (or Melaka Chitties)<sup>3</sup> has an oral tradition of its origins in the foundation of Melaka, though it is recognised that there has been a continuous absorption of and association with members of later migrant groups.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the period prior to the arrival of the Portuguese colonialists in 1511, North and South Indians, mainly Gujeratis and Tamils respectively, were dominant in the trade which made Melaka the greatest port in the region and the capital of a small empire covering much of the peninsula. It is from this population that a longer-term resident community of Indians grew. Certainly, by the time the Portuguese maps were drawn, the presence of an Indian settlement or 'kampong kling' was clearly recorded on the north side of the river. The evidence<sup>2</sup> suggests that the resident Indian population of Melaka was Tamil-dominated even at the time of the Portuguese arrival.

With their knowledge of the founding of Melaka and the role of Indian traders, leaders of the Melaka Chitty community stress the irony of their present situation as relatively poor members of an ethnic minority which is excluded from the category "bumiputra" or "sons of the soil". The irony is heightened for them by the use of a sanskritic term

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<sup>1</sup>The awareness of their long history in Melaka on the part of local Indians has recently been enhanced by the work of Kernial Singh Sandhu and of a local scholar and headmaster Mr. K. Narayanasamy. I am greatly indebted to Mr. Narayanasamy for our helpful discussions about his research (1967), and for his preparedness to share his considerable knowledge of Indian matters with me.

<sup>2</sup>See Pires (1944).

<sup>3</sup> See Note p. 18 on term "Chitty"

"bumiputra" to designate a politically privileged group of Malays and aboriginals (orang asli). In Malay tradition, the period of the Melaka Sultanate represents a 'golden age' of Malay culture and rule, and is seen as the context of the flowering of Islam. These differing interpretations of the town's history explain in part the political discourse of contemporary Melaka and the sense of injustice expressed by the Melaka Chitties when they are too closely identified with later migrant groups of Indians. As such, these differing views are the source of some of the divisions between Malays and Indians. Perhaps more importantly for the purposes of this discussion, the Melaka Chitty interpretation of their history is a source of division within the category "Indian" which also has major political implications (see Chapter 8).

The influence of Indians through their control of trade in early Melaka was great. It proved crucial to the development of an Islamic state which became a petty empire, because it was revenue from trade which financed the development of Melaka's inland territories and which gave the rulers access to the expropriated surplus value of peasants and tin miners. Some local contemporary Indians feel that their community's early importance to economic development, like that of the Chinese later, is inadequately recognised in the present political context and that they are unfairly disadvantaged as a result. Whether or not their perceptions of their origins are accurate, they are important to understanding the present situation of the Chitties.

It is apparent that the interests of trade, or more technically, mercantile capital, were paramount throughout the pre-colonial period. It is also clear that the State was largely constrained to promote those

interests in order to ensure the continued revenue it derived from the profits accumulated by predominantly Indian merchants (though there were also important Chinese traders and a smaller number of Malay traders). Thus, Indians played a vital role in early Melaka, but with the coming of the European colonial powers major changes occurred in the status of Indians and in their location in the local economy. One feature of these changes was that they left the resident Indian population in what was ultimately a much more structurally marginal position. At the same time, the proportion of the Indian population of the town which comprised permanent residents rose, as did their absolute numbers in the longer term.

The political influence and the relative wealth of the Indian community in Melaka peaked in the pre-colonial period. There is some irony, therefore, in the fact that the very destruction of the Sultanate is partly owed to the assistance given to the Portuguese invaders by a Hindu, one Nainu Chettu, as the records have it. This man is the first Chetty<sup>1</sup> or Chitty mentioned in Melaka's written records.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The term "Chetty" or "Chitty" is a common corruption of the South Indian caste title "Chettiar". The Chettiar caste has long provided many of the traders and financiers for Southeast Asia and the term "Chitty" became synonymous with any Indian trader. Occasionally it was adopted by Indian merchants who were not of this caste.

<sup>2</sup>For his help to the Portuguese in 1509 and 1511, he was appointed "governor of the klings", when they successfully gained power.

## The colonial period

### 1. The Portuguese

The Portuguese imperial conquest of Melaka had its rationale in the desire of the European power to break the monopoly of trade which Melaka had held in this region. The incorporation of Melaka within the Portuguese empire marked the beginning of its fall from pre-eminence as the centre of trade. At the same time, the growing monopoly of trade in the region held by the Portuguese was crucial to the changes in the situation of Indians in the town. The interests of Indian capital were subordinated to the interests of Portuguese capital and the political importance of Indians declined concomitantly. The changes were not achieved all at once. The Indian kampong kling continued to exist and trade with India remained important for some time.

Melaka's importance as part of the Portuguese trade network and the consequent Portuguese domination of commerce in the area continued to be a source of imperial rivalry. The Portuguese were competing with the Dutch for control of trade and resources just as they were in other parts of South and Southeast Asia.

### 2. The Dutch

The Dutch maintained an even tighter control over trade and obtained a still more complete monopoly than the Portuguese. It was their policy to favour Batavia rather than Melaka as their major port. It was these facts in combination with the rise of the British ports of Singapore and Penang at either end of the Melaka Straits which completed the demise of

Melaka as a centre of regional trade and, therefore, of Indian merchant activity.

Dutch maps of the time show the rebuilt kampong kling<sup>1</sup> slightly inland and to the east of its former site. It is in this location that the oldest temple still in use in Melaka, indeed in Malaysia, is to be found. It is owned by the Melaka Chitty community, though it is now managed by the more recent wave of Chettiar immigrants who moved into the town in the British colonial period. The temple stands on the site of a land grant made in 1781 to Telvanaiagam Chitty as leader of the community by the Dutch authorities.<sup>2</sup> Though this section of the town has a long and continuing history of association with the Indian population of Melaka, the report of Governor Bort (Bremner 1927:51) suggests that Hindus may have been cultivating on the northern outskirts of the town as early as 1678. Certainly, the earliest land grants still remaining in the hands of the Chitty community were made by the Dutch for plots which became the sites of temples. These were made in Bachang and Gajah Berang, in

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<sup>1</sup>References from the disputes and battles between the Portuguese and Dutch over Melaka show that the first Indian settlement, originally on the sea shore, had burnt down. Imperialist rivalries had led to an agreement between a Dutch captain, Matelief de Jonge, and "the deposed king of Melaka" on the 17th May 1606, that they would join forces in order to oust the Portuguese. The outcome was to be Dutch control of the fort of A Famosa while,

On the other hand, his majesty shall people the suburb of Campo Clingh, which is now burnt down, and rule it without interference (Bremner 1927:11).

The attack failed and the Dutch had to wait until 1641 to capture Melaka.

<sup>2</sup>Governor Bathasar Bort's Report of 1678 (Bremner 1927) speaks of Gentoo (Hindu) goldsmiths being given the right to search for and work gold from the sea shore in 1660. In 1678 itself, he reports, there were 372 "Moors and Gentoos...in the northern suburb". ("Moor" is a term used at this time to refer to South Indian Muslims.)

1754 and 1770 respectively.<sup>1</sup> These grants lend some credence to the Melaka Chitty oral tradition which is that a large part of their ancestral community had moved out of the centre of the town by this time. It is also part of this tradition that the ancestors had cut their association with trade to a large extent at this period.<sup>2</sup> What is important for the self-perception of the present Chitty community is that pre-British colonial records show a Chitty as the head of a vital Indian community which had a focus still in the heart of the town as well as one at the present site of the Chitty kampong in Gajah Berang.<sup>3</sup>

The oral tradition of the Chitties themselves, and that of some other Indians, both relate the distinctiveness of the Chitties (physiological and cultural) to miscegeny and the caste system. This is thought to have made it impossible for the progeny of extra-caste (and even international) marriages to be reabsorbed into the local social systems of village India, from which the ancestors were thought to have come. Thus,

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<sup>1</sup>There may well have been other land grants which lack documentation or which were later bought back by the British. Cameron (1965[1865]:227) states that much of the land granted by the Dutch was bought back by the British authorities.

<sup>2</sup>It is uncertain who precisely the people were who first migrated to the northern edge of the town. However, oral tradition and the caste titles which all families retain suggest that many of those who moved initially may not have been directly engaged in trade themselves at any time. Rather, they may have been members of castes and trades which serviced the traders. It is believed that many tried their hands at agriculture, though others, such as brickmakers (Potters?) do appear to have sought to develop traditional caste occupations.

<sup>3</sup>A contemporary portrait of Telvanaiagam Chetty shows him wearing distinctive clothes which are not dissimilar to those worn by the Melaka or Straits-born Chinese, otherwise known as the Babas. It is clear that a distinctive identity had emerged for the Chitty community by 1781. The peculiarities of traditional dress can be seen in photographs of the weddings of living members of the community.

local ideology has it that the Chitties were forced to remain in Melaka. However, they appropriated land, with colonial approval, in order to create Hindu temples. These are spatial domains with particular significance since their presence constituted the surrounding land and population as the responsibility of the resident Hindu deity. As the archetypal cultural figure for Indians (see Chapters 5 and 6), the Hindu deity represents a highly conscious identification with their Indian origins on the part of the Melaka Chitties.

### 3. The pre-British situation: overview

By the time of the Napoleonic wars in Europe, the period of colonisation in Melaka had firmly established the patterns of spatial arrangement of the core urban area. The town's very location is the result of the historical assessment of its strategic position in relation to surrounding political states and major trading routes. However, the dominant spatial configurations within the town are not simply the result of the combination of topography and location. Given its river estuary, protected coastline and single dominant hill on the foreshore, Melaka appears a 'natural harbour' because of the social requirements of a series of colonising powers — Malay, Portuguese, Dutch and English. The port facilities on the estuary and the fortifications on the hill with its concomitant administrative centre, are necessities in the logic of imperialist expansion and the economic exploitation of the dominated area. Equally, the creation of a centre of commerce in the area around the port follows as a logical consequence in the context of a developing colonial economy. By the same token, the emergence of a distinct community of Indians who become spatially differentiated firstly in the very centre of the town as a trading community and then at its periphery

as agriculturists and artisans, is in part a product of the logic of developing imperialist economic struggles, though its particular form has to be understood in terms of the cultural bases of differentiation such as those described on the previous page.

Up until the Dutch ceded control of Melaka to the British, the town of Melaka had its raison d'être in trade and commerce. Even when this role was in decline, Indians primarily engaged themselves in activities which supported the interests of mercantile capital, though this capital ceased to be Indian-controlled. However the spatial form of the town of Melaka, and the physical location of Indians in the urban area are not simply to be explained as reflections of the economic and political structuring properties which have been outlined so far. Though a hierarchy based on political power was symbolised and protected by the physical location of the militarily and politically dominant elite on St. Paul's hill, the location of Indians incorporates a second hierarchy. The second hierarchy is the caste ranking system. The translocation of the Chitty community to their present site has to be seen first as a result of a politically and economically dominant colonial power giving force to the interests of its own merchants. However, it is also given its particular form by the effects of caste values internal to the Indian community. Moreover, before the British arrived, these moves had ensured that a series of class-based differences within the Indian population had already emerged. Some Indians were still principals in trading ventures, other were wage labourers and others still were engaged in peasant and petit bourgeois activities.



Thus, the logic of colonial economic developments and the culturally specific logic of caste interact to produce a spatially peripheral and differentiated Indian community (the Chitties) from a population already subordinated to the State politically and in the earlier spatial symbolism of the town. These processes become even clearer and more consciously developed once British control over the town becomes consolidated.

#### 4. The British

The purpose of this section is to show how Indians are affected by a conscious decision on the part of the British to develop a new infrastructure for an economy based on industrial capital. It is this historical transformation of the social formation encompassing Melaka which has most impact on the processes which produced the present Indian population in all its complexity.

The British first came to Melaka under a treaty with the Dutch whereby the territories outside Europe of one power were to be taken over by the other power in the event of either being defeated by Napoleon.<sup>1</sup> In an attempt to rationalise the division of colonial spoils and create unequivocal spheres of interest, a direct exchange was made between the Dutch and British in 1824, by which the British gained Melaka permanently and the Dutch took over Bencoolan in Sumatra in return. The transition was smooth and peaceful and the British kept many of the Dutch administrative procedures in the early phase of their rule.

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<sup>1</sup>The agreement was specifically designed to thwart French imperial expansion by the back door, so to speak. The result was that the British walked into Melaka in 1795 on the defeat of the Dutch by the French and they administered the town on a caretaker basis until 1818 when it was returned to the Dutch.

With the coming of the British, the fate of Melaka was sealed. The harbour was already silting up and the advantages of the new and expanding ports of Penang and Singapore, already in the possession of the British, were too great to allow Melaka any chance of regaining its earlier pre-eminence.

I restrict my account of the effects of British rule over the Straits Settlements (and eventually the greater part of Malaya) to an outline of the features which had the greatest impact on Melaka and on the growth of an Indian population. These features are then analysed specifically in terms of their importance in understanding the contemporary situation of Indians in Melaka.

Sandhu (1969) characterises the major difference in Indian influence between the pre- and post-British arrival periods as lying in the massive influx of low caste, illiterate and extremely poor labourers which came about in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a result of the capitalist expansion of the Malayan economy. Stenson (1980:16) points out that "The mass migration of Indians to British Malaya was thus the result of specifically European political and economic needs. Unlike the spontaneous migration of the Chinese, it was planned and directed by the colonial authorities." This was done consciously by Governor Weld and others with a view to aiding British manufacturers by providing both a source of cheap raw materials and potential markets as the population was expected to grow in keeping with the rapid expansion of the economy. Sandhu (1969:58) also cites Weld as writing in 1887 that it was necessary to encourage and facilitate Indian

migration in order to counteract the growing influence of the Chinese, over whom the British never had more than tenuous control.

The massive migration at the turn of the century had major structural effects on the composition of the Malayan economy, creating as it did a new working class majority in the Indian population. Nevertheless, Indian merchants and traders continued to play an important part in the Straits Settlements throughout the British period.<sup>1</sup>

The large flow of new labour was employed to create the plantation industry. Local labourers were not only reluctant to engage in wage labour for the British but as Sundaram (1977) points out, were actively prevented from entering the plantation industry in the role of small-holder or petty capitalist. This was done partly to ensure that the Malay peasantry provided the basic food supply for the majority of the population through rice cultivation, but also in order to prevent effective competition to the interests of British capital from within. Indeed, as both Sundaram and Stenson show, the interests of British capital were very carefully preserved throughout the colonial period by the State, through legislative and executive decisions. One such process was the maintenance of migrant labour as a highly mobile commodity which could be repatriated at times of local depression.

Tin mining had been an early economic development, largely run by Chinese but marketed through British-controlled outlets. However, it was

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<sup>1</sup>Indians were in the entourage of Captain Light when he took possession of the island of Penang in 1786, but it was not until a century later, in the 1880's, that Indian migration began in earnest.

in the plantations that most British capital was invested. Initially these were plantations of sugar and coffee but later became overwhelmingly rubber.<sup>1</sup> Many of the European and British planters who came from the 1830's onwards to create the vast new estates came from previous planting experience in Ceylon, India and other tropical countries. Keenly aware of their profit margins and, therefore, eager to minimise costs and maximise output, these planters rapidly judged the Chinese expensive, 'unreliable and quarrelsome'. Those planters who had worked in South India and Ceylon already had experience of Tamil migrant labourers, mainly on tea estates, and were loud in extolling their virtues as 'docile', relatively hard-working and reliable workers who were easily managed and who required little.

Thus, it was the British colonial State which created the conditions for British capital to transform the social formation of Malaya and gave it its particular form. It is the needs of British capital which determine the size and flow of Indian migrant labour. However, neither the source or form of that labour are solely determined by economic requirements or exigencies. The South Indian labourers who formed some 65 percent of the total Indian immigration to Malaya during the whole colonial period, were largely drawn from the depressed service and Adi-Dravida or untouchable castes. The exploitation <sup>which</sup> the planters made of the Indian form of social organisation centred on a caste ideology was conscious, deliberate and remorseless. Caste ideology had had the result of limiting individual occupational mobility in India, particularly in the

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<sup>1</sup>Though the first commercial rubber plantation in the peninsula was created by a Chinese in the state of Melaka, and the labour was still initially Chinese.

era before the flowering of modern conurbations.<sup>1</sup> Low caste individuals were located in the most alienated positions in the relations of production in India. Moreover, the jajmani system, by binding serving castes to dominant castes, reproduced a social formation in which any individual's location was ideologically represented as being determined by his accumulated karma created in previous incarnations. Moffat (1979) suggests that South Indians of low and untouchable castes share the dominant ideology of caste and are amongst its strongest proponents, with the proviso that they have, of course, been erroneously ranked in their lowly position by historical accident. In this view, he is supporting Dumont (1970) in the idea that the principles of pollution and purity are the fundamental opposition behind the form of all social phenomena in India. While it may be that some individuals or whole sections of some untouchable communities accept the ideology of the high castes, in my experience of low caste workers in Melaka, many are equally convinced that the whole caste system is a device perpetrated to reproduce their repression. <sup>It was a</sup> device foisted upon them by those wealthy castes who dominated them politically and economically and were therefore able to rank themselves above those they dominated. The colonial planters utilised the effect of the dominant ideology to provide themselves with a labour force which was expected to be, and indeed, largely proved to be far more acquiescent in its lowly position than the Chinese had been.

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<sup>1</sup>The issue of caste in India is, of course, a highly complex problem. The view expressed here is somewhat contentious, especially in the light of Dumont's (1970) position. However, it is a position which essentially reflects the views of many working class Indians in Melaka and which many of the colonialists also seem to have recognised.

Throughout the whole process of recruitment of labour in India, Malaya was presented as a place where life was easy, money plentiful, and the iniquities of the caste system a thing of the past; a place where starvation never threatened.<sup>1</sup> In securing workers from the lowest castes, the planters were, to a large extent, extracting those in the Indian productive system who were landless labourers unable to find employment in either the agricultural sector or in other occupations to which their traditional caste affiliation was supposed to have predisposed them.

The point is that regardless of the extent to which low castes subscribed to the caste ideology of the dominant higher castes in the 'traditional' context of India, they had been placed in an exploitative position by virtue of their alienation from the means of production. Surplus was extracted from their productive activities in the economy and a system of social differentiation was reproduced, with them at the bottom of the ranked order. In colonial Malaya this location in the economic structure was largely reproduced. The cultural form of India had apparently been turned on its head, only to subjugate the same population in a new context. The transformation of low caste ideology, if such it was, did not, of course, change the way they were viewed by other Indians. However, it may mark the first stage of a shift which was to become an important part of the cultural dynamics of this population; one which is explored in the later chapters of this work.

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<sup>1</sup>Sandhu (1969:66-7) quotes two informants whose histories are typical of those I heard. One, a former kangani, attributed his blindness to divine retribution for lies he had told in recruiting fellow Indians. The second, a labourer, gave starvation as his reason for migration.

The process of Indian migration to Malaya was generally facilitated and easily controlled by virtue of the British domination of the governments of both countries.<sup>1</sup> Though earlier systems of migration were remembered by some informants in Melaka, it is the kangani system which was portrayed as the most common form of tied migration. It was experienced by direct urban migrants and by those who had come via their own or their parents' incorporation into the Malayan work force initially in the plantations. From the point of view of the contemporary urban population, both the kangani system and the assisted 'free' immigration policy are critical to understanding the location of working class Indians in the economic structure.<sup>2</sup>

Legal since 1882 only, the kanganis are thought to have been the actual recruiters of much of the 'free' labour from much earlier. The kangani method (known as maistry in Burma) was based on the use of a labourer or overseer (kangani) from the Malayan estate or government department, acting as recruiting agent for his employer. The kangani would be

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<sup>1</sup>Two basic forms of labour migration occurred; 'assisted' and 'unassisted'. Assisted migration was of four main types, of which the most controlled and later most despised version was indenture. Sandhu (1969:81) estimates that some 9 percent of the total immigrant labour force were recruited by this method. As a form of labour provision, indenture arose in many British colonies as a direct result of the ending of slavery in the 1830's. It involved a type of contract which lasted from one to three years and under which the labourer had almost no freedom while the employer had powers of fining and even imprisonment for misdemeanours.

<sup>2</sup>Three main agencies were responsible for recruiting such migrant labour. The State recruited for distribution both to government departments and to private employers. The Malay Peninsular Agricultural Association recruited for the sugar industry in order to supplement indentured labour, in the early days. Finally, the employers recruited directly or indirectly through their Indian agents for specific tasks. The Public Works Department and the railway authorities seem to have been major users of this form of labour and many first-generation immigrants still resident in urban centres such as Melaka were originally recruited in this manner.

licensed to return to his natal place, funded by his employer, to recruit friends, relatives and acquaintances to join him in Malaya. Besides his real costs, the kangani was given 'expenses money' and a commission for each labourer successfully recruited. On his return to the estate or department, the kangani would often be paid a small sum daily for each man whom he had recruited who turned up for work.

Kanganis had been very successfully used in Ceylon and the great advantage to the European capitalists lay in the social control exercised by the kangani who was in many ways responsible for his workers and who had a financial incentive in ensuring their productiveness. The kangani system remained fundamentally the same until 1938 when the Indian government eventually succumbed to pressure and banned further migration of all unskilled labour.<sup>1</sup>

The kangani system and the other assisted forms of migration are clearly an extremely effective way for capitalists in Malaya to reproduce a cheap and acquiescent form of labour power. Surplus labour, of course, could be repatriated at times when there was no market to justify further expansion. It is also the case that the capitalist incurred few of the direct costs of reproducing his labour force since there was, until 1938, an almost limitless supply available in India in relation to demand.

The colonial plantation remained a relatively closed social system into which the labourer could be further locked by his debts incurred to the

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<sup>1</sup>Sandhu (1969) suggests that between 1865 and 1938 kangani recruitment accounted for some 67 percent of all assisted labour, i.e. 44 percent of all immigrant labour, and 28 percent of all Indian immigration.



estate shopkeeper<sup>1</sup> and in the toddy shop.<sup>2</sup> Even the religious needs of the community were controlled by the building of an estate temple with aid from the management and supported by compulsory deductions from wages at source. Labourers were housed in 'lines' of barrack-like quarters, the regulation of which was a government responsibility. Thus, the links between estate management, supervisors and workers pervaded all regions of the workers' lives.

The urban labouring population, especially those recruited directly rather than from ex-plantation workers were also housed in government-controlled quarters attached to the department for which they worked. Though there was less of the total intrusion into every aspect of their social lives by the employers, social control through economic sanction, housing and the use of police was nonetheless great. As we shall discuss more fully in the following chapter, the labour lines also formed relatively enclosed and socially separate communities of Indians who became the first really identifiable set of proletarians in the urban context.

In both the urban and the plantation contexts then, Melaka (and later other states) provided prime examples of the power of the colonial state to act on behalf of capital to reproduce labour power cheaply and easily. However, the kangani system and its allied patterns of recruitment also meant that the form that labour power took was of a particular sort which is crucial to comprehension of the later perpetuation of social

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<sup>1</sup>Licensed by the manager.

<sup>2</sup>Often a prerequisite of the kangani.

divisions in the Indian population of Melaka. Most of those Indians so recruited came from the districts of the then Madras state of India closest to the ports of Nagapatnam and Madras itself. This is still reflected in the origins of the majority of working class South Indians in metropolitan Melaka.<sup>1</sup>

In two sectors of the developing Malayan economy, for the latter part of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, Indians were the backbone of the proletarian community. In urban government and local government departments which serviced the plantation hinterland and its urban support structures, and in the plantations themselves, it was this highly identifiable ethnic category which provided the work force. Furthermore, by virtue of their distinctive residential patterns, frequent closeness of origin and the high degree of relatedness which developed, these South Indian enclaves provided most of the contexts for social interaction outside that of work. This pattern was enhanced by the tendency for recruiting patterns to create caste clusterings in which many members of several low and untouchable castes were likely to be represented.

Thus, ethnicity, class and caste must be seen as interpenetrating factors in the creation of distinct sets of the population of Melaka, throughout its development. The important aspect for the present discussion is that the arrival of a population of low caste, working class Indians in Melaka occurs at the point of a major historical

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<sup>1</sup>As with other forms of migration, the influx was overwhelmingly of young males, aged for the most part from 15 to 45. It was not until the late 1920's that women made up even 30 percent of labourers coming into the country. Ratios of females to males were not stipulated by the State for Malaya as they were for most other colonies.

juncture in which a new mode of production becomes dominant in the social formation. Where the working class Melaka Chitty population are the products of an economy dominated by mercantile capital, the working class South Indian population are the product of an economy dominated by capital engaged in production. In both cases, however, the creation and recreation of these populations as identifiable sets can only be understood if the interplay of the economic and political forces and the ideological position of both European and Indian migrants are taken into account. In choosing low caste Tamils (and some Telegus), the British, for the reasons outlined above, consciously reproduced the subordinate position of these people in a new context. Religion<sup>1</sup> and language further differentiated the Indians from others, particularly in a situation where residential isolation and encouragement to build temples were promoted by the British.

The encapsulation of South Indians within the domains of British capital and the colonial State was almost total. Tamils are often quoted as having said of their white masters, "He is my father and my mother". Their recognition of British paternalism and their compliance with it is perhaps most clearly evident in the extent to which informants agreed that almost every aspect of a worker's life was determined by the edicts of the vellaikkarren (white man) who was in charge of him at work. The engagement of the British in the lives of their South Indian workers extended to the very process of biological reproduction itself, especially after the cessation of unskilled migration in 1938. Many employers actively encouraged and supported the return of workers to India to find

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<sup>1</sup>Sandhu (1969:187) says that 80 percent of migrants were Hindu, followed by Muslims, Christians and Sikhs in that numerical order.

brides if they were unable to find them locally. Again, the aim was ultimately the cheap and controlled reproduction of a labour force. In return, a pattern emerged through time whereby the children of Indian workers on the estates and in government departments were more or less guaranteed work in the same concern and one of the children could expect to succeed to the living quarters of his parents eventually if he had not already been found accommodation. The job security was double-edged of course, "The Indians' occupational training, skill and literacy were sufficient only for their jobs as labourers" (Tilman 1969:463).

The vital location of the urban Indian proletariat in the Malayan economy lies in the role this set of unskilled and semi-skilled workers had in the construction and maintenance of the communication systems of the country, in the very rapid expansion of such services as piped water and electricity supply, and in the health services. All these were State-run infrastructural requirements for the successful expansion of British capital, in both the plantations and elsewhere.

Non-assisted migration formed an important part of labour supply throughout the British period, but it was of major importance only after the depression of the 1930's when demand for labour was high as the Malayan economy began to get moving again. Most unassisted migrants encountered in the course of my research had received some aid from relatives either in India or already in Malaya in the process of migrating and finding work on arrival. Some were returning former migrants and accounts given by informants suggest that Malaya was always economically attractive to South Indian landless labourers as wages and conditions, poor though they often were, were better than those they

left behind them (see also Stenson 1980:19). Initially and up until the 1930's the duration of a migrant's stay in Malaya averaged between three and five years and many who did not return to India failed to do so because they died prematurely in Malaya.<sup>1</sup> This resulted in a small residual resident population in comparison to total numbers of migrants. Deliberate exclusion of Indian nationalists and political opponents of the British along with the instability of the migrant population reduced the development of political consciousness amongst Indians in Malaya until after the depression of the 1930's. What political awareness there was amongst migrant Indians was largely centred on India itself. Before 1938, neither the Indians nor the Europeans thought very much about Indians settling in Malaya permanently and it was only around this period that even a nascent 'class struggle' began to emerge as Indian workers began to push for better conditions and wages (see Stenson 1980).<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, it was labour migration which was the major political concern of Indians. Paradoxically, it was from India rather than from within Malaya that the initial attempts to make migration to Malaya a political issue came. By the late 1920's and the 1930's this protest had reached a crescendo, and it was tied closely to Indian nationalism

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<sup>1</sup>Majoribanks and Marakkayar reported in 1917 on the high death rate amongst Indian migrants but it was not until 1929 that births exceeded deaths in Indian estate populations (Stenson 1980:21).

<sup>2</sup>The economic struggle did not only take place in the estates, however. In 1921, 54.9 percent of the Indian population in Malaya was employed on estates and only 27.4 percent could be found in urban centres. (The figures are Sandhu's (1969) and apply to urban centres of 1,000 or more inhabitants.) By 1931, the figures were 48.8 and 30.5 percent respectively. Thus, by 1931 it was already true that the popularly held view of Indians as overwhelmingly an estate-based population was misleading. In their increasing involvement in other sectors of the economy, Indians were marking out new areas of interest and competing more and more with both Chinese and Malays.

and claims to rights of equality with their colonial masters. Indian migration was seen as detrimental to the nation's self-respect, besides being exploitative and degrading for individuals. It was only in 1936, however, that Malayan Indians were moved to create a political organisation, the Central Indian Association of Malaya (C.I.A.M.), which was to be the national self-appointed watchdog of Indian affairs. In particular, it concerned itself with the conditions of Indian labourers. A party very much orientated towards the Congress Party of mainland India, the C.I.A.M. was a middle class urban phenomenon which was directly inspired from India.<sup>1</sup>

The important theme to note here is that this part of the process of creation of a politically significant ethnic category "Indian" in Malaya arose from the contradictions migration generated in the political system of mainland India. The needs of the Malayan political economy were also seen as contradictory to those of the Indian homeland but it was the interests of the latter which generated political organisation, not the interests of Indian workers in Malaya. Thus, the first stirrings of Indian political awareness in Malaya did not serve to unite the population. Instead, the labourers remained divorced from the centre of the political stage.

In order to appreciate the role of non-labouring immigrants of the British period in the development of political consciousness and in the

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<sup>1</sup>The C.I.A.M. saw its prime function as being to inform the Indian press on the conditions of Indians in Malaya (see Sandhu 1969:110). In its own way the new organisation was as patronising to the low caste labourers as were the British. As such, it was not engaged on its own behalf, or on behalf of the labourers, in a genuine political struggle with the colonial Malayan State but was more a small appendage to the political struggle of India itself.

growth of social divisions within the category "Indian", it is necessary to understand their origins and location in the social formation of British Malaya. As some 35 percent of the total Indian immigration, non-labouring classes are primarily accounted for by the influx of petty commercial capitalists. An elite of administrative and technical workers was nevertheless significant. These latter categories were mainly involved in the development of government bureaucracies and plantation supervisory staff. South Indian Muslims and Nattukottai Chettiars were prominent among the businessmen, along with Gujeratis. These were differentiated from the labourers not only by their entrepreneurial skills and ownership of capital, but also by their origins in castes of a higher status. Similarly, teachers, government servants and junior management personnel on the estates were characteristically not only more highly educated, but also of higher castes than the labourers, even when they were South Indian Tamils from the same geographical regions. British colonial officers, especially many of the early ones who were seconded from the Ceylon civil service, often solved their initial staffing problems in the junior ranks of government departments and local government authorities by bringing out Ceylonese Tamils they had worked with in Ceylon. A similar pattern emerged in the estates where both Ceylonese and Malayāli (i.e. from the present state of Kerala in India) supervisory staff were brought out by planters who had used them before.<sup>1</sup>

The Ceylonese are important not only because of their mediating role between the British and the Indian labourers, but because they also have

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<sup>1</sup>Malayālis became prominent during the 1920's as a result of staff shortages.

a history of ambivalent identification with the category "Indian". This culminated in 1970 with their voluntary incorporation into this category for census purposes, and therefore, for access to political and economic resources controlled by the State (see Chapter 8). Once they had become established in many areas, such as the railways and hospitals, the teaching service and the clerical posts of local government, the Ceylonese were able to maintain a virtual monopoly by means of a middle class version of the kangani system. This comprised recruitment which frequently involved white senior officers informing their senior clerks that a job was vacant and asking for suggested applicants, knowing that the patronage the clerk could thereby exert would act as a form of insurance of good behaviour and performance. This was especially true since many such posts were filled by kinsmen of the incumbent officers, or by fellow caste members from the same part of the Jaffna peninsula in Ceylon. It is these factors in combination with the numerical domination of the Vellalar caste in the educated population of Tamil Ceylon which explain the preponderance of the members of this caste in the Ceylon Tamil community of Malaysia.

Like the Ceylonese, the majority of the Malayāli immigrants were from relatively high castes and were already literate in English, a major qualification for the job.<sup>1</sup> Even more than the Ceylonese, the Malayālis were short-term migrants who, in the early days, rarely brought their families, and who expressed the firmest intentions of using their money from Malayan earnings for investment in India. Of those who brought

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<sup>1</sup>One informant described to me how he had been recruited in the examination hall after sitting for his School Certificate, in Ceylon, in about 1911 when he was offered the opportunity to go to teach in an English-medium school in Malaya.



their families, many sent their children back to India for their education and looked to India for marriage partners for their children. Of the communities in Melaka, the Malayālis are the most inclined to retain emotional ties and frequent contact with their natal places in India.

Educational differences, dialect and language distinctions, caste rank and differing class interests resulting from different locations in the social formation all served to militate against the creation of an ethnic group identity for Indians in Malaya prior to the outbreak of the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> The arising of the C.I.A.M. did not successfully translate the ascribed identity "Indian" into an effective self-declared identity precisely because the relations of production in the social formation reproduced the conditions for the replication of prior divisions. The contradictions in the system were only just beginning to emerge in the form of political and class struggle when the Japanese arrived to occupy Malaya in 1941.

##### 5. Ethnicity and the Japanese occupation

The arrival of the Japanese transformed the social relations of wartime Malaya at all levels. From the point of view of Indian political consciousness, the period may be summed up as the transformation of an uneven and rather vague nationalist sentiment into large-scale political and military action.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See Chapters 2, 3 and 8 for detailed discussion of production of these differences in regard to the contemporary situation.

<sup>2</sup>The Indian Independence League was formed in Tokyo in March 1942 by dissident exiled Indians with the active encouragement of the Japanese. It was rapidly followed by the formation of the Malayan branch of the organisation and an astonishing surge of membership such that Mahajani (1969:147) claims that some 95,000 Indians from all over Malaya had joined by 10 May 1942.

The formation of a provisional government of Free India (Azad Hind) gave a pseudo-legal basis on which to build a system of 'citizenship' and enforced allegiance which was supposed to offer some protection for the Indians at the cost of large financial contributions to the Provisional Government.

The "Indian National Army" went into battle in northern Burma in 1944 and, with the Japanese army, eventually suffered defeat at the hands of Mountbatten's forces. The co-operation with the Japanese had made things easier for the Indian population in Malaya in comparison with some of the other communities during the war, and was the basis of the first organisations to reach and bring together Indians of all types under one banner and for one cause, even if the mobilisation was reluctant and incomplete in some cases. Ironically, the brand of fascist nationalism advocated by the leadership of Subhas Chandra Bose alienated the overseas Indians from the main Congress nationalism of the homeland. Nevertheless, the wartime nationalism of Indians in Malaya undoubtedly created a pan-Malayan Indian ethnic identity for the first time. At the same time, while being cut off from India, Malayan Indians concentrated their attention on what was least likely to generate an identification with the country in which they were domiciled. The problem had been one of survival under a Japanese regime which became increasingly tough and bankrupt. Once the cause had disappeared, so did the unity and the identity.

#### 6. The return of the British

The period prior to the arrival of the Japanese had seen the British dealing with increasing labour unrest and demands for recognition of

Indian rights by the middle class C.I.A.M. The result had been a mixed reaction in which Ceylonese were replaced as the supposed representatives of the Indians, but few major gains had been achieved in either the political or the economic struggles of Indians in the colonial regime (see Stenson 1980:Chapter 3). In the event, the growing class consciousness of Indian labourers was submerged by the international situation and the temporary nationalist unity of the Japanese period. On the surrender of the Japanese in 1945 and the return of the British in September of that year, many of the latent divisions of the wartime period became manifest once more.

As Stenson (1980:93) confirms, the first divisions within the Indian category to re-emerge were those between Ceylonese Tamils and other Tamils, and between Indian Muslims and the others. The recognition by Indian labourers that their immediate interests were no longer with the leadership's co-operation with the Japanese grew during the first part of 1945. Desertions from the Indian National Army and reluctance to provide labour for Japanese projects increased throughout the period.

It is noticeable that as in the pre-war period and in the Japanese occupation, the political consciousness of the Indians and their engagement in the political struggle was determined by the dual aspects of their relationship to an international political and economic structure, and their subordination to an imperialist State. The return of the British provided conditions for the sub-ethnic categorical distinctions to come to the fore in the context of nominated representative councils instituted by the colonial authorities and the bitterness of the people who felt that they had been unfairly co-erced into supporting the Indian

nationalists by the Japanese colonial State. The Malaysian Indian Congress (M.I.C.), the political successor to the C.I.A.M., initially concerned itself with promoting the Indian nationalist cause and attempting to wrest control of the labour movements from the trades unions which had been totally restructured by the British.

However, the M.I.C. was forced by events to take up essentially Malayan issues for the first time. The British put forward and implemented a plan for a 'Malayan Union', a concept worked out during the war for a state in which, amongst other things, citizenship would be open to Malays, Chinese and Indians alike if they had been born in Malaya or resident there for ten of the previous fifteen years. In addition, anyone who had been resident for five of the previous eight years could apply for and be granted citizenship.<sup>1</sup> The constitution put Indians on a legal par with the Malays but this was almost meaningless given the absence of any plans for democratic representation in government for any locals, and the lack of any substantial disadvantage for people who chose to remain non-citizens.

Malay opinion was outraged, however, and the Union was condemned by the Malayan Communist Party as there was no prospect of the end of the imperialist rule for which they had fought so effectively in the jungles during the Japanese occupation. Reaction was so strong that the British abandoned the Union and created a new concept, the 'Federation'. Malays were to be much better protected under the resulting legislation and

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<sup>1</sup>These provisions would have made all Indians in Malaya eligible for citizenship without requiring them to give up their Indian citizenship. British concern was to make a more efficient structure for the purposes of development of the country and it was felt that Chinese and Indian participation was vital to this aim.

citizenship was more difficult to obtain, requiring a longer residence and declarations of intent of permanent residence. The war had seen a growing development of nationalism not only in India but throughout the colonies. Many voices were raised for Malayan independence and the M.I.C. eventually decided to join the 'All Malaya Council of Joint Action' for this purpose. The leaders of the M.I.C. were still held in strong suspicion by the colonial authorities, but the council initially included members from all three major ethnic groups. However, once again, the view of the Malays was incompatible with the others with regard to representation and citizenship and the united front broke down.

The early M.I.C. leadership was very similar to that of the C.I.A.M. both in terms of personnel and policies. Like its predecessor the M.I.C. failed to reach the majority of the Indians, the estate and urban labourers, and remained essentially the province of urban middle class non-Tamils. Furthermore, the early leaders were still firm in their prime allegiance to India and Thivy, the first president, eventually became the Indian government's official representative in Malaya before returning to a political and diplomatic career in India. The Indians remaining in Malaya during the period immediately after the Second World War were constrained to make a decision as to their stance with regard to the independence of Malaya, given their advocacy of an independent India. However, this immediately raised the problem of the position of Indians in the proposed new nation. The success of India's campaign, culminating in her independence in 1947, brought the question of loyalties even more to the fore.

The machinations over a new constitution and the role of the British State in the development of a new political structure for the nation which it was determined to create, are crucial to understanding the form of the constitutional and political position of Indians in the contemporary institutional structure of Malaysia. However, this is only one aspect of the analysis. The role of the State has to be balanced against the question of the moves which were taking place at the level of worker/management relations and the reasons why a clear unity of class interest did not overcome ethnic differences. In the chaos of the British Military Administration and the Malayan Union, conditions for workers were extremely hard as the economy had been destroyed during the occupation. British authorities were primarily concerned with re-creating the conditions for the successful reassertion of capitalist relations of production. Labour unrest (encouraged and supported by communists who had been active in the resistance to the Japanese) was rife and questions of the parity of wages for Indians and Chinese were brought to the centre of the stage once more, as they had been in 1941 before the British were forced out. The British authorities did little to alleviate the problem, merely reacting to it in terms of subversive communist provocation and the usurpation of the labour movement by the communists.

It is again noteworthy that even at a time of overt hostility between the working class and the colonial State and the capitalists whose interests it was mainly representing, the dispute was articulated in part in terms of an ethnic split in that working class. The outbreak of open guerrilla warfare led by communists, armed during the war by the British in order to resist the Japanese, led to the justification of the government's fears in its own eyes. It resulted in the declaration of a

state of emergency in June 1948 just after the formal creation of the new Federation of Malaya. "The Emergency", as it came to be known, was to last twelve years. The M.I.C., in total disarray by this time, offered to suspend all political activity voluntarily until the end of the problem.

Official political activity amongst Indians in the post-war period is a story of the growing dominance of the M.I.C. and that organisation's enforced increase in commitment to Malaya and Malayan (later Malaysian) co-operative nationalism. By 1950, the M.I.C. had been forced by the Republic of India's declaration that all overseas Indians were nationals of the country of their domicile, to accept the notion of a single nationality and citizenship for Indians in Malaya. In the period 1950-1955 the Indians were politically divided along class lines by the formation of the Federation of Indian Organisations which was a middle class attempt to counterbalance what it saw as the overemphasis of the M.I.C. on matters of labour interest to the detriment of the interest of the Indians involved in business and the professions. The split was also an attempt to win back favour from the government which was still highly suspicious of the Indians at this early period.

In the early 1950's the M.I.C. had taken a stance against the growth of communalism in politics and initially stood opposed to the alliance of the United Malays National Organisation (U.M.N.O.) and the Malayan Chinese Association (M.C.A.), which had been formed to fight state elections. After systematic exclusion of the Indians from the 'Membership' system of government and the failure of a series of alliances of its own, the M.I.C. began necessarily to adopt a basically

communal stance itself in order to attract further support and to validate its claim to be the representative of Indian opinion. It was, however, hampered in its political ambition by the small number and thinly spread distribution of the Indian population. Few of these people had taken up citizenship or registered to vote. However, the immediate reward for joining the alliance was the allocation of two seats in the Federal Cabinet following the 1955 elections. The M.I.C. thereafter took the position of the quiet partner of the alliance and the Indians were noticeable by their absence in delegations and representations made by the alliance group.

The period in the 1950's which saw the shift of the Indians, through the M.I.C., into the alliance was also the time which saw Tamils reasserting themselves over the non-Tamil leadership.<sup>1</sup> The constant tension, both inside the M.I.C. and outside it, especially in the urban areas, which resulted from the Tamil numerical domination of the organisation informs many of the issues discussed in the remaining chapters of this work. What is particularly important for the present discussion is to note that the institutional political structure set up by the British colonial State to protect the interest of British capital in Malaya finally succeeded in incorporating the Indians in such a way as to make their immediate interests apparent as lying with the British and their approved successors, the Alliance Party.

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<sup>1</sup>This finally led to the emergence of a Tamil estate owner, V.T. Sambanthan, as the new leader. Sambanthan had successfully mobilised the vote of the estate labourers whose massive membership he ensured for the first time in the M.I.C.'s history by wide and systematic recruiting.



The only occasion on which the ascriptive identity had merged with an affective identity for even a significant proportion of the population called 'Indian' had occurred significantly when there was a major disruption in prevailing relations of production and distribution in Malaya, during the Japanese period. At this time, and at this time alone in the history of pre-independence Malaya, did the meaning of the term "Indian" and the symbols that went with it coincide in any sense for those with power and those without it.

One common factor of the position of Indians in the infrastructure of the British-dominated social formation provides the basis for the analyst to see the logical genesis of the ascribed identity "Indian" as it emerges through time. With the exception of the Melaka Chitties at the beginning of the British period, and possibly the Nattukottai Chettiars throughout, those termed 'Indian' today form a population which was integral to and almost totally involved in the colonial plantation economy. Roberts (1978) discusses the implications of the colonial plantation as a form of production and suggests that its prime effect was to extract resources from the country involved by technological innovation and for a foreign market, without creating of itself a significant effect on the local economy, either in the labour or commodity markets. Now, while the effect on any given local economy is likely to have been highly variable and was greater than Roberts would allow in Melaka, it is, nevertheless, true that Indians were brought in to provide the administrative and service base of the plantation industry in the urban centres. They also provided the dominant labour force on the plantations themselves in the manner already described.

Roberts' thesis broadly follows that of André Gunder Frank in its emphasis on the metropolitan power and the minimal impact on local economies of multi-national capital (Frank 1967). Stenson (1980) and others have detailed the extent to which the surplus value created in Malayan plantations was exported to Britain. Sundaram (1977) has convincingly demonstrated, however, that the effect of the plantation industry in the wider economy and on the social relations of production was far from minimal, even among rural Malay peasants.<sup>1</sup>

The plantation industry produces a particular set of productive relations which in turn locates ethnically differentiated sets of people in particular places in the social formation. In this case, the social situation comprises a minimal number of interactive contexts outside the work place in which members of different ethnic categories meet, even in the market place, as Furnivall (1939) long ago pointed out. There are fewer still such contexts inside the work place and here, class positions divide the population within the same ethnic category (see Chapter 3). In the urban situation of Melaka, these patterns are both reflected and reproduced in the emergent residential and spatial patterns of development of the built form (see Chapter 2).

The contradictions which dominated the Malayan social formation lay in the separation of White and Indian interests on the basis of class location within plantation relations of production. Simultaneously, there existed the identification of both populations, to the virtual

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<sup>1</sup>It is true that imported Chinese entrepreneurship accounted for almost all the development of the local commodity market and that Chinese labour provided the bulk of the non-Indian labour supply which was engaged in the sphere of non-peasant wage labour.

exclusion of all others, with that industry as the basis of their livelihoods. Thus, there were contradictions within the plantation system and between it and other sectors of the economy. In consideration of the emergence of new meanings of the categorical term "Indian", the dominant cleavage in relations between, on the one hand, the Whites as both the owners and managers of capital and the State and, on the other, the Indians as part of the colonised set of non-owning producers, was continually undermined by the other Indians who were differently located in the relations of production of the social formation as a whole. Nonetheless, as we have seen, the political struggle did arrive at the point where this dominant cleavage was the basis of transformations in relations between the leadership and the membership of the M.I.C. by the time of the coming of representative government and finally independence. However, the alliance of political parties representing the ethnic categories of the population which resulted was such that it was bound to see the differing economic interests of each set emerge once the common interests of the preservation of capitalism and the removal of the British had been achieved.

Thus, in the wider political and economic development of Malaya and even within the independence movements themselves, a new dominant cleavage was to emerge to replace that between white colonialists and the local population. In part, this became manifest in the eventual cessation of migration through Acts aimed at both the Chinese and the Indians.<sup>1</sup> These

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<sup>1</sup>Two immigration acts in the 1950's succeeded in ensuring that future migration of Indians to Malaya was cut down to a minimum. In 1953, the Immigration Ordinance of 1952 was enforced along with a second part dated 1953. These together had the effect of limiting fresh immigration to professionals or specialists who could be deemed not to be taking the jobs of local people; or to a person under contract to a "substantial or well-established business" under conditions approved by the Home Affairs

restrictions put an end to immigration of all but the professional and highly technical, middle class Indians. So by independence the basic structure of the Indian community and its position in the country's social formation had been clearly established. At the same time, the nature of politics from this time, in which access to resources was to be determined by one's "race", forced the continued search for a common basis from which to respond to the implications of being 'Indian'.

After 1957: post-colonial or neo-colonial?

The federation of Malaya achieved independence in August 1957. After long battles, the citizenship requirements were made less stringent than those which had existed in the past and the principle of jus soli or citizenship by right for all those born in the country after "Merdeka" day (independence) was finally conceded. The delicate balance of communal politics has been the major feature of politics in independent Malaya along with the repeated skirmishes with communist guerrillas which have recurred in the years since 1960 when the Emergency was officially declared at an end. Until 1960 the British, aided by Commonwealth troops, had provided the military base for the resistance to the communists who sought to destroy the capitalist social formation. In 1963, the new nation of Malaysia was created when Malaya incorporated Singapore and the North Bornean states of Sabah and Sarawak.

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(continued) Department. Members of the families of the above categories and family members of those already legally resident in Malaya were the only others to be allowed into the country. In 1959, another act was passed which further limited the entrance of dependent children, initially to those under fifteen years, and finally to those under six years. All contract employees were then required to be assured of an income of 1,200 Malaysian dollars a month and no person whose job could be done by a local was to be admitted.

Singapore was ousted from the nation two years later when the political acumen of Lee Kuan Yew and the numerical strength of the Chinese became too dangerous for the constitutionally protected bumiputras (sons of the soil) who were the Malays and other 'indigenous' peoples (see Chapter 8). Since that time the Malay-dominated government has gradually increased its pressure in an attempt to redress, as it sees it, the unfair balance of economic wealth more in favour of the Malays. The characterisation of the Malays holding political power while the economic reins of the country were in the hands of the Chinese is not entirely inaccurate as a picture of the distribution of local capital, especially in the local manufacturing sector (see Puthuchearry 1960), but it is wrong as a portrayal of the economy as a whole, in which foreign capital still dominates with the British at the top of the list. In any case the Indians are largely caught between the two elements, the Malay-dominated State, on the one hand, and the Chinese capitalists on the other.<sup>1</sup>

The conflict between the State (now representing both the interests of international capital and those of an ethnically identified section of the local population)<sup>2</sup> and those whose interests lay with local capital as a whole became clear in the riots which followed the 1969 federal election in Kuala Lumpur. Indians were caught in the middle and it became all too clear that, in the world of communal politics, Indians

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<sup>1</sup>The State now has the dilemma of needing to preserve the conditions for the development and further accumulation of capital in order to preserve the economic base of the country from which it gains its own revenue, while attempting to avoid enhancing conditions for the specific growth of Chinese capital. At the same time, it is actively seeking to create a new class of wealthy Malay capitalists as well as a Malay petite bourgeoisie, in order to translate political power into economic power.

<sup>2</sup>See Chapter 2 for a fuller discussion of the contradictions this generates.

had little to gain and much to lose. Their interests are almost inevitably subordinated to those who hold the real power and they have little strength to resist the changing relations of the post-colonial structural transformations in the economy.

In many ways, the contemporary situation of the Indians in Malaysia is a variation on a theme. Under British rule, Indians were employed to serve the needs of a colonialist economy and discarded when they were no longer of use. They had small rewards and few rights. They worked in the original multi-national companies and then, as now, their control over their destinies was minimal. In modern Malaysia, Indians are dominated still by a privileged political group and most are still employed in jobs controlled by the State which is controlled in turn by this group, or in jobs controlled by the same British capitalists by whom they were employed before. Some have moved in the urban sector into the new multi-nationals. These have arrived in Melaka and elsewhere in Malaysia in search of cheap labour for the production of such items as electronic components and textile products. The structural position of Indians remains essentially the same here as in earlier trans-nationals. Moreover, the 'traditional' areas of work are even more unsafe than they were. Where Indians once provided the bulk of the work force, the State now requires that a more equitable balance of representation of 'bumiputras' be achieved. Thus, former avenues of employment for youth have been closed while new ones are not opening fast enough to absorb the surplus.

It is perhaps not too strong to say that viewed from the Indian perspective, the old colonialism has given way to a new neo-colonialism which

has left the Indians in an even more precarious position than they were. Changes have taken place, Indians are now an even more urban population with 34.5 percent of them living in towns with a population of more than 10,000 and 50 percent living in towns of 1,000 or more. Most Indians are now citizens and the majority locally born (1970 Census) but they are still the community with the lowest life expectancy, the highest rate of unemployment, the smallest proportional representation in tertiary education and the most uncertain future.

#### Concluding summary

The position of Indians in the Malayan peninsula has always depended upon their engagement in a wider economic structure. As a trading port, Melaka was the centre of the Southeast Asian region of the world trade system. It continued to be so during initial colonial history and Indians were located in this economic structure primarily in the spheres of exchange. Increasingly, during the period of colonial rule the State had interests which were at odds with those of the Indians whose activities had been centred on developing commercial capital. During the British period, the State, acting as the agent of British capital, became even more pervasive in its influence over the location of Indians in the new social formation which began to be built around local plantation production. Through the shift in the mode of production, the meaning of the label "Indian" also shifted to be dominated by understandings related to the newly immigrant population of low caste workers.

The intervention of the State has been on the basis of ideological notions of the suitability of particular categories of people to perform the functions required to produce the conditions for the successful

development of capital. The world capitalist system, in this case mediated through British capitalists, became paramount in structuring the broad parameters of the relations within the social formation of colonial Malaya. However, the precise form of the relations of production and of the consequent economic and political struggle is a result of the interaction of this plantation-dominated mode of production and the historically prior social structure dominated by exchange relations of mercantile capitalist. Culturally specific ideologies provide the rationale for the resultant particular patterns of organisation. Also, they are crucial to understanding the transformation of the contemporary situation involving a shift towards multi-national manufacturing capitalism where Malays seek to become joint partners to the exclusion of Chinese and Indians.

Such then are the basic conditions for the creation of the Indian population in modern Melaka. It is critical to all the following chapters that social practices are understood not only to reflect wider relations of the social formation and its historical creation, but also to be the location for their reproduction and transformation. Thus, the remainder of this thesis comprises a discussion of the particular processes which created and recreate that population as a more or less self-identifying set of interacting people, rather than simply as a category determined by ideological and historical ascription.



## CHAPTER 2

### ON STRUCTURED STRUCTURES:

#### THE PRODUCTION AND REPRODUCTION OF URBAN SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION

The previous chapter traced the emergence of the ethnic category "Indian". This was viewed as a process leading ultimately to the contemporary understandings of the term "Indian" and to the beginning of the analysis of its importance for the population so designated. The town of Melaka as a built form was referred to only insofar as it was the location of the transformations of the wider social formation. In this chapter the urban built form becomes the focus of the discussion. It is specifically examined as a context encompassing and embodying the structural properties of the emergent social formation. As such, it is considered here as a major factor in the reproduction of the relations of that social formation. Like Giddens (1979:202) I see a need to incorporate space as a set of conceptual relations into the very heart of my analysis of what structures the reproduction of social systems.

In examining Melaka as an 'urban context', I shall be analysing two processes simultaneously. On the one hand, I shall discuss the "structuring properties" of the creation of the contemporary built environment, which I and my informants recognize as Melaka. On the other hand, I shall argue that the built form, through its embodiment of those properties, becomes itself a structuring property implying their reproduction. The properties embodied are reproduced not only in themselves through the urban form, but also constitute the context for the reproduction and potential transformation of patterns of 'on the ground' social

organisation. These, in turn, reproduce the conditions for the reproduction of the mode of production. That is, they embody class relations and the reproduction of labour power, infrastructural bases, contexts of meaning, and patterns of social identity.

As stated in the previous chapter the structuring properties of the social systems are not static but are "both the medium and the outcome" of social interaction. Thus, reproduction in the sense it is being used here is a complex and subtle process entailing the potential for change in systems, and ultimately in the structuring properties. This change derives from contradictions which emerge in the operation of structuring principles in practice.

The structuring properties incorporated into the built form of Melaka involve the intersection of three analytical domains and their concomitant ideologies. These are: Class, both colonial and post-colonial forms; Caste, as a hierarchical system of social division; and Ethnicity, as colonial and post-colonial processes of categorisation with concrete effects in the social formation. Encompassing each of these sets of relations organising people, to a greater or lesser extent, is the State. It is contradictions within each of these four systematically organised sets of relations, and in the relations between them as they emerge in practice, which we trace here through the built form of the town.

There is a repeated concern in what follows to demonstrate how Indians invest their world with meaning and thereby construct a 'social reality' in response to the structured realities produced by others with different intentions and meaning frames. Similarly, it is basic to this argument

that the social reality of these others responds continually, as system, to that created and reproduced by Indians. The aim is to show the extent to which Indians are not simply acted upon in a deterministic fashion by these 'structuring properties', but instead act themselves to construct, reproduce and transform their social world. The actions spoken of here, although themselves intentional, have both intended and unintended consequences. A continual theme of the thesis is the relation of intentional action to the creation and reproduction of distinctive social and cultural practices in a systematic manner, such that they provide the basis for a set of continually created, and often contradictory, identities. In this and the three following chapters the notion of spatial relations as transmitters of the structuring principles of social reproduction is pursued through the detailed consideration of three different domains of practice — the urban, the domestic, and the temple.

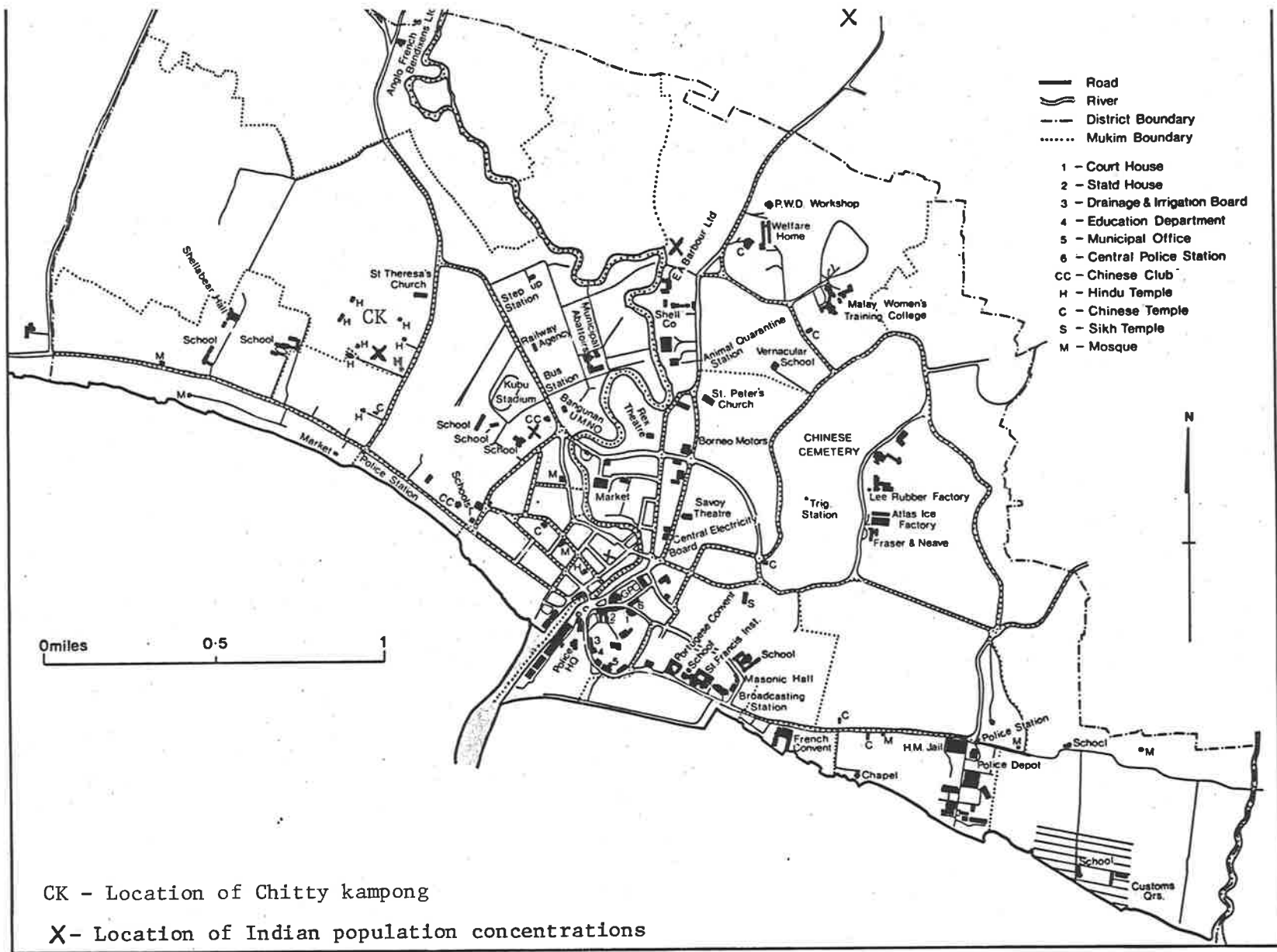
#### Melaka as built form

Urban space will be shown to be organised essentially on class lines within the logic of colonial and neo-colonial economic orders in which a conscious relation of class and ethnicity is and always has been present, as was shown in the last chapter. However, these patterns in and of themselves cannot necessarily explain transformations or even the reproduction of contemporary social and spatial orders. What a class analysis alone would fail to reveal is precisely how and why an ethnic group is not and cannot become a class 'in and for itself', nor why any of the classes in Melaka cannot be said to be achieving a class consciousness which transcends ethnic categorisation. It is my contention in this chapter that these two processes have to be understood as both reflected in, and reproduced by the structuring principles which order the spatial

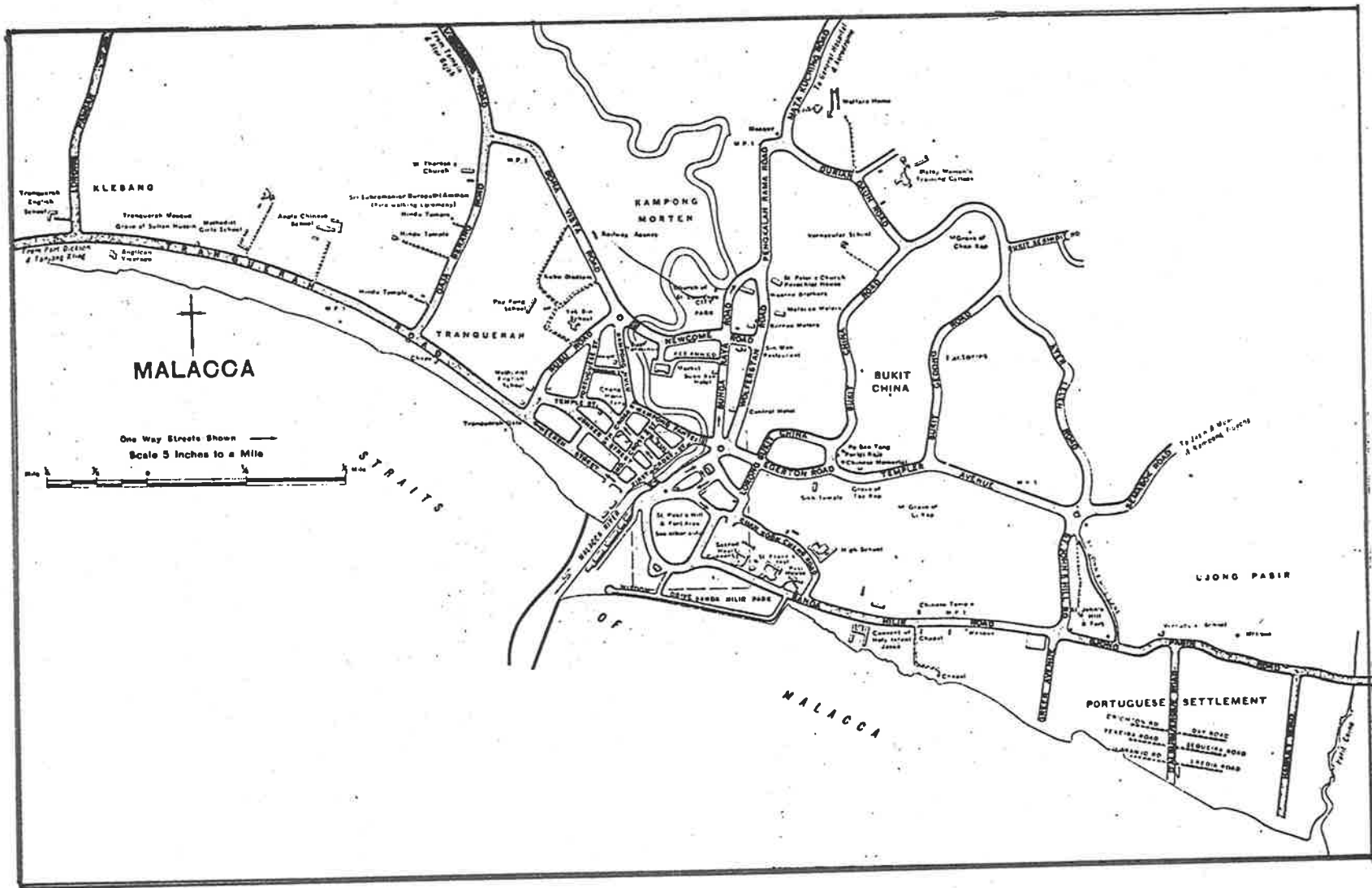
arrangements of the town and people's understandings of them. One such major structuring principle, I argue, is caste, in that it orders spatial relations and political relations, and constrains both interaction and long-term identification of interest between members of the imposed ethnic category "Indian". Caste, in this context, will be shown not to have an ultimate status in the Dumont (1970) manner of being the all-encompassing principle of social relations or even of their ideological form, but will be seen to operate in a dialectic with class and ethnicity as structuring principles.

In order to develop these themes and tie them to the contemporary situation in Melaka, it is necessary to discuss the present built form of the town and its genesis in some detail. On arrival in the town, the most immediate and lasting impression is one of the diversity and complexity of spatial relations in a context where symbolic expressions of diversity are manifold in other equally apparent forms. The pink-washed Dutch architecture which dominates the area of St. Paul's Hill, and the neatly laid out roundabout with its clocktower at the centre (see map, page 61), stand in stark and remarkable contrast to the Chinese-dominated area to the north of the river, with its mixed architecture and densely packed shophouses set in narrow streets.

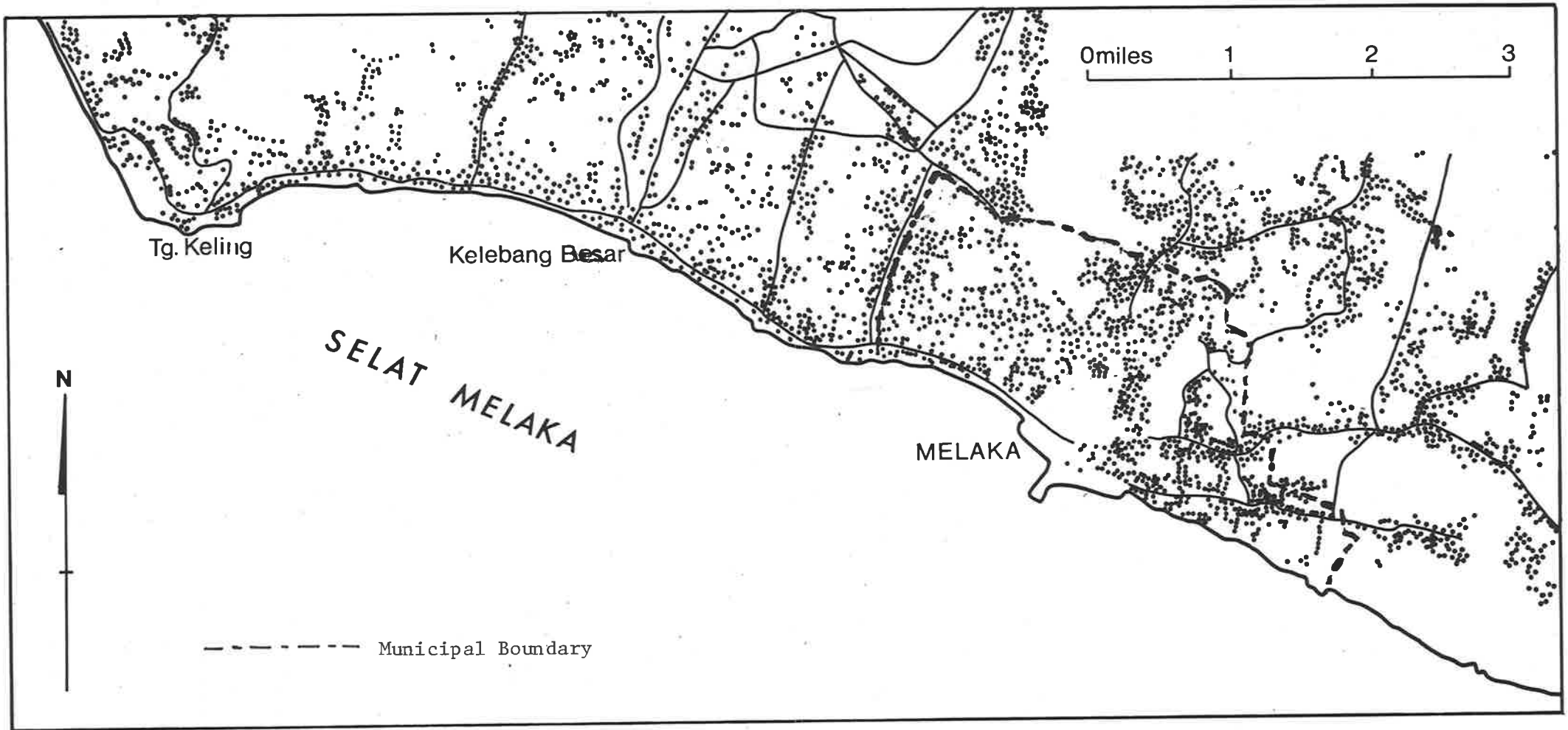
The road south from the hill is wide and tree-lined and runs along the foreshore past the green field, reclaimed from the sea, and past the archetypal symbols of European domination; the Melaka Club, with its playing fields, and the Convents with their schools. Moving out from the centre along this road from the Dutch town hall, still known as the 'Stadt Huis', one passes more Dutch buildings, then the substantial



MELAKA - Municipal area



MELAKA  
 (Showing English street and place names)



MELAKA METROPOLITAN AREA  
(Showing extent of built-up area)

Portuguese gate to the fort, which was renovated by the Dutch and which is all that remains of the fortifications which the British blew up and used for building material. Between the Dutch and the Portuguese, between the symbols of administration and those of military subjugation and imperialist self-protection, lies the first of the British buildings to be encountered on this route. Aptly named, Bastion House stands on the bend of the road and serves as the headquarters of the Dunlop Rubber Company. Beyond it lie the British 'Melaka Club' and then the old government 'Rest House'; though the latter was in the process of being remodeled as a private hotel as I left the field. Further south and just off this road, at the very edge of the former municipal boundaries, lies the epitome of British colonial concepts, 'Garden City'. This seaside, rectangularly laid out, residential location provides homes for the lesser government bureaucrats such as departmental heads and their assistants. Within its boundaries, houses are ranked by size, style, and position relative to the sea. The largest are detached, have gardens and are at the sea's edge. The smallest are terraced, have no garden and face the large grass square which forms the centre of the complex. In spatial configuration, this housing pattern is typical of the form of colonial grouping based on military conceptions and classed as 'civil lines' by the colonialists themselves (see King 1976). At present, amid the growing numbers of Malays and some Chinese, a few families of Indians are to be found here. At the entrance to the area is the Melaka Jail and on the opposite corners, the police barracks.

It is thus clear that the area to the south and southeast of the town centre is still dominated by the symbols of the State in the various dominant forms it has taken in the history of the town. The needs of a



colonial order acting to protect the interests of the capitalist economy are here made manifest in the built form. Each succeeding State has been able to inherit and build upon the structures of domination in the town and upon their architectural heritage, in such a way as to render them both more than symbolic vestiges of an old order. Rather, they are incorporated as integral parts of the new. The functions and meaning of the built structures and the institutions they house, remain essentially the same as they become the instruments of the politically ascendant power. Even in the present context of a state dominated by the Malay population, the structural relations remain essentially the same, as the new State is built round a capitalist economy dominated by overseas investment. Only the personnel have changed, their roles remain functionally the same, and their social and geographical location in many respects identical with their foreign predecessors.

To the southeast of the 'Garden City' area lies another highly regulated residential area. It is spatially distinct and contains mainly simple, single-storey wooden buildings as opposed to the solid brick and concrete of 'Garden City' where many of the houses are double-storey. This is the 'Portuguese Settlement': a State-sponsored and deliberate attempt to spatially locate, and thereby reproduce, the socially distinct set of descendants of the first European conquerors and colonial settlers, who took local wives. At the edge of the former municipality, this settlement houses almost the entire community of the working class people whose use of an archaic dialect of Portuguese and whose Roman Catholicism are prime markers of distinction along with the engagement of many in the local fishing industry (Pintado n.d. 1973?).

In important senses, then, the history of Melaka continues to live through the physical structure of the town. So too do the schisms in the local society, through the contrast between the southeast side of the town, characterised by administrative and colonial buildings and areas of government housing, and the dense and bustling commercial heart to the northeast of the river and to the north of St. Paul's Hill.

A good example of the process I have just described may be seen in areas other than the southeast of the town, where the influence of the State, class differentiation and cultural values all conspired to produce select areas of colonial housing for the senior British officials. These are on areas of raised land, usually small hills such as Bukit Pringet, because of British notions of the healthiness of the air at higher levels (see King 1976), their pursuit of the cooling as well as the healthy effects of the breeze, and their search for views of the landscape. The British saw hills as 'naturally' superior sites. Moreover, raised residential areas such as hills provide a good symbolic statement of class relations in which the dominant stand above the dominated. Not only were the houses elevated, they were also large, detached, set in large grounds (usually 'gardened' in British style), and frequently double-storey too. The best had drives and car-parking spaces. Each house had a large number of rooms, each with a specialised function, and above all, they had British-style bathrooms and toilets. Thus, cultural notions became symbolic of class and ethnic relations through their incorporation into the built form.

The houses were, of course, built and owned by the State and were meant to symbolise British power and civilisation. At independence, they were

passed on to the Malay-dominated new State and have become the symbols of the new State-employed, bureaucratic elite and the power they wield. Since this area of government is precisely that in which the question of Malay domination has become a central problem, these houses are now also symbols of the growing dominance of a new set of people defined ethnically, as they were under the British. As well, they reproduce spatially once more the class relations of the present social formation in which the State is still so prominent.

The pervasive and continuing pattern of State intervention in the social development of Melaka and in its built form is again marked in the south-east part of the town, though also in other peripheral areas, with the contemporary expansion of housing. Some of these new housing estates are directly government-sponsored low-cost housing projects, though many are private developments undertaken by Chinese entrepreneurs. However, in accordance with state and national policies, numerous regulations were laid down about the participation of Malays in all levels of these projects, their share in the equity and profits, and finally the access of members of this ethnic category to a proportion of the houses on a quota basis.

Such intrusion into the 'free market' is increasingly frequent and is always justified in terms of a perceived need to redress an uneven balance in access to urban resources experienced by the Malay population. In the contemporary social formation of Malaysia, this pattern of intervention marks the contradictory nature of the relationship between the State, multi-national capital and local capital. Though the Malays dominate the state and national political institutions, and they gain

revenue and support from the overseas capitalists, they own a very small proportion of the equity of registered capital themselves. On the other hand, of course, local capital is dominated by ethnic Chinese who have limited political power and who are predominantly engaged in small-scale manufacturing and trade. In the past Malays have had limited involvement in the urban economy, and West Coast peninsula towns in Malaysia are dominated economically and numerically by Chinese. In Melaka, approximately 75 percent of the population are classed as Chinese, only 12 percent as Malays and approximately 8 percent as Indian (Census 1970).<sup>1</sup>

Housing is just one arena in which urban politics in Melaka is inscribed, though an important one. The relationship of the State to the expansion of the built form of Melaka will form an important part of the later discussion in this chapter, particularly in the examination of the growth of new contexts of multi-national capitalist expansion in the manufacturing sector. For the moment, it should be noted that at the time of my research local cynics, Indians amongst them, pointed out that extensive government intrusion through regulations created powerful bureaucratic figures whose acquiescence in certain dubious practices of the developers and construction firms was vital to the success of the projects. Indeed, some of these construction firms were thought to be owned, in part, by members of the local administration. The same cynics were ready to point out that few powerful figures in government or in the top rungs of the state bureaucratic order were poor. Indeed, the dominant and frequently expressed view of those not involved in politics was that those who were, were wealthy and had become politicians totally out of

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<sup>1</sup>The metropolitan population as a whole was approximately 110,000 at the time of my research.

self-interest in order to enhance their wealth still further. Regardless of the truth or otherwise of these opinions expressed by the governed, they mark an important social division at both the ideological and the structural levels which will be explored more fully later in this chapter.

A high demand exists in Melaka for new housing and most modern estates are characterised by dispersed patterns of Indian settlement such that while it is possible to identify a slight tendency towards clustering, these middle class suburbs are not ethnically differentiated in such a way as to form enclaves of any sort. The roughly crescent-shaped area of metropolitan Melaka has essentially filled up from the northwest round to the southeast, in terms of the density of housing and the development of new commercial buildings. More recently, expansion has been to a satellite suburb in the northeast in Bukit Bahru, and to the northwest, along the coast to Tanjong Kling (see map).

The newer suburbs contrast strikingly with the dense core of residential and commercial space which lies immediately to the northwest of the river. Here the densely packed shophouses are occasionally interspersed by large houses of several storeys, all roofed in small and vividly red tiles which give the area the appearance of the classical stereotype 'Chinatown' of hectic commerce and trade. A more careful examination of the buildings located here shows the historical influence of the Dutch merchants in the architecture of the warehouses and business houses of the streets near the port and river. The still commonly used Dutch names of Heeren Street and Jonkers Street give a further reminder of the colonial presence, just as the new 'official' Malay names they now bear

mark the attempt consciously to transform conceptual understandings of town space, on the part of the now politically-dominant Malays.

On the northwest bank of the river, occupational, ethnic and religious differentiations in the population are reflected in the most commonly used English forms of the street names, some of which have been translated into Malay directly (see map). Viewed from the perspective of the State institutionally located on the hill, the heterogenous population on the other side of the river — a population of artisans, traders and general petite bourgeoisie — is both the source of revenue and prosperity, and the source of threat and danger. This is by virtue of the fundamental power derived from the crucial role these people play in the reproduction of the economic base of Melaka.<sup>1</sup> It is this perception which partially explains the new developments of industrial estates at the margins of the metropolitan area rather than in the central industrial zone. In these new developments the State has a major interest, for it acts both as agent for others and directly for itself in achieving Malay participation in joint ventures with multi-national capital. This is taken up more fully below. As a consequence of the fact that until now the State has always had a reliance on the ethnically-differentiated productive population on the other side of the river, it is logically necessary, or at least highly desirable, that no single consciousness of opposition emerge in that population. Thus, it has always been in the interest of the rulers to encourage, rather than simply acquiesce, in the reproduction of social divisions within that population.

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<sup>1</sup>This statement is true for the whole of Melaka's past, but requires some qualification in the light of current transformations in the economy.

The new industrial estates, most of which are Free Trade Zones, mark an important transformation in the local social formation, away from the dominance of the plantation industry and towards manufacturing. As such, the development of the built form which goes with this shift repeats the pattern of shift which took place when the British set up the infrastructure of the plantation industry itself. In both cases, a major concern of the capitalists involved was the reproduction of labour power. The transition made by the British, as the first chapter sought to show, may be characterised as a shift from an economy dominated by structures created for the circulation and realisation of surplus value to one in which the production of that surplus value becomes paramount. The built form of Melaka from that time on reflects those concerns. We have seen this in the brief account of the southeast of the city in which the colonial bureaucratic support structure for the plantation industry was embodied. As we focus more on the situation of Indians, this will become even clearer. However, the point with respect to the Free Trade Zones is that the new form of manufacturing capitalism, along with the limited growth of Chinese petty capitalism in such areas as the 'Jalan Kilang' light industrial zone (contiguous with the north-northwest edge of the town centre), has generated the increased need for labour and the services required for its reproduction.

On the rubber estates of the British period, and even today, labour power was reproduced by the capitalist management's very tight control of tied housing, education and health facilities (see Jain 1970 and Wiebe and Mariappan 1978). Similarly, in the towns, the State's role in the reproduction of labour power for the support structures of the plantation productive system was and is central. This involved the State in the

provision of many of the items which Castells (1975) refers to under the rubric of "collective consumption", including the supply of housing to the immigrant proletariat. However, contrary to Castells and even to Harvey (1973, 1978) who are talking of advanced capitalist societies, I do not feel that this engagement of the State should lead us to suppose that urban politics is solely or even predominantly about the distribution and consumption of such items and services. Vital and contentious though they are, particularly in a polity in which ethnicity looms so large, the provision of housing, schools, hospitals, transport and communication systems through socialised, rather than private means, has to be seen as secondary to the problems of the generation, reproduction and distribution of capital through the relations of production. It is this process and its transformations which are made apparent in the new Free Trade Zones and the state-regulated efflorescence of private and government housing.

Unlike the plantations, the new manufacturing industries of the Free Trade Zones are largely joint ventures involving multi-national and local capital. The local capital is often state capital invested on behalf of Malays, or capital borrowed by Malays at preferential rates. The aim is to create contexts for the accumulation of capital by Malays and to generate employment for urban Malay workers who formed a negligible proportion of the proletariat in the British period. Employment is also generated for members of other ethnic categories, but recruitment is controlled according to state quotas, just as they are beginning to be for public sector employment. Thus, in both the plantation and the modern manufacturing sectors, any attempt to separate the generation of surplus value from the need to realise that surplus or create the



conditions for its circulation is patently to rupture a fundamental unity.

### Capital and labour in the built form

The spatial form of the new manufacturing zones, and the development of housing estates, themselves embody the emerging shift in the impact of the world capitalist system on the local social formation (see Chapter 1). The State designates the land which will be used, and arranges for its infrastructural services to be supplied. It does this to accommodate the requirements of multi-national capital in which it has an interest through joint ventures and through the revenue generated by exports. A major requirement is the controlled and assured provision of labour power. The built form of the present urban area as a whole derives from the complex interplay of a set of historically related processes in which the dominant logic of productive capitalism is only part of the story. Perhaps the spatial creations of the British and the place of Indians within them best exemplify some of these points, especially when set against some contemporary transformations in the relationships between the State and the Indian population. Whereas the pre-British period town shows a primary distinction between the northwest and the southeast of the river, the British pattern is complicated by the expansion of the town to the north and round to the east of the older areas in such a way as to place small concentrations of a state-employed proletariat strategically close to the state-run organisations for which they supplied the labour. From early in the British period the prime source for such labour was South India, for reasons I have outlined elsewhere (see Mearns 1982, also Chapter 1). The Public Works Department, Hospital, Water Board, Electricity Board, Post Office and

Telecommunications Department, Municipal Council, Health Department and, until their closure, the Railways, all absorbed considerable numbers of Indian labourers as well as Ceylonese and Indian supervisory staff and clerical officers. The police were recruited from amongst Indians, with large numbers of Sikhs being prominent. Teachers were employed from both Ceylon and India, many of whom had recently received their own certificates on the completion of their education in an English-medium school. The Education Department was geared to the production of a labour force of literate men who could fill the necessary roles in the development of the infrastructural aspects of the state economy and the supervisory roles in the service industry.

Many of the services proffered from the urban centre were performed in the rural hinterland as necessary production processes or as maintenance of basic aspects of the plantation production process. Thus, besides being a built environment which served organisational functions and which facilitated surplus value realisation, Melaka also functioned as a concentrated focus of labour which was employed in the processes vital to the generation of that surplus value. Communications, electricity, water and the availability of good quality health care were central to both the production process directly and to the reproduction of the labour force. It is spurious to seek to separate the two functions of the town and assign unequivocal dominance to either (Harloe 1977).

A major aspect of the control of labour power in the urban context, as in the plantations, lay in the conscious attempt on the part of the colonialist employer to maximise the regulation and control of the work force, through housing, often in the name of efficiency. This is well recorded

elsewhere (Sandhu 1969). As I have argued elsewhere, this was the prime motivation for the recruitment of Indian labourers to Malaysia in the first place. It was also part of this notional mode that the use of low caste Indians facilitated the process. The result, in the town, was the creation of distinctive spatial environments for distinctive class and ethnic categories. Urban labour lines were for many years the only true concentrations of a proletariat, and were almost exclusively Indian in personnel. Moreover, in most cases, work space became equivalent to ethnic space as different sectors of the urban economy were the special province of a particular section of one ethnic category. Thus, the spatial order entailed and embodied aspects of social identity derived from class, ethnic and caste divisions throughout the British period.

However, Indians in the British colonial period were not restricted to a single sector or even to the roles of state labourer or supervisor which I have already suggested were dominant. With the diminution of trade as the basis of the Melaka economy from the Dutch period (though it has never been totally eclipsed), the significance of the Indian traders diminished accordingly. Gujerati textile merchants and furniture stores are still to be found. However, like the South Indian petit bourgeois operations, such as grocers, general suppliers, book stores and restaurants, which surround them, they mostly service the State's resident Indian population and specialise in imports from India for that purpose.

In terms of the Indian presence in the older commercial heart of Melaka, the economic transformation brought about by the rise of the plantation industry is clearly marked by the reduction of the population now largely

restricted to the confines of one street, First Cross Street, and by the nature of the occupations undertaken there. Though there are still one or two other traders such as jewellers in this area, as well as a few Gujerati furniture stores, the dominant presence is of Nattukottai Chettiars who are the South Indian caste of money lenders and property owner/managers. They and the Indian lawyers who have their offices on First Cross Street, but who unlike the Chettiars do not live there, provide significant evidence in themselves of the orientation towards the exploitation of the rural potential of Melaka in the British period. Chettiars loaned money and obtained property as a two-sided aspect of the opening up of land as a resource beyond the municipal area. The lawyers were and still are frequently engaged to settle disputes of a sort which ultimately have their origin in the creation of rural Melaka's land as a commodity. Much of the Indians' property derives from the growth of the rural industry in the final analysis.

The Nattukottai Chettiars share with the working class Melaka Chitty community, and with them alone from within the Indian population, the unusual feature of the collective ownership of their basic residential land. Though the Chettiars use the houses on the land for business purposes and the Chitties on the whole do not, the rationale for collective ownership remains the same for both communities. At the level of the articulated perceptions of the leaders of each community the alternative was to risk the further erosion of the community, and thereby its ability to act cohesively and collectively, through the alienation of its core space. Chitties and Chettiars alike expressed fears that Chinese capitalists or the Malay-dominated State would acquire their land over time, if ownership remained individual and fragmented. The monetary

value of the sites was unquestionable, though there was a question mark for some informants (and no doubt for others) over the motivation for such acquisition, which was thought possibly to be with a view to removing the population as an Indian population from these areas. Once more, it is not particularly important whether these perceptions were in any sense accurate. What is important is that the perceptions are at least partially responsible for the continued identification of a particular set of people with a particular urban locale, and for ensuring the continued reproduction of that set as an identifiable group within the urban population through the collective ownership of land.

It is significant for this present discussion that there exists as a prior condition of the creation of this land ownership, an identity which is operating at a lower order than the encompassing category "Indian". Indeed, the interests of these two sets of people cannot be understood without taking this into account. If one considers the class location of the majority of individuals within the groups, their interests would appear to be at odds given the engagement of the Chettiars in finance capital and the Chitties in selling their labour in the wage market. And yet, they share the same potential fates of dispersal and loss of identity, and they believe this to be because they are categorised as Indian. In fact, their interests are predominately in retaining a core space. The caste-defined group of Chettiars thereby form a doubly defined class fraction, that is as Indians to non-Indians within a class, and as Chettiars to other Indians within the same class. In the case of the Chitties, as an historically, linguistically and (negatively)<sup>1</sup> caste-differentiated group, core space is essential to the

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<sup>1</sup>Chitties are technically outcaste, though in practice high caste Indians tend to view them as low-ranking or debased castes which remain superior to untouchable castes (see discussion below).

reproduction of their social identity too. The fact that they suffer the consequences of the categorisation as Indians in a potentially similar form does not engender any automatic unity of identity or purpose between these two sub-sets.

In the context of our discussion of the processes underlying both the contemporary urban form and the actions of Indians, these patterns of external threats leading to collective action seem to suggest that the idea that urban politics is dominated by questions of collective consumption, was correct after all. However, it is necessary to point out that, for the Chettiars, their core identity is important precisely because they are located in the economy as a class fraction with specialised financial roles which they perform from the houses in First Cross Street. Though not quite so vital in the present situation of alternative sources of finance, it is nonetheless important that Chettiars maintain some degree of intimate contact in order to avoid undue competition or the loss of their control of some areas of petty finance. Agreement on interest rates and share of the market, as well as shared information on the nature of that market and the credit-worthiness of clients were especially significant in the reproduction and accumulation of their finance capital in the past, though this remains true to a lesser extent today.

In the case of the working class Chitties, their concern to protect their interests is twofold; though both aspects may here be said to amount to the politics of collective consumption in the urban context. Melaka Chitties as a group are concerned to reproduce themselves as distinct socially and culturally, but they are also concerned to ensure the transmission of their property in the form of land to future generations.

It is this property, in tandem with their alternative bases of differentiation mentioned above (i.e. history, language and caste), which distinguishes this group from other working class Indians. The latter mostly rent their houses from the State or on the private market. The Chitties are seeking to avoid the further expropriation of their surplus value in the form of rent which would have to be paid if they did not own their land and houses. That rent would go not only to those of another class, of course, but in all likelihood to members of another ethnic group. Moreover, the pervasive influence of the State is operative here also. The Melaka Chitty population was threatened with the compulsory acquisition of their surplus land if it was not utilised. Much of the land which Chitties owned was neither built on nor cultivated on a regular basis. As a result of a government edict, and after the drawing up of a trust deed in 1962 to make all the land community property in the trust of the temple officials, the community encouraged Chinese to build and rent houses in the residential area they owned. This has resulted in a slightly higher proportion of non-Chitties living on that community's land than members of the community itself. The implications of these transformations are explored more fully in the following chapter. What is striking here is that the present residential pattern of the Chitty community is the result of the historical processes of colonialism described in the previous chapter in combination with contemporary influences of the State in a context of class and ethnic divisions. These operate to order perceptions of the situation, and therefore, to order actions taken by both the State and the Chitties.

Contemporary Melaka Chitties sell their labour power in a wage market which is dominated by a capitalist mode of production. Like other

Indians, however, the Chitties are located in the urban economy largely outside the directly productive sphere. Though a significant number of the Chitties are employed in the public utilities, mostly in skilled and semi-skilled jobs or in minor clerical capacities, others are located in private, commercial concerns, and a few are self-employed as trishaw (pedalcab) riders. In all these occupational sectors, a national- and state-level governmental policy to increase the proportion of 'bumiputra' (in this case Malay) involvement, wherever possible to reach a level of 30 percent by 1990,<sup>1</sup> has a direct effect on job security and youth employment opportunities. Other South Indians who have an even greater proportion of their number employed and housed directly by departments in the public sector are even more vulnerable to the effects of this policy.

Residentially, the current interference by the State in the working of both state and capitalist organisation has the effect of diminishing the number of Indians located in the proletarian centres of labour line accommodation and making them less attractive as focal points for the formation of clusters of cheap, non-state housing for Indians, as they had been under the British. Chitty leaders, and even many of the ordinary apolitical people of the community, are operating in the urban process with a fairly developed consciousness of their class relation to others in the urban economy, but the more immediate consciousness is in terms of the operation of political forces through ethnic categorical distinctions which have a direct effect in the ordering of relations of production, consumption and exchange, and upon the reproduction of the

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<sup>1</sup>This aim is first articulated in the government's 'Second Malaysia Plan'.



distribution of political power. That this consciousness may in some senses be seen as a level of false consciousness by Marxists may be misleading. This is because consciousness as ideology remains fundamental to the reproduction of the social system. The implications of the institutionalisation of ethnic categorisations into the political structure of Malaysia through the Constitution are examined in broader scope in Chapter 8. However, the relevant considerations for the purpose of the analysis of the urban built form, in its relation to the production and reproduction of social relations in Melaka, lie in the constraints such constitutionalised divisions place on the reproduction of labour power and in the transformations in the personnel in the various levels of the relations of production. The latter aspect is important in the extent to which it produces new cleavages and cross-class alliances and serves to diminish the chances of class consciousness arising. However, insofar as the spatial relations of the urban complex of Melaka, the social relations they encompass, and the understanding of actors moving through that social world are distorted, it is also important analytically if the self-generative, reproductive and transformative aspects of the shared symbolic orderings of the world are ignored.

#### Meaning and the reproduction of social identity

The distribution of Indians through the town, and their engagement in productive processes and production-serving processes, reproduce not only a class structure, but also a series of culturally specific understandings and relations. The relation of the former to the latter is a central problematic of my thesis. The major contention of what follows in this chapter is that, in the case of the Indians, the cultural/religious understandings with which people invest their social world are more than

mystifications or simple reflections of their class location in that social world. They are the medium and the outcome of an ongoing set of social processes which both reproduce and transform themselves through the interaction of individuals and groups in particular and structured contexts. The argument hinges on the notion that structures or structural properties are reproduced through practice, or rather through the practices of located individuals and groups. These practices are themselves 'structured', that is, given constraint and potential, by the culturally possible range of responses. These in turn stand in a dynamic relation to the always evolving worldwide social structure of which they are a part. Thus, ideologies are produced from the interaction of cultural systems and the wider social structure. As contradictions emerge, e.g. in caste, in its confrontation with the politics of ethnicity, these are resolved in practice and new ideologies emerge (see Chapter 8).

The economy of Melaka, even during the British period, was always diverse and complex. In contemporary Melaka, as we have seen, the economy has been diversified still further as a matter of deliberate state policy. In the following pages I shall comment further on these points which have received brief attention already, for their implications are great for the Indian population. However, here the point I wish to stress is that though it is necessary to characterise economic form and analyse it initially in its own terms, there remains a crucial requirement that the analyst consider how this economic form comes to relate to the concrete social formation with which it is linked in practice. The spatial form is part of the social formation, and its complexity obviously derives in large measure from the complexity of the economic form.

Nevertheless, I shall develop now the theme that the cultural forms —

the symbolic orderings of experience which sets of actors engage in and reproduce in the course of their everyday life — are also integral to the dialectic which generates the particular social formation dominated by economic structures, in this case a multi-national Capitalist Mode of Production. It is worth pointing out here that practices which reproduce and enact differing cultural orders may overlap with sets of practices involving direct engagement in the same productive processes for differentiated groups of people. There is no necessary relationship between sets of people and their location in the relations of production, which is bound to bring about an homogeneous culture or ideological form.

To return to the more concrete, I am concerned to show that the spatial relations and distribution of Indian residents of Melaka both reflect and reproduce more than a class structure, and that what this extra element or elements might be has important ramifications for that class structure itself. In the debate about the best analytical approach to adopt towards urban formations, and in particular, to colonial urban formations (Harvey 1973, Castells 1975, Frank 1971, Harloe 1977, King 1976 and Horvath 1969), the data from Melaka led me to the conclusion that this colonial and post-colonial urban formation cannot be adequately understood in any sense, historically or contemporarily, by simply according primacy to notions of collective consumption, the circulation of surplus value, the reproduction of labour power, or even the production or generation of that surplus value, to the exclusion of non-economic factors. In a sense all these elements of the social function of the urban form are present in varying degrees at different points in the historical development of the town. I have, indeed, already suggested that the advent of the different sets of Indians identifiable today has

to be seen in each case in relation to particular stages in the development of mercantile capitalism or industrial capitalism or the transition from the dominance of one form to the other. What is clear though is that once they arrived, all Indians were located in an urban context which entailed degrees of interaction with other Indians and with various non-Indians. This interaction could not be understood or predicted in terms of understanding merely the class locations of those involved. Equally, it would be inadequate to see the interaction as taking a particular form only as a result of cultural differences.

As I have pointed out, most Indians were employed by European-dominated plantations or state organisations. They bought goods and services from other Indians and from some Chinese. For reasons to do with language use and with culturally prescribed needs, varying from the avoidance of butchers who sold beef or pork, to the provision of ritual goods for the practice of their religion, Indians have found that other Indian traders and merchants, money lenders and priests were amongst the foremost expropriators of that surplus value which had not already been appropriated at the source of employment, and were integral parts of the organisation of the reproduction of labour power. Indeed, just as the Chinese entrepreneurs were the foremost exploiters of other Chinese and Malays were similarly involved in the exploitation of other Malays, the Indian population contained both exploiters and exploited and it is true that, contrary to popular representations, such exploitation of one member of an ethnic category by other members of that category is as prevalent a feature of Malaysian social life as the more commonly described pattern of exploitation of one ethnic category by another (see also Caldwell and Amin 1977).

Moreover, it is by the creation of specific entrepreneurial opportunities through shared cultural patterns of wants, and the consumption patterns they generate, that many of the class-based divisions within the local Indian population are derived. Others exist specifically because the British recruited functionaries into bureaucratic and industrial structures at different levels, from populations they already recognised to be socially differentiated. Engagement in local economic activity facilitated the reproduction and exacerbation of these differences. Thus, the Ceylonese public servants of the British period became members of the professions in the next generation, as well as bureaucrats. In this latter case, the reproduction and enhancement of class position, and its consequent status, is paralleled by the facilitation of the ability to reproduce status associated with the high caste affiliation of the majority of the Ceylonese population. As noted in the previous chapter, by virtue of the caste structure of the Jaffna peninsula, it was members of the Vellalar caste who dominated in educational achievement and subsequent colonial employment opportunities in Sri Lanka (Ceylon). It is important to the legitimation of claims to high local status that members of this caste would be employed in what are culturally acknowledged to be 'respectable' jobs. This means above all that no Vellalar should be seen doing a menial task, especially under the supervision of another Indian whose caste he deems inferior.

Meanwhile, most working class Indians did not have, and were not given, access to resources such as advanced education in order to enhance their chances of class or caste mobility in the next generation. In many cases, the chances of maintaining or reproducing their present location in the working class has been eroded by the policies mentioned earlier

of increasing Malay participation in urban proletarian occupations. These have effectively excluded a significant proportion of Indians from the jobs which until recently they as a category were employed to undertake.

The question, as I see it, does not come down to the decision to adopt the view that either the relations inherent in the infrastructure of the Capitalist Mode of Production or those which inhere in the systems we call Culture should be considered as paramount in their explanatory force. The two aspects are inextricably interwoven. They interpenetrate at all levels. It is impossible to conceive of any concrete social formation in which culture or, indeed, ideology do not exist as prior conditions for the form which infrastructural relations take. This is most clear in the notions of gender inherent in the development of industrial capitalism itself, but is to be seen also in Malaysia in the role of ethnicity and caste. I shall argue that the cultural notions of caste and ethnicity, like kinship in primitive societies for Godelier (1978), enter directly into the relations of production.<sup>1</sup>

In concrete terms in Melaka, the patterns of residence and the occupations of Indians had their primary logic until recently in the relations of production inherent in the historical development of the infrastructural support structure of the statewide plantation industry. However, even this logic included the ideological understandings of the British

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<sup>1</sup>This is not to say, however, that they function totally as the relations of production and thereby magically become determinate of that which is determinate 'in the last instance'. Unlike Althusser and Balibar (1970), I am not concerned with the ultimately functionalist final cause of the form of a pure Mode of Production. However, I do accept that capitalist relations of production 'dominate' the social formation of Malaysia.

colonialists which took account of the cultural and social practices of those over whom they had power and were locating in particular class positions in the socio-economic structure. Thus, the British were not unaware that a great correlation existed between the class position of their working class Indian population and the status of that population in the status hierarchy of mainland India and Sri Lanka (in the form of caste). Indeed stereotypical views of the tough but acquiescent nature of the low caste South Indians were inherent in their recruitment. On the other hand, higher caste Tamils and Malayālis were thought culturally adapted, through their strong evaluation of education, their knowledge of the language and their cultural knowledge of how to deal with low caste Tamils, to act as the mediators between the workers and their colonial masters. On the plantations and in the town, higher caste Tamils especially were given supervisory, bureaucratic and managerial roles as the class agents of the British.

In contemporary Melaka this results in a distribution of higher castes through the better middle class areas, where very few low castes are to be found, while working class areas of the town in which Indians once dominated and are still now in strong evidence, remain conceptually areas of low caste habitation. Four major areas of this type exist for most middle class Indians, though even these are ranked according to the degree to which formerly 'untouchable' castes are conceived to dominate or not. Thus, the area of housing centred on the municipal depot is an area into which most non-resident Indians will not choose to enter. It is an area which is still occasionally referred to as a place of 'dirty fellows' and a place where danger resides for outsiders. Familiar middle class notions of the toughness and abusiveness and the violence of

working class communities are overlain in Melaka with a sense of potential ritual danger in the form of pollution. Even though this latter aspect is rarely overt in conversation, it occasionally emerged in oblique references and in patterns of interaction where, for example, requests or invitations to enter houses or partake of food would be politely refused with an elaborate excuse.

The general pattern is for avoidance to be the most prevalent mode of handling such difficulties. Where it is necessary for low caste individuals to visit an upper caste house, usually to perform some menial task, low caste people will often complain that they are subtly treated as unequal and may still be offered a drink from a vessel kept specially for low caste people. Working class Indians view middle class homes as doubly alien places if they contain Indians. Set in locations which are invested with meanings which are related to middle class conceptions of the privatisation of space, they are uncomfortable contexts for workers to enter because class and caste prejudices combine to make the low status individuals acutely aware of their position, according to informants from this category. By contrast, the centres of working class Indian residence were, and to a lesser extent still are, places which have the qualities of high degrees of network connectedness and developed knowledge of family history which both make interaction less problematic.

The point of these remarks is to underline the fact that Indians in Melaka invest the urban space which contains them with meanings which affect their social action and, more importantly, create the conditions for a structured disunity within the category "Indian" and between



classes of different ethnic groups. Middle class Indians may remark on the changes in caste attitudes. They may recall, as one did, for example, that the dhoby (washerman) was never allowed beyond the threshold of his mother's house and that a ritual sprinkling of water followed his entrance even into the compound. Yet today the dhoby just tosses the clothes onto a chair in his front hall. The fact is that working class Indians recognise that caste does affect them in many ways.

The picture requires considerable refining in order to portray the complexity of the sets of understandings within broad spatial and social parameters. Within any of the clustered sets of Indian residences there is detailed awareness of, and differing reactions to, houses containing members of especially problematic castes. Women, especially older women, are able to cite the houses of Pariyan and Pallan caste members, and some of them will avoid entering or eating at these houses since members of these castes are designated extremely polluting, or what is glossed as "untouchable", in the South Indian caste system. Many men, especially younger ones, were prepared to enter such houses and even to eat there in some cases. These men were among the most vocal in proclaiming the end of caste and of its relevance in the overseas context. Yet the vast majority of marriages I recorded were 'within-caste' marriages and all cases of marriage between Pariyan or Pallan and a higher caste were public knowledge, and the cause of gossip and doubtful prognoses on the part of members of higher castes.

The particular meanings with which Indians invest their social world, including its spatial form, are much more than simple cultural relics which are in the process of breaking down. The views expressed, and the

patterns of interaction observed, were not simply important to some idealistic 'traditional' schema, they were modes of conceptualisation of practical relations in the contemporary context. In certain contexts, they both reflected actual patterns of social behaviour, and ordered that behaviour.

The Melaka Chitty's kampong presents an interesting anomaly socially and spatially. I have already outlined the conditions which brought it into existence and suggested that they were founded in the twin relationships of a population subjugated to a colonial power developing its own form of mercantile capitalism, and the essentially caste-based differentiation of a locally-born population (born of miscegeny from India-born Hindus). In a technical sense at least, the Chitty community is therefore an outcaste community, though local caste understandings as they influence social life at the interactional level belie this to the extent that they are certainly not equivalent to the 'untouchables' of some of the labour line settlements. Nevertheless, from the point of view of high caste Indians, the kampong is conceived of as an area in which people of doubtful caste origin reside.

At the same time, the settlement lies in the centre of an important area of temples (see Chapters 3, 4 and 5), and contains people who claim middle and higher caste origins, who are devout Hindus, and who own and maintain considerable ritual paraphernalia, not to mention knowledge, which are very important to the celebration of religious festivals in the town (see Chapter 7 especially). Chitty Hindus guard their community space and explicitly relate its meaning to the temples surrounding it. They also collectively approve the marriages of Chitties to outsiders,

or sometimes withhold that approval, by decisions to grant or refuse rights of residence, and by deciding whether or not to allow marriages to take place in their temples. More subtle social pressures could also be employed to dissuade members from courses of action which would be thought to reflect on the community as a whole. On the more overt side, I heard Chitty community leaders discount the possibility of acting as mediators in a potential marriage arrangement on the grounds that one of the parties concerned was possibly of dhoby origin and that therefore their 'people' would not like such an approach. Dhobies rank very low, of course, in the Hindu caste hierarchy.

Once again, the significance of such decisions made on caste bases lies in the extent to which they reproduce an ideology which in turn enters into spatial and social orders at the level of organising principles. It is quite clear then from my data that caste understandings at the level of associated status and origins did organise Indian space and people's understandings of those spatial relations. Space as an embodiment of caste principles, in turn, reproduces them over time. One otherwise knowledgeable and reliable informant remarked one day that what many outsiders did not know was that people would not like to marry or even go regularly into areas dominated by other castes because each caste was thought to have its own magic which would more than likely cause harm to an outsider, particularly if he got into a quarrel. He said that such quarrels were likely between people of different "races" (he used the English form which is one of the possible translations of "jāti"). This was the only clear case I met of conceptions of powerful magic being generalised beyond individual encounters with sorcery, to the level of intergroup relations. However, the important notion was a more

familiar one, which was that people of radically different caste origins were bound to generate trouble if they came into regular, close proximity.

The Melaka Chitty community members are on the whole as reluctant as the Ceylonese or Chettiars, Malayālis or North Indians to enter the labour line areas of the town, if it can be avoided. They say that there are two aspects to this reluctance: the one deriving from an uncomfortable-ness because they do not speak Tamil well, and the other being expressed as fear of meeting people whose backgrounds they do not know and whose propensities to violence and bad behaviour they dislike.

Once more, the accuracy of the opinions is immaterial to their social consequences. In fact, of course, the people of the low caste labour lines appeared to an outsider as not significantly different in these respects to those of any working class community. What is important is that perceptions such as those being expressed here reproduce a caste ideology which in turn reproduces divisions between fractions of the working class, as well as between classes, within the category "Indian". The reproduction is achieved not through the marking of individuals, nor indeed through a clear sense of a 'group', but rather through space in the form of spatial regions of the town which are conceived of as 'no go' areas. Anyone associated with these areas is considered potentially dangerous until one learns differently in another context. It is partly in this fashion that caste as a meaningful system for ordering relations is perpetuated.

It may be worth noting preliminarily at this point that temples (see Chapters 5 and 6) frequently mark a congregation spatially as well as

socially, and most clusters of houses containing Indians have a temple or shrine associated with them. However, temples are one of the few spaces into which low caste and working class Indians will enter when higher caste middle class Indians are present. The reverse is not always true, as we shall see below, for high caste Hindus avoid certain temples and shrines because of their association with low caste congregations.

#### Transport, communication and the reproduction of divisions

From the map, it is possible to see that clusters of low caste working class housing are separated from one another, in some cases, by quite large distances. While in the past this did add to the tendency for relative isolation of spatially distinct areas of Indian habitation, at least in terms of daily and regular interaction outside the work context, the isolation is insignificant in terms of the contemporary reproduction of the populations which occupy them. Transport systems within the town and between the town and the rural hinterland are sufficiently developed to allow relatively easy and cheap travel between centres. In terms of the relationship of social to geographical space, this results in all the identifiable sets of Indians within the town being able to reach locations of other like sets either within the town or beyond, without undue problem. The plantations of the rural hinterland of Melaka and Negri Sembilan, and to a lesser extent Johor, all provided locations of working class, low caste Indians, as did other urban labour lines. Plantations also contained smaller numbers of Ceylonese and Malayāli supervisory and managerial staff and their families. Increasingly, alternative urban centres such as Kuala Lumpur and/or Singapore have become significant as places where populations of both working class

Indians, Tamils and Chitties alike, and middle class Ceylonese reside. Modern transport and communication systems render these populations accessible and result in frequent examples of a population within urban Melaka such as the Melaka Chitties, for example, conceiving of Singapore as part of their social space by virtue of kin and affinal connections which may be maintained as active links in family networks.

Nattukottai Chettiars have long maintained a national network which is reinforced through temple festivals (see Chapter 5), though their concern to keep in regular contact is overtly to facilitate common business practice and flows of regular information on the state of the financial market. Most other population sets within Melaka mobilise links outside of the town primarily through marriage, either the finding of suitable partners for children or the acknowledgement of already existing affinal obligations. Moreover, the history of migration into the country has been such that patrilineal kin are likely to reside in other centres, in the case of almost all categories. Rural to urban migration in recent decades has enhanced the pattern of links between plantations and the urban population. The net effect with regard to the urban context, is to make it common for Indians to restrict their social intercourse to within their area of domicile and to like areas beyond the town's boundaries, rather than to areas containing other categories of Indians within the town. There are, of course, areas of common ground (some temples and the public areas of the town such as the market and cinemas) where Indians of different residential areas come into frequent juxtaposition, though this does not often involve direct interaction.

Transport is an increasingly important phenomenon in understanding the dynamic of urban spatial relations and their role in the reproduction of social divisions. Both state and private transport in the form of buses, as well as taxis and private cars, are used to promote the movement of labour to and from working situations. Networks of private buses service the factories of the Free Trade Zones, for example, and they and the state systems, not to mention the roads, telecommunications and even the airline service to Melaka's small airport, certainly perform dual functions in the interest of capital and the non-capitalist population alike. My point, however, is that while they function to reproduce and enhance the accumulation of capital, they also function to render urban space socially divisible and reproducible in this particular fashion. Small areas of the town contain populations of Indians who could not in the long term sustain a separate identity on the basis of sub-ethnic category or caste were it not for the accessibility of other like populations. Marriage into these other populations reinforces links outside the town or between particular areas within the town and allows Indians, especially Hindus, to reconstitute their non-identification with other categories of Indians within the town.

In the reproduction of caste as a meaningful category which orders social relations, the equation of populations with caste clusters located in space is very important in India, even in the urban context. In Malaysia, urban space is not only ordered cognitively by Indians according to caste-type understandings. Those spatial relations were actually produced and are reproduced in and through the application in practice of caste principles.

As I have already remarked, working class populations of Indians are now finding that their jobs, and the tied housing which went with them, are increasingly being offered to Malays in an effort to make the distribution of occupations more equitable in terms of the percentage distribution of ethnic categories in the population. At the same time, the Malay <sup>- dominated</sup> government is involved in a transformation of the economy which incorporates a shift in capital and labour. The result has been the decline of Tamils as a proportion of government-owned labour lines in the urban area and a tendency for some dispersal of the working class Indian population. This was very much a transformation at the beginning of its progress during the time of my fieldwork. Nevertheless, it is possible to say that the urban processes involved were such that a fraction of capital defined by ethnic criteria, and supported by a State similarly defined, was succeeding in the pursuit of its interests in a manner which was rendering caste secondary as an organising principle of residential patterns of Indians, in the short term. I have no doubt though that caste will be important to understanding where Indians move to in the urban area, even when it is not an overt consideration according to informants.

In terms of their relation to general urban processes, and in particular the developing political processes which centre on relations of production and the ownership of capital, caste and other more overtly religious understandings operate to structure both ideologies and alliances as well as to define for Indians the possibility of locating oneself both socially and spatially within a particular context. Put simply, it remains true that social mobility and spatial mobility are necessary conjunctions, but that both are constrained by the influence of a belief



system which is internal to the Indian cultural system (caste) and by another which is external to them and based on a notion of the rights of the native 'sons of the soil' (ethnicity).

As institutionalised definitional processes, ethnicity and caste operate in the Melaka context to structure, at the level of organising principle, the distribution of capital, the relations of production, and, as a by-product, the consumption of collectively- or state-provided facilities including housing. In doing so, they also constitute the conditions for class and ethnic fractions to reproduce themselves and to have perceived differences in interest. Meanwhile, the urban context of Melaka must be seen as one in which the State seeks to maintain and enhance the conditions for capitalist development while simultaneously endeavouring to resist tendencies towards monopoly capital control of the local economy. At the same time it is directly intervening to alter the form of capitalist enterprise and the content of its labour force. Thus, the reproduction and transformations of labour power are reflected in patterns of collective consumption, but the urban structure exists as part of the productive process of creating surplus value to be extracted from both within its boundaries and beyond in the rural plantation hinterland. The location of the industrial estates at the edges of the town area and the recruitment of some of their labour from the rural hinterland suggest in themselves the nonsense it would be, in the context of Melaka, to seek to define the urban absolutely. It also points to the conclusion that the historical development of the town is a complex ongoing process comprising the interests of international capital, local capital and class fractions defined by cultural criteria.

The point being made here is that the structuring principles of a social formation at any given moment in history, particularly one which is complex and embedded in the world capitalist system, are bound to throw up contradictions in themselves, and to come into contradiction with the dynamics of relatively autonomous sets of relations in and beyond that social formation. Melaka town, as one arbitrarily delimited part of the wider social formation of Malaysia, is not then the product of a single economic, practical, cultural or symbolic logic, but the intersection of several such logics as they evolve in the course of social action. It is the unique combination of these intersecting logics which differentiates Melaka from any other urban centre.

## CHAPTER 3

### DOMESTIC SPACE, DOMESTIC GROUPS AND IDENTITY

This chapter examines the relationships between domestic groups, the urban space which contains them and the production, reproduction and transformations of social identity amongst Indians in Melaka. It builds specifically on the analysis of the previous chapter by reorientating the discussion towards a narrower focus, that of the physical and conceptual space surrounding Indian domestic groups.

The position developed here extends then upon arguments presented in the previous two chapters, but it is very different in emphasis. Here, the concern is with the production of the cultural and ideological features of Indian social life and the logical relationship of this process to the processes already discussed for the town as a whole. The extent to which culture remains relatively autonomous with respect to economic and political forces in society is the issue here. By the examination of historically concrete practices we shall come to discuss the theoretical implications of approaches which seek to explain social life in terms of polar notions of 'structural causality' at one extreme, and agents' free will at the other.

Here, too, I discuss the processes which define fractions of capital and the factors which inhibit the emergence of class consciousness.

Inhibitors to the emergence of a single ethnic identity which would be required in order to render cohesive a set of people contained in a social category are also examined. I touched on these problems in the

last chapter, but here the aim is to illuminate particular ranges of social life from the point of view of the actual social relations between people 'on the ground', as I observed them. It is an integral part of the overall approach that Indian conceptions of the environment, including the non-human environment, be incorporated into the analysis. However, the first concern is with conditions of a more mundane sort which are more amenable to direct observation.

### The domestic group

For the purposes of this argument, the notion of domestic group refers to that set of people, normally resident in one household, who pool income, divide their labour and share food on a regular basis, in such a way as to constitute a recognisable unit to both the analyst and the local population. The most common terms used locally, by Tamil and Malay speakers, best translate as "my house". Most frequently, ties of descent (or filiation) along with affinity provide the ideological basis of the group. However, the prime definitional characteristic is the sharing of food. An alternative designation would be 'hearth group'. Such a group may contain or, more rarely, be made up entirely of unrelated (i.e. non-kin, non-affinally linked) members but such cases are unusual.

Domestic groups are identifiable in opposition to other like groups, even where they occupy overlapping space within one dwelling. Most commonly, one domestic group in Melaka occupies one dwelling or distinct division of it, with separate cooking hearths. Even where this is not the case, spatial differentiation occurs in the usage of the dwelling, as we shall see elaborated in a case discussed below.

Once more, the concern in this analysis of the domestic group is to examine the relationship between meanings embedded in a particular culture, the formation of ideologies, and the reproduction of the social formation. The position taken here assumes that Indians as social actors, individual or group, are involved in urban processes which are not susceptible to their direct and conscious manipulation at the level of basic structure. The reasons for this have been elaborated in the previous two chapters. Nevertheless, it is assumed in this chapter that the form these processes take and their interpreted meaning for Indians in the domestic context are also not determined themselves, in any simple or direct way, by the forces acting externally to that context. In the thesis as a whole, it will be shown that the processes which reproduce cultural forms, i.e. systems of belief and practice, and which occur largely in the domestic setting, are central to understanding the reproduction of the social formation at large. The cultural forms which have the capacity to affect the wider social structure within which Indians find themselves, are such things as caste and religion, as well as gender and ethnicity. Ethnicity itself is a complex phenomenon which, like the other three sets of relations, is only partly constituted in the domestic context. It is precisely how and in what sense the constitution of ethnic identity is achieved as one of the major aspects of overall social identity, which is the concern of this argument and the one contained in the next chapter.

As I argued in the previous chapter, it is important that an account be given of the ways in which actors use, conceive of, and relate to the space which is available to them, because the meaning entailed in these processes in part determines the interaction which takes place within



that space. Moreover, an understanding of that entailed meaning also crucially informs the analysis of the principles which order interaction in regions beyond that immediate space. I am concerned to show how this is done in Melaka through the examination of the relation between the structure of domestic organisation and the investment of imposed social categories with meaning. Categories such as "Indian" are given flesh and bones by the actions and conceptions of the people so categorised. The very reproduction or transformation of the categories themselves, and of the patterns of relations between actors in one category and those in another, are affected by understandings actors have of domestic space. These understandings may be conscious or unconscious, comprising 'discursive' or 'practical' knowledge, in Giddens' (1979) terms. Nevertheless, as socially produced 'cultural forms', their shared patterns provide the basis of the identification of unity and division within a category.

#### Creating domestic space

The conception of domestic space, as both a geographical and a sociological phenomenon, must be described by the delineation of a series of relationships. Those relationships need not be seen as fixed in form, nor the concepts as fixed in content; though an historically, relatively stable, configuration is necessary for the concept of domestic space to be useful analytically.

Although the area of analysis covered in the material which follows might loosely be termed "housing" by some analysts, I am not concerned to elaborate the discussion in terms of patterns of distribution of housing types or, indeed, the shifting patterns of ownership and the politics of

collective consumption.<sup>1</sup> As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, housing is one important feature of local-level politics, but the town is best understood as the product of a complex interplay of the needs of productive and exchange processes in the context of a world capitalist system. The aim of this chapter is to consider how the patterns of ownership and distribution of capital are subsumed in, and interpenetrate notions of the nature of domestic space embedded in Indian culture. Indeed, it will be argued that the Indian domestic group and its encompassing social space are ordered according to structural principles which are such that they ultimately produce significant contradictions in relation to the structuring properties of the wider social context. These become apparent in the actions of individuals and groups located in social processes in concrete historical junctures.<sup>2</sup>

I have shown in the previous chapter how the location of housing and the general use of space in the town is only now beginning to break out of the patterns established in the colonial period. Indian housing is, of course, part of this trend and present patterns of distribution of Indians consequently mark some important changes, especially in the case of upwardly mobile middle class Indians. However, inasmuch as there still exist foci of Indian populations, a clear class- and ethnically-based ideology, made manifest in colonial practices, was shown to account for many of the important defining characteristics of Indian patterns of residential location. Incorporated into these ideological

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<sup>1</sup>Thus, I wish to avoid the traps of the essentially Weberian 'housing class' arguments of Rex and Moore (1967) and Pahl (1975).

<sup>2</sup>One such appears in the transition to manufacturing capitalism where employment opportunities for young women occur at a time when those for young Indian men are diminishing. I develop this below (see especially Chapter 8).

positions was a version of the colonialists' knowledge of the Indian caste system employed as a subtle form of social control mediated, on the colonial capitalists' behalf, by other Indians.<sup>1</sup> The point is that cultural and ethnic understandings are necessarily entailed in the essentially class-based differentiations manifested in the built form of Melaka, now as in the past.

For the purposes of the preliminary stages of this analysis, I shall operate with the sub-categories which members of the Indian category most commonly employ themselves in self-reference. It is precisely the reproduction of such sub-categories as meaningful social distinctions which is at the heart of the final conclusions of this analysis. Thus, adopting this heuristic position is to put the analytical cart before the horse, but can be justified on the grounds that the basis of an actor's distinctiveness may not be immediately apparent to him when employing a label with respect to himself, yet the category will remain important in terms of self-definition. The way in which actors reproduce categories in the course of their social lives and the structural principles which lie behind the process is what I shall now attempt to uncover.

### The Ceylonese

Ceylonese domestic contexts may be grouped according to two major distinctions based on the ownership and transmission of the houses. Many of the adult Ceylonese males currently in Melaka as the head of a household or domestic group were recruited directly from Ceylon. This was done through friends or relatives, or by colonial government agents.

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<sup>1</sup>See Chapter 2 above for a fuller discussion of this.



The recruits moved into the plantation industry or into the colonial public service, at clerical, supervisory and junior management levels. As such, their early accommodation was provided by their employers and often included the allocation of servants from the nearby work force, whose function was to maintain the property and its contents according to standards laid down by the employing organisation. The servants were often Indian Tamils.

Insofar as it is possible and justifiable to generate a 'typical' life history for young male Ceylonese recruits, it was common for a young man who had proved to be satisfactory in the quality of his work to be sent back to Ceylon to be married, often at the employer's expense. The ideology which was recognised by the Ceylonese was that the man should 'settle down' to a stable married life. Clearly, the marriage and the debts were such that they rendered men more committed to the requirements of the management. On return to Malaysia, the man's new wife took prime responsibility for the control of the domestic space. This she achieved, in part, by taking charge of the day-to-day direction of the activities of the servants; and partly by establishing, if they did not already exist, areas of the house which were restricted in entry to only members of the family. The conceptualisation of the social space of the house in terms of more or less open areas is a major theme in the discussion that follows of the relationship of cultural conceptions to practice. For the moment, I shall make a few rather straightforward and deceptively simple observations.

In the early days, many Ceylonese settlers retained clear property rights in the Jaffna peninsula in Ceylon, where the vast majority of them

originated. Domestic property among the higher castes in Jaffna was and still is mostly obtained at marriage. Wealthy members of these castes donate a house and its land, with sundry other property, as part of a daughter's dowry.<sup>1</sup> Initially, therefore, many of those who migrated as married men, or who returned to be married, had these property rights together with an intention of eventually returning to Jaffna, though the timing of their return was often in the indeterminate future. In practice, by the time of my research, most of the migrants had come to the conclusion that their interests and those of their children would be best served by remaining permanently in Malaysia, and many had ceded their land in Sri Lanka to relatives. It was very rare to find a Malaysia-born Ceylonese under the age of fifty who felt that he or she retained any land rights in Jaffna.

In the earlier days of migration it was a common practice for women to return to Ceylon for the birth of their first child, if not of all their children. However, this seems to have ceased as a general practice, and certainly for children subsequent to the first, after a relatively short time. Expense and the availability of good hospitals locally were the most often cited reasons offered by Ceylonese informants in Melaka for the change in practice.<sup>2</sup> Roughly concomitant with changes in birthing practices came an increase in the incidence of Ceylonese purchasing land and houses on the private market in Malaysia. Ceylonese themselves suggested two main rationales for this in the course of unstructured interviews on the subject of migration and life histories.

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<sup>1</sup>See Pfaffenberger (1977) for a description of contemporary Jaffna.

2. It may also be that Ceylonese became conscious of gaining their children "rights of birth" (jus soli) by ensuring that confinement took place in Malaya.

Many Ceylonese report that they initially sent surplus income back to Ceylon to improve or increase family property held there. When the conditions of their life in Malaysia had become clearer and they had established families there, they stated that they felt that a better investment was to obtain property where they were resident.<sup>1</sup> This they pointed out remained convertible, should they decide at a later date to return to Ceylon. The secondary reasoning in terms of informants' expressed views was an often vague statement about the advantages of owning one's own house and thereby avoiding debts to others and the control inherent in tied housing. This was deemed especially the case when "you have a family".

The importance of the move to ownership of domestic property resides in the logic of marriage practices as they are even in contemporary Ceylonese Tamil culture. When a daughter, especially one born in Malaysia, is of marriageable age, most fathers in Melaka saw matters resolving themselves into two alternatives. Given that most Malaysia-born women were very reluctant to go to Ceylon and to a doubtful future in Jaffna, the choice was seen to be between gaining a tertiary-level educational qualification or accepting the 'traditional' pattern of marrying at a younger age with a good dowry which would ensure, it was to be hoped, a marriage into a "good family" locally.<sup>2</sup> The idea was that

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<sup>1</sup>At the time of my research, most urban Ceylonese families were living in houses bought by the head from his savings partially accrued as an employee in a colonial undertaking. A few, however, remained resident in 'government quarters' while others had gained living space in the manner described below.

<sup>2</sup>As indicated in Chapter 1, immigration regulations effectively preclude the recruitment of male marriage partners from Ceylon, though it is still possible to bring a Ceylonese bride into the country.

a good education, particularly one which led to the professions, and more especially, one which led to a medical career, would of itself ensure that a girl was able to marry well.

A Ceylonese girl who chose not to or was deemed unable to pursue her education to the tertiary level relied on her parents to find her a suitable husband. This normally meant a man from a known equivalent sub-caste of the Vellalars, above all.<sup>1</sup> The normal pattern was for parents to look first for spouses who were themselves in the professions. Despite attempts by some reform groups, especially in Ipoh, such men could in general command high dowries throughout Malaysia. Kin and affinal networks ensured that eligible men would receive offers from several parts of the nation and their dowries normally consisted of the minimum of a house. This was true, even in cases I recorded where the match had been effectively a "love match" in which the young people had persuaded parents to accept their personal choice — often a person met in the course of education or professional work. The location of the house might be already determined if the father of the bride had built a house in preparation for the event, in which case it might be rented or sold if the location was not suitable for the husband's employment. Otherwise, a house would be acquired at the site most favoured by the man. One man in Melaka has obtained a house in the Kuala Lumpur area for

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<sup>1</sup>There are cases recorded in my field notes of men of lower Vellalar sub-castes and even of lower castes (i.e. Koviar) according to the Jaffna caste system (see Banks 1957, David 1972, Pfaffenberger 1977) successfully obtaining brides from 'higher' sub-castes, reportedly because wealth and occupational status had transcended caste rank as a dominant criterion of marriageability in the context of a reduced pool of men of the correct age. Acceptance of these marriages was always somewhat equivocal, however, as were those cases of Hindus marrying Christians which I recorded, though the latter were all of people originating in high castes according to informants.

his daughter, though his home was in Melaka.<sup>1</sup> This was done in recognition of his daughter's career mobility and the knowledge that a house in Kuala Lumpur would be a more attractive proposition than one in Melaka for any man she was likely to marry who did not himself come from Melaka.

There is a noticeable trend for the daughters born in the period since the Second World War to opt, where possible, for the chance to pursue their education and to accept a reduced dowry or none at all, as a consequence. In some cases, this is said to be because of the wish to obtain a degree of independence which they would otherwise lack. It is only the richer families, where there are few daughters, who can afford to educate their daughters to university level and provide a large dowry, including a house. A compromise said to have been adopted in several cases was for some fathers to agree to the delaying of their daughters' marriages until they had established a career in their chosen profession. The father and daughter then each paid a proportion of the cost of building the house. This was sometimes done by the father starting the house and payments and handing them over to his daughter at an appropriate time, or by the father handing over a lump sum on marriage, which was specifically intended for part-payment on a house.

The major point to note here for the purposes of the present analysis, is that two consequences follow from the patterns which emerged in the historical development of Ceylonese practices of property transmission

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<sup>1</sup>Banks (1957) also records that the property a man gains access to on marriage may be passed on in turn to his daughter, or be replaced by its equivalent inherited patrilineally or bought for the purpose.

and marriage. Both mark the effect of intersystemic contradictions between prior cultural forms and a contemporary social formation, in which the Ceylonese culture in question is subordinated politically to that enacted by dominant others.

The first consequence was the creation not only of private property in Malaysia in the form of housing, but also the creation of private domestic contexts, for a generation of individuals who, if not born there, had spent most of their lives there. We shall return to the implications of this more fully in what follows. The second consequence was that, possibly to an even greater extent than in Ceylon itself, young women became the primary source of, or more accurately, medium for, the transmission of capital wealth. This took the form of housing which remains the major form of property owned by most Ceylonese (though later, some bought land). This property was usually placed, at least initially, in the woman's name. Women's control of the domestic domain was and still is greater in the second generation of Ceylonese even than in the first generation, where rights to domestic space were a product of the husband's social status, derived from his position in the occupational structure of the colonial economy. Informants suggest, however, that the significance of the transformation, which is in effect a return to previously preferred patterns of transmission, are tempered by the lack of supply of 'good' husbands and the inflation of dowries in which this has resulted.

Their uxorilocal residence pattern, at least in the early years of a marriage, contrasts with the patterns of other younger Indians in the town. Moreover, their houses, though accounted for largely in the three

major middle class areas of the town noted in the previous chapter, form clusters of a very loose kind. They also share few outward features with the houses of most other Indians. The small but nonetheless significant exception is the housing of a rising class of South Indian Tamils whose parents were most often petty entrepreneurs, but who have themselves gained sufficient education to enter semi-professional or professional careers, such as in the government bureaucracies, teaching or the law.

Characteristically, a house is established quite early in the marriage in a place where the couple eventually envisage settling, or in a place where the prospects for renting the property at a profit are good. This occurs even where the careers of Ceylonese of either gender in a second-generation marriage require geographical mobility through transfers or in search of better prospects. South Indians, on the other hand, are generally less mobile and more of them are able to pursue their occupational careers solely in Melaka.

There exists then a clear class difference between Ceylonese and most other Indians in terms of the ownership of property and the use of it as capital for the production of rent. This is overlain by the cultural differences which place women in a different structural location in the Ceylonese community. We shall return to a further discussion of the differences in the control and ordering of space within dwellings. This is also fundamental to an understanding of the reproduction of social differentiation within the category "Indian". However, outwardly there is little to distinguish Ceylonese middle class houses from the South Indian or, indeed, the Chinese equivalent, either in style or location (see also Mearns 1982). Constructed of brick and concrete, with tiled

roof, the older private dwellings are usually double-storey buildings, set in a large garden. Some are older-style bungalows and, more recently, the estates of modern houses mentioned earlier have provided houses for all three categories. Some of these are large, but many are small single-storey terraced or semi-detached units which, because they are mass-produced, lack individuality. Some Ceylonese have bought these, either because they are not as wealthy as others, or because they are husbanding their resources with a view to using them for other purposes such as the education of their children.

As is the case for almost all cities then, in Melaka status and class position are to some extent marked by the style and location of housing. However, Indian status is a complex problem as Dumont (1970) acknowledges. Housing, of itself, represents a reflection and source of reproduction of only one aspect of status in this context. Status for Indians, as we shall see, is created in practices which relate to cultural understandings which are peculiarly 'Indian', and which are not necessarily in consonance with the understandings of others in Malaysia who are not defined as Indian. I hasten to add that I am arguing not for two different kinds of status, but rather for status, insofar as it is socially relevant for Indians, to be a complex of various processes. These processes engage ideas entailed in caste, class and ethnic relations. In order to understand the meaning of Indian houses as elements of social reproduction and transformation in relation to the urban processes discussed in the previous chapter, it is necessary to examine the nature of 'domestic space' in a more restricted sense, and to focus on its internal relations. This is not to detract from the need for a concern with relations between types of domestic units and



their role in social differentiation in the town. Rather, I shall postpone these concerns until conditions for their better comprehension have been established.

For the purposes of the analysis I shall make here, the importance of the form and origin of houses in Melaka lies mainly in the degree to which they may be seen to constrain the use made of domestic space. Whatever the outward form, location and ownership, certain major structural properties are replicated in the practices they contain. I argue that it is the variations and transformations of these structural relations which are essential to any account of the production and reproduction of the Melaka social system as it affects Indian social relations and organisation.

Ceylonese Tamil houses in Jaffna are renowned for their high fences, cleared compounds and defence of privacy (see Banks 1957, David 1972 and Pfaffenberger 1977). In Melaka, the high walls and fences which block inquisitive and dangerous eyes are often missing. Although there is always a carefully tended garden, where nature, if allowed to remain at all, is under tight control and restricted to grass and a few ritually important plants. In this, Melaka practice does replicate the concerns of the Jaffna household. This garden, if not enclosed by a high wall, is usually surrounded by a substantial wire fence on metal railings. It usually has an imposing gate which is normally kept shut. The main entrance doors to the house are also normally kept shut and unlike the Melaka Chitties or the Indians of the labour lines, the Ceylonese do not use the area in front of the house as a place to sit and chat in the evenings, nor as a place for casual interaction with

friends and relatives at the weekends and on holidays. To put it another way, the boundary between inside and outside is made clearer in practice than is the case for any other set of Indians.

### Labourers

Urban Indian labourers were housed for the most part in 'labour lines' owned by the government in the early days of British colonial economic expansion as part of the controlled reproduction of labour power spoken of in the two previous chapters. But Melaka, like other metropolitan centres, has experienced a continual migration of Indians into and away from its environs such that a significant population arose which was not directly accommodated by the State. Occasionally, such people bought their own houses or, more commonly, built their own on rented land. Many rented from Chinese landlords; some just the land, and others both the land and the house. Many of the later migrants into the town came from rubber estates in the rural hinterland of the state and they mobilised kin or 'native place' links and networks in order to create access to land in close proximity to people they knew. This tendency had the consequence of producing clusters of non-state housing around those government quarter areas such as the lower Bukit Pringet and Hospital areas, where Indians were predominant.

### Structure and process in domestic contexts

The homes of the working class Indians, both Melaka Chitties and Tamils, who are the result of more recent colonial migration patterns, usually have an area of "defensible space" in front of their main entrance. In most cases, this is truncated space in comparison with the area in front of many Ceylonese houses. The area is also often less well-tended, and

may have some of its space devoted to flowers and to fruit and vegetables, grown for utilitarian as well as ritual purposes. Where fruit and flowers are grown in Ceylonese house compounds, these are almost entirely employed in ritual offerings, and the effect of planting is to create a sharp sense of order within large areas of open space. The obvious possibilities of a class-based account for these differences might suggest that what has been described might equally be expected to apply to other ethnic categories in the town who are differentiated by class location. What distinguishes the Indian situation is that a particular understanding of the space around their homes may be shown to make its relation to the internal domestic space specific and crucial to the reproduction of one or several Indian social identities.

The area surrounding any Indian home is conceptually an area of danger. The danger is thought to reside primarily in the potential for invasion of, and interference in, the domestic domain. Around each house, a number of incorporeal beings, spirits, unsettled ghosts of ancestors or residents, and malevolent deities are thought to reside or to visit regularly, attracted by the effluvia of everyday family social life. These are 'impure' (āsuttam) beings whose force lies in their potential for usurpation of normal relations within the home. These relations extend beyond those between human members of the household and beyond those between the human household members and the divine beings, to those between household members and outsiders entering the home. These impure spirits may also usurp relations between an individual's mind and his normal social and bodily self.

Some of these beings are deemed to have an active desire to create havoc and may only be resisted through correct, regular rites ensuring the beneficent presence of the family deity (kula devam). At a minimum, these rites entail the lighting of a lamp before the image of the deity in the evenings. Before any major ceremony which involves a puja in the house, followed by a participant leaving the house to attend the temple or any other place where his purity is required, limes are cut and tossed into the air to placate those beings surrounding the house who would otherwise interfere.

However, the space in front of the house is not merely a point of vulnerability to what is often termed the 'supernatural' forces. It is also an area where nature, in the form of animals, decaying vegetables and polluted humans, are likely to appear in close proximity to the home, even when precautions are taken. Of the South Indian and Ceylonese houses in the town, very few retain the raised platform or verandah (thinai) which is traditional in the higher caste house construction of South India. Two houses owned by Melaka Chitties, and one formerly owned by them (all of which were built before living memory) are in this style, but most modern houses have a porch and verandah at ground level, if they have any, on which are placed rough wooden benches or outdoor chairs. Amongst working class people this is a place where men, especially, congregate in the evenings and late afternoons after returning from work. Men will often rest here before taking their evening bath and meal. The bath is a prerequisite for lighting the lamp before the images of the deities in the household shrine, which is the shortest form of puja (worship) possible, and which it is the duty of the household head to perform before the evening meal is taken.

Men who are still 'dirty', that is, men who are unwashed and therefore physically and ritually unclean, and strangers whose caste and ritual condition are unknown, may often remain on the verandah until their condition is deemed to have altered either by bathing or by knowledge of their ritual status. Some individuals may never enter the house proper at all if the head is not at home, or if the person is suspected of being low caste or polluted by recent association with death or involved in a similar extreme situation. In the case of higher castes visiting lower castes, the verandah may be as far into the domestic space as the higher caste member may be prepared to penetrate. On the other hand, an 'outsider' whose ritual status is known or deemed unproblematic, may be accorded the privilege of entering across the threshold into the first room or 'hall' of the house. Not to allow such an individual to enter could, under certain circumstances, be construed as an insult. Thus, Ceylonese being visited by other Ceylonese would normally expect that the visitors could enter the hall, as almost all the Ceylonese in Melaka are known to be of equivalent Vellalar caste status.

The cultural practices I am describing are not, of course, adhered to with the same degree of circumspection by all Indians in the modern urban context. In the homes of many educated Indians, including the wealthy Ceylonese, domestic space is more open to outsiders than the above description might suggest, especially to members of other ethnic groups who are of an equivalent social standing in terms of occupation, education and wealth. Here, the principles I describe apply more to the relations between Indians of known low caste rank and those of higher caste, rather than between Indians and those who have no caste status.

This is important in the discussion of the role cultural systems play in the reproduction of social relations and the social formation precisely because the conception of domestic space which cultural principles order, divides Indian from Indian, and Indian from outsider.

Despite some differences in practice which can be explained in part by the organisational capacity for variation in the larger houses of the wealthy, as we shall see, I shall show that structural identity in the relations of space within the home can be seen in the principles which order even the transformational variations. Thus, entering the hall of all Indian (Hindu) houses involves passing under a string of mango leaves (thoranam) pinned across the lintel. Above this is usually a picture which most commonly represents the goddess Lakshmi, the female deity whose special association is with wealth, prosperity and general personal and familial well-being. Mango leaves, like the whole tree itself, have very potent and 'multivocal' or 'multivalent' (Turner 1967) symbolic import in the religious system of Tamils and other South Indians. In all cases, the essential quality is of a positive valency in that mango, like sandalwood, is a powerful tree which attracts the gods. It symbolises fertility, fruitfulness and coolness. These are strong values antipathetic to the polluting, deathly forces which pervade 'uncivilised' areas.

The thoranam and the image of the deity are installed at the rite of passage which transforms a building into a house habitable by human beings. This puja is centred round the installation of the family deity (i.e. the patrilineally-inherited kula devam) in his or her new domain and preferably into the shrine. The full significance of the threshold

is explored in the discussion of domestic ritual which comprises the substance of the following chapter. For the moment, I would just point out that the thoranam is renewed amongst most Indians on the morning of the festival of Thai Pongal, which may be usefully glossed as "harvest festival" and which is, therefore, a rite redolent with symbols of fertility, wealth and well-being. It is a festival which looks back on the old year and forward to the new, even though it is not the official Tamil New Year.

Thai Pongal is very much a 'liminal' festival, one which stands at the threshold of a process of transformation of nature into the work of man. It is the archetypal reproduction ritual, not just of the material basis of life, but of the social basis on which the former is acknowledged to be built in Hindu thought. It requires the attendance of the community at their temple in the morning, and of the family at its own performance of a puja which replicates that of the temple.<sup>1</sup> The major event involves the boiling of rice in milk at the literal threshold of the house/temple and the offering of the rice to the deity, the worshippers then taking the 'leftovers' (prasadam), in each case. In each case too, the rite also incorporates an element of the reaffirmation of a group identity in the process of sharing the prasadam.

The point of introducing the rite into the analysis of domestic space is to demonstrate that there are two principles of the cultural organisation of the Hindu house which might be seen to stand in contradiction to the

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<sup>1</sup>It also usually involves the drawing of a kōlam or white design on the ground in front of the main door. See Beck (1976) for a discussion of the relationship of this to spatial symbolism.

principles organising mundane space in the social formation at large. Firstly, the rite demonstrates a pervasive principle of Hindu space which is that it should be maintained to welcome the beneficent forms of the divine and turn away the malevolent forces. This renders even personal space, as will be discussed more fully below, as well as the home, a potential temple. Indeed, the successful incorporation of the deity demands that it be treated in precisely this manner. In turn, this creates domestic space in the form of housing as a context where the 'rational' economics of commodity exchange are totally inadequate as a mode of explanation of the patterns of property transmission.

The second contradictory aspect which has already been briefly mentioned and which is to some extent integral to the understanding outlined above, is that Hindu material life is predicated on the continuing promulgation of the correct relationship between the divine forces and the human. It is not merely the individual human, but the social order of which he is a part, which he has the prime responsibility for reproducing according to the correct principles. This cultural inversion of the materialist approach which makes all material life subject to the force of insubstantial conception embodied in ritual practice, is a familiar one in the literature of the anthropology of religions. The argument that these cultural activities are mere mystifications, which obfuscate the 'objective' reality of the principles which organise the social formation, is totally misleading. What such an approach would miss is the complexity of the relationship between social practice in the form it is found amongst actual human actors, and the structuring properties which lie behind the categorical analysis of a mode of production or of even a concrete social formation. The way in which Hindus conceive of and act



in their domestic space may not fundamentally alter the relations of exploitation inherent in a capitalist-dominated social formation, but they do significantly affect the form that exploitation takes, and the limits of the penetration of the forces of the capitalist mode of production into the lives of those whose labour reproduces the system. Even more importantly, the understandings of the cosmic and social orders which are being reproduced in such cultural performances act in particular ways to inhibit the formation of class-based identities. This is not simply because class interests are obscured by cultural superstructures, but because those superstructures represent interests which are thought to transcend 'this-worldly' concerns and which render them correspondingly unimportant.

In order to elaborate the points I am trying to make, I shall briefly consider the structuring principles which order domestic space from the threshold inwards by means of a detailed description and analysis of a house belonging to one Indian family, in this case working class Melaka Chitties. I shall consider it comparatively in terms of variations in form found amongst other Indians. While there are many different styles of house with different ground plans, I shall maintain that Indian houses are essentially arranged according to the same set of structural principles. Moreover, what would appear as major differences, residing at the level of class-based variations in access to resources, may be shown to engender minor transformations rather than fundamental distinctions in meaning or organising principles.

In all the homes in Melaka, as elsewhere, the act of crossing the threshold of an Indian house requires the removal of one's footwear.

As with the process of entering a temple (see Chapter 5), removal of shoes is regularly seen as the removal of a necessary form of pollution gained in one's engagement in the external world. The concept which springs most readily to mind when discussing this practice with informants was one of 'respect'. It is a mark of respect to the household and to the deity of the house and the temple that one would not risk even inadvertantly introducing 'dirt' into their 'home'. In the case of the Chitty family house, and most other working class houses, the space one enters in the act of crossing the threshold is that which is the most formally constructed of all domestic space. This is true both in symbolic and material terms. A guest being received here enters and is then made to sit on the most expensive items of furniture which the family is likely to own, usually a vinyl-covered suite set around a coffee table. These are chairs and tables which, in many cases, would rarely be used by the family except when guests are in the house.

On the west wall of the 'hall' of the house is the wooden family shrine, consisting of an enclosed shelf and housing the household deities, in both pictorial and sculptured forms. As with many houses in Melaka, the Melaka Chitties cannot normally afford the luxury of devoting a complete room to the images of the deities, where the space is used only for worship. Most middle class Indians, and almost all Ceylonese, set aside a screened area if not the whole room, known as the pusai arai, or puja room, where a number of images are kept and regular offerings made by the head of the household. Such a room, where possible, is usually located at the heart of the domestic space, at a point where it is not only most protected from the dangers of the invasion of polluting forces from outside the house, but also from the polluting potential of normal household processes of birth, living and dying.

Though Ceylonese and other middle class Indians may not have their family shrine, the hall remains the place where guests are received and contained and it is the location for domestic rituals to which outsiders are invited. In the case of the Melaka Chitties and the labourers of the 'government quarter' areas, the hall is rarely used except on the occasion of entertaining 'honoured guests', both divine and human. The exceptions are mostly cases in which the family shrine is to be found in another part of the house, or where space is so cramped that people have little alternative. In the latter cases, the shrine is sometimes left closed during the day and only opened in the evening for the purposes of worship. In the few cases where the family shrine was placed elsewhere, it was usually in a space which connects the guest hall with the rest of the house. This is an area which, if utilised at all for other purposes, is usually an area for solitary and quiet activities such as studying and accounting, activities on which it is not inappropriate that the household deities should gaze. Even where this space acts as a passageway, it is one which is screened by walls and doors from the more mundane and polluting areas of the house.

The Melaka Chitty houses, and almost all working class Indian homes, contained within this hall at least a small 'gallery' of family portraits, most commonly photographs of recently dead ancestors and family or household members. Patrilineal relatives of the head of the house, and their spouses, were often prominent (usually at least his F, M, and often FF and FM). The latter, especially the father and mother of the present head, were usually stationed above the lintel of the door which led from the hall into the interior of the house. The 'images' are garlanded and

offered the arāthi (flame offering) of the camphor lamp as part of the daily or, at least, the Friday puja to the shrine of the deities.

Occasionally I was told by Indians from all classes and castes that the position of the mother and father were especially venerated by Hindus and many informants recited the sanskrit injunction to order one's worship to Mātr, Pitr, Guru, Dēva (Mother, Father, Teacher and God).

Though not often sure of the source, informants were confident that this was an injunction with scriptural authority as to the priorities one must have in the payment of respect during worship and in life generally.

In practice, worship of the images of the ancestors was always secondary to the worship accorded to the deities.

The vital point for this argument is that the ancestors as spirits or spiritual potentialities are contained with the divine presence and accepted human 'strangers' in the one formally structured space within the house. Moreover, just as Lakshmi protects the entrance to the house as a whole, and to the house as 'temple', so the immediate ancestors protect the entrance into the more mundane space of the house where ordinary human life is lived. In a sense, the whole house is the domain of the deity, but especially that area where the spiritual forces of the universe are most pervasive; while the ancestors have the area within, where internally-generated pollution is a real potential. Each must seek to ensure that the force of one does not unduly invade the other.

In fact, the relationship of this space to the rest of the house is a complex one, implying as it does the parallel, but inverted spatial order of the temple (see Chapter 5) with similar conceptual relationships to surrounding space. Unfortunately for the analyst, the structure of

organisation of Melaka Indian house space does not have the neat mirroring form of "le monde renversé" which Bourdieu was able to discern for the Kabylie (Bourdieu 1970, 1977). However, I shall argue that, like the Kabylie house, the relations embodied in the domestic space of urban Indians in Melaka do in some important senses provide a "matrix of perceptions, appreciations and notions" (Bourdieu 1977:83). This matrix in turn provides one of the major cultural bases for understanding the social world in which Indians are engaged. This is emphatically not to suggest that it is the sole basis of cultural orders and social understandings, or that it stands in grand isolation from other forces which affect perceptions or order processes of social reproduction.

In Turner's terms (1974), the house and temple are both "arenas", concrete settings in which "paradigms become transformed into metaphors and symbols", but I would go further: the space in and around the house enters and orders social relations directly from the perspective of those inhabiting it in such a way as to belie its metaphorical status and to constitute a basic 'reality'. I shall argue that Indians operate with what Giddens (1979) terms a "practical consciousness" of their social world which derives in large measure from their conscious and unconscious understanding of their domestic space. This practical consciousness comes about not from theorising but from regularities of practice. Actors reflect on their practices in varying degrees, of course, but most of what takes place in the domestic context is what phenomenologists would term part of "the taken-for-granted world" of Indians. Indeed, I would accept that it is the processes of reproduction of the practices and the relations of the taken-for-granted world which

constitute the very identity "Hindu" or "Indian" and distinguish it from other social identities available to Malaysian citizens.

The theoretical underpinnings of the position I am adopting for this section of the analysis might appear to contradict the approach taken in the previous two chapters which examined the broader processes of social reproduction, in part from a consideration of spatial relations. I do not believe this to be the case, though I do believe that there exist contradictory aspects of the perceptions of the ordering of space contained within the culture of Indians, and the principles ordering relations in the wider domains. I do not believe either to be entirely independent, nor do I unequivocally assign a status of greater objectivity or reality to either. The fundamental consideration from the point of view of understanding the position of Indians in Melaka and the reproduction of social divisions within the social formation, is where one stops the explanatory efforts and considers that a sufficient account has been constituted.

It is my opinion that an analysis of the cultural patterns of Indians in the manner being pursued here is one way in which to consider the role of actors in the reproduction of culture. This facilitates the analysis of the ways in which cultural transformations are generated in the course of social life, and thereby leads to a greater understanding of what I consider to be the goal of social anthropological analysis. This is to relate the distinctiveness of sets of human beings to the processes which operate to deny their distinctiveness. In other words, the aim of this procedure is to argue that rather than simply being passive products of social forces entirely beyond their control, Indians in

Melaka shape the impact of those forces, to an extent limited by the contemporary relations of international capitalism in its particular Malaysian form. The shaping of the impact I have spoken of derives not from isolated individuals, of course, but from sets of people who operate distinctively in terms of their cultural traditions and practices. This is not to suggest that a reified phenomenon "culture", or indeed, another called "society" or "international capitalism", operates in any sense independently. The concept of culture I wish to promote in the course of this thesis is one of a set of relations of symbolic orderings and understandings of the world, which evolve to maintain their relevance to the world in which they are located, and which in the process may act to transform the direction of that world's social evolution as a whole. Thus, the relations of a capitalist mode of production based on an international division of labour (see Froebel, Heinrichs and Kreye 1980) cannot be understood in any concrete social formation except in relation to the cultural contexts in which it operates.

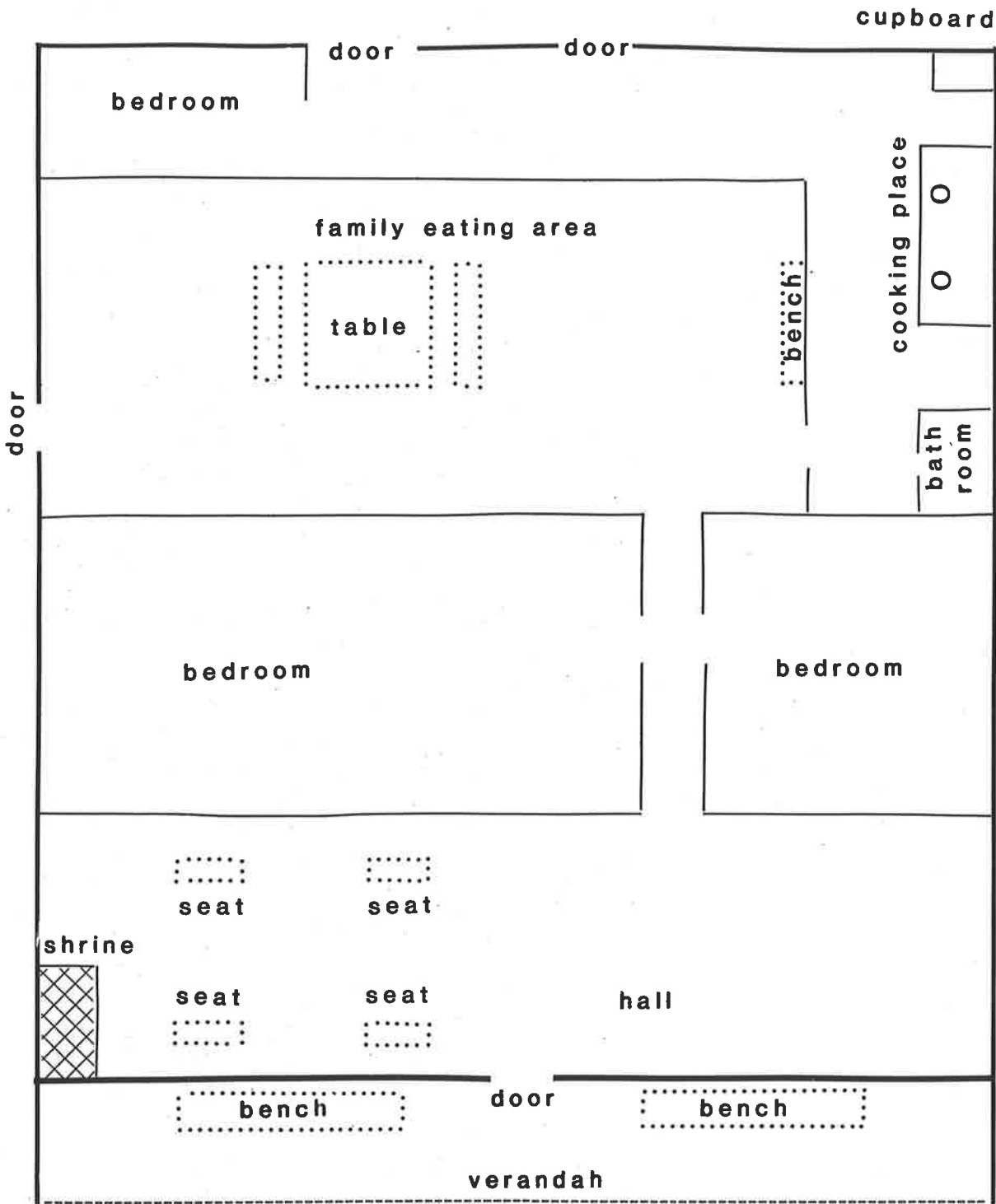
In the previous chapters I have shown how cultural prejudices as one aspect of ethnic relations gave the colonial and post-colonial relations of production their particular form. Now I am arguing that similar processes operate at the micro level of domestic relations to give form to the local social relations of production, exchange and distribution, in such a way as to reproduce cultural and social divisions which prevent the emergence of a class struggle operating at either the political or ideological level, and to prevent the economic class struggle from transcending those barriers which mark fractions of classes.

To return to the concrete production and reproduction of socially distinct identities through domestic relations, I shall continue the analysis of progress towards the interior of a Hindu house. In the case of the Chitty house being focused on, and in most others occupied by working class Indians, in passing under the photos of the parents of the contemporary head of the household, one also passes under a second thoranam or string of folded mango leaves. The symbolic reproduction of the first threshold is here marked, and the sense of entering a different order of space emphasised. The relations of spatial organisation to the rear of the second threshold remain consistent, even where the concrete examples of house architecture differ. Thus, though the Chitty house I am describing as my example is not meant to be 'typical' of a universal 'style' of Indian house, it does embody a form which is almost 'universal' amongst Indians wherever they retain even minimal control over the utilisation of their domestic space.

In Littlejohn's (1963) terms, domestic space is characterised by a series of closures. Though most urban space might equally be seen as "boxes within boxes", and none more so than domestic space, this would be a literally meaningless description if it were not related to actors' conceptions as made manifest in the symbolic forms I am now analysing. The symbolic closing of the hall as a particular area of the house must be seen as a closing of the inner space of the house, which is itself then further divided physically or symbolically. Though the closure is never complete, or as formally circumscribed, as that of the hall reached through the first threshold of the house, the rest of the house comprises regions which are successively more difficult for an 'outsider' to enter. Like the situation amongst the Yakan (Frake 1975)



□ toilet



A CHITTY HOUSE

Diagram 1.

lower garden

entrance

one must be given a special invitation at each stage before going further inwards.

A short corridor often leads from the second threshold to the bedrooms, as is the case in this Chitty house (see diagram), and beyond to the eating area where all normal family meals are taken. In all Indian houses, eating and cooking areas are conceptually to the rear of the dwelling. The cooking hearth itself may be partitioned off from the eating area to provide a form of separate kitchen. In either case, the greatest part of the household's family interaction takes place or is centred on this part of the house. Often children take their meals with one of their parents, where the household is essentially a nuclear family. The father officiates if he is present, the mother if he is not. Many women still do not normally eat at the same table as their husbands, at least not at the same time.<sup>1</sup>

It is in this rear part of the house that young babies are hung in hammock-like slings during the day, while the mother goes about her housework. Here, children will frequently play their indoor games and relatives and close friends of the family, especially women, may be accorded the privilege of easy access to this area. Such access to the 'family area' of the house is normally restricted very carefully, and few non-household members would find it unproblematic for them to enter the house by the side or rear entrance which gives direct access to this area. Yet, again, like the Yakan (Frake 1975), Indians do open this

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<sup>1</sup>Some wives still refuse to eat before their husbands unless he expressly orders it. However, this practice is generally changing and a wife now tends to feed the children and herself in the event of a husband's delay.

area to those who have been invited or who could legitimately have expected an invitation according to normal practice, at times of special feasting such as those described in the following account of domestic rituals (see Chapter 4). At these times, others will be entertained on the verandah and not offered a full meal to be taken at the family table but be given cakes, sweetmeats and cordial outside. Despite these general rules and understandings, individual guests, even foreign anthropologists, may be invited to eat a normal meal with the head, and occasionally his children, in some households. In many though, the privilege is still accorded only to those deemed to be of equivalent or higher caste status. In the Melaka Chitty case, this means, by definition, any other Chitty so defined by birth or marriage. In the case of other Indians, it is precisely this process of definition and the reproduction of hierarchies in such interdining practices which remain the most problematic areas of social relations between Indians.

It is certainly possible to witness cases where people of caste acknowledged generally to be higher than that of the household accept food from the household and enter the family's eating area. Some high caste individuals make a point of doing so, though they are generally young people who seek to deny the relevance of caste and who were, in any case, frequently uncertain of the minutiae of caste ranking. Brahmans and other high caste members may exceptionally offer meals to lower ranking outsiders (even anthropologists) though it was still the mark of 'orthodoxy' that one did not interdine freely and especially did not offer food to outsiders. It was almost always higher caste people, who were thought to be acting in accord with "Indian" customs which were of more relevance to India in a previous era, who were most strict in such

matters, and whose domestic space was most closely guarded as a consequence.

Bedrooms existed as separate areas in all the Indian houses I was able to observe. However, few working class Indians can afford the luxury of a sleeping room to themselves and in this situation, the space represents less 'private' space than increasingly domestic or family space of a closed type. Small children frequently share their parents' room and other household members usually share rooms on the basis of a division of the sexes such that it is seldom that any household member is alone in any part of the house. In fact, it is true for most Indians in Melaka that illness would be the only situation in which they might expect to be alone in any room for any length of time. Most women now have their children in the General Hospital if they are working class, and in private hospitals in many cases if they are middle class. Thus, the former association of the bedroom with childbirth is diminishing, though it is still the place where a new mother will be largely confined during the early days of the month of seclusion following the birth.<sup>1</sup> The bedroom is also the setting for sexual intercourse at normal times, and as such it is the cultural understandings of the meanings of sexual activity, birth, illness and death which are associated with this space, which create a particular identity and logic for the practices engaged in there. As a closed area into which strangers or any non-household member almost never enter, the bedroom is a context which is fraught

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<sup>1</sup>Where seclusion during menstruation is still practised, however minimally, women are confined usually to the bedroom. In the case of working class women, the practice appears to be declining (though the quality of my data on this area is necessarily somewhat suspect). This is probably partly due to the increased prevalence of the nuclear family structure and consequent difficulties of removing women from the kitchen.

with ambivalence, being at once an area of supreme domesticity and yet an area of immensely threatening potential.

For Indians in Melaka, two major sources of danger are conceptualised. One stems from the idea of the invasion of outside forces into guarded space — religious, domestic and personal; the other from the effects of 'natural' processes of everyday human living, which generate vulnerability partly, but not entirely, by virtue of their polluting capacity. Outside forces are uncontrollable, or barely so, and are unpredictable. They are attracted by the 'smell' of human activity taking place within the house, varying from cooking odours to the less humanly accessible smell of pollution. They might be human, superhuman or animal agents, acting consciously, with malice perhaps, or simply unaware of the consequences. Conceptually they represent real physical danger and this is why so much care must be taken in the control of household space and the activities it encompasses.

As with all Hindus, Melaka Indians conceptualise all matter and exudations emerging from any orifice of the body as dangerously powerful. This power is normally equated solely with pollution in the literature (see especially Dumont 1970). However, controlled exudations such as the expulsion of breath in the form of a mantra (a good example would be the universal OM or AUM) or in the practice of Hartha Yoga, have positive power. Similarly, the ascetic retention of semen enhances the power of the sanyasi not only by the avoidance of a polluting bodily fluid, but because semen has powerful creative potential.<sup>1</sup> Creation through the

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<sup>1</sup>Frequently repeated versions of divine creation myths usually involving Siva, but also other deities, describe how a lesser divinity, sometimes malevolent, was formed from an illicit ejaculation, often simply onto 'mother' earth.

loss of semen is obtained at the cost of a diminution of the donor's strength in normal procreation.<sup>1</sup>

It is appropriate here to recall that the very symbolism of the house and that of the human body are closely related. Both are entailed in the symbolic structure of the South Indian Hindu temple (see Chapter 5), as are notions of the human bodily form in relation to that of the divine. Beck (1976) traces more systematically than I am able to do here (or indeed an ordinary Indian in Melaka would be able to trace) the ideal Tamil understanding of bodily orientation in cosmic space, and its relation to architectural orientation. The fundamental orientations are, of course, shared in terms of their primary significance and there is no need at this point to repeat Beck's points. The particular conceptions I would wish to emphasise for the purposes of this discussion are the importance of the head and the notion of "being allowed inside" (Beck 1976:219). I would also like to extend Beck's analysis by elaborating upon the commonly heard Indian aphorism that 'the body is a temple', and relating that point to the analysis of the connection between the house and the temple forms. This will anticipate to some extent the discussion to take place in Chapter 5.

As with the body, the house is a spatial enclosure, the central and pervasive meaning of which resides in the need to control entry and egress. In a global perspective, such concerns are certainly recorded in other ethnographic contexts, for example, that described by Littlejohn (1960, 1963). However, in Malaysia Indians reproduce the

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<sup>1</sup>In Indian conceptions, semen is a form of blood. For a discussion of the significance of blood, see Beck (1972) and Barnett (1975).

the basis of a larger cosmological scheme as much through their domestic practices as through their more public performances. Incorporated in the practices of each domain are sets of relationships and concepts which may be usefully considered as being founded on, and evidence for, 'structuring principles' in Giddens' terms. These principles provide the basis for interaction and, therefore, the reproduction of regularised practices of everyday life which, in turn, are the only basis for determining that the same principles are in fact governing social behaviour.

The reproduction of spatial relationships and their meaning relates dialectically to the apparently fixed form of Indian social relations through time. Where, as I have argued in the first and second chapters of this work, Indian social relations are transformed by the effects of power relations inherent in the processes of colonisation, decolonisation and the formation of a new nation-state enmeshed in a world capitalist system, it is still possible for these changes to be 'externalised' from the point of view of changes to the structural relations of the domestic and religious domains. That is to say, though the form of the physical dwelling and its location in geographical space are determined by forces of the wider social formation, external to the culture of Indians per se, the structure of the relations that organise internal domestic space remain essentially the same. Similarly, it will be argued in the discussion of temple space in Chapter 5 that the internal ordering of space and meaning stand outside the forces which determine the existence or location of temples in Melaka's urban context. Where wider changes impinge directly into the domestic domain, as we shall see, not only conceptual but also spatial transformations occur which transform the reproductive possibilities of the system. This is because

contradictions are made manifest which are resolved both by interpretive shifts and by changes in the material organisation of social life.

Nonetheless, it will be argued that these transformations must always be given both meaning and direction in terms of the "matrix of perceptions" inherent in the relations which pre-exist them, in a continuous dialectic.

I shall now return to the conceptual base of the perceived relationship between the house, the body and the temple. The head is the main point of entry into the body; amongst males it is normatively the only point of entry. The head is simultaneously the controller of what may penetrate further into the body's inner space. So, in the house, the household head, ideally male, is labelled 'headman' (talaivar) and is deemed to be responsible for determining who shall enter the house space, in particular the space at the point of entry, a room which amongst the Ceylonese is called the talaivācal or head room (see Pfaffenberger 1977: Chapter III). In controlling who or what may enter the house through the region which is the most susceptible, the head of most Indian households also protects the honour and well-being of those divinities and ancestral spirits deemed to control the successful continuity of the normal relations of the household and its reproduction through time.

In Hindu theology, self-realisation, the recognition of and identity with the divine within, is the precursor of ultimate escape from the constraints of the human body and rebirth of the soul (atma).

Explicitly, the tradition of yogic control of the worldly body and the consequent achievement of internal physical and spiritual harmony are one path whereby the prior conditions for escape from the human world may be achieved. The parallels with the home are recognised in varying



degrees of articulation by Melaka Hindus who conceive that maintenance of internal household harmony is similarly dependent upon carefully controlled relations between the household and the outside world. This in turn ensures the spiritual and physical progress of the household members. Both the external relations and the internal relations directly may be disrupted by the actions of often ill-defined supernatural intervention which may appear capricious until its cause is discovered. That cause is frequently determined to be the giving of offence, often inadvertently, to divine beings. The mundane social world of human interaction is deemed to be very similar and the household's harmony may be disrupted by the intervention of offended outsiders, or by acts of the members which lead to social stigma.

Therefore, the containment of the sources of greatest potential pollution and most danger at the rear of the house, away from the domain of both ancestors and the divine, is part of an even larger concern to exclude as many as possible of the sources of internal disharmony. Such disharmony is not simply a matter of concern in terms of the relations of individuals within the house, or even their health, both of which are important enough considerations, but of the long-term fortunes of the household both physically and spiritually. A major source of potential disharmony which may be generated from within is thought by males to reside in women, especially among some more orthodox Ceylonese. Women are a prime cause of invasion of spiritual forces into the human world amongst all Indians, of course, especially in the context of menstruation and childbirth. However, Banks (1957), David (1972) and Pfaffenberger (1977) all report the extent to which Vellalars in Jaffna also seclude their women on the basis of their presumed

propensity to seek illicit sexual relations, should the slightest opportunity present itself. Women are, therefore, mostly confined to the domestic domain, and to the rear of the house at that, and are encouraged to leave the house as little as possible and never unchaperoned. No men, other than 'blood' relatives, should enter the woman's domain and no stranger should enter the house at all unless the head is there to greet him in the 'head room'.

Pfaffenberger (1977:156) describes the vulnerability of women, especially at times of menstruation, to sorcery and to the influences of Rahu and Kethu, the nodes of the moon, who as minor deities are thought to be able to produce infertility. There is then, a double-edged aspect to this; women produce the 'faults' (kurram) which make themselves and the house vulnerable through the natural processes of their daily lives. Moreover, they are thought to exacerbate this potential through uncontrolled 'natural' desires. Yet, at the same time, women are the symbolic centre of the home and the acknowledged reproductive base of society. Pfaffenberger notes how in Jaffna it is the woman who is to be the centre of the home whose birthdate is required for the correct performance of the construction ritual of a new house. Thus, the reproduction of the family, at both the levels of physical and social existence, and the status of the head and his whole family, depend crucially on women. The process begins, from the point of view of each new household, with the status of the family from which the woman as bride comes, and the size of the dowry she brings. It continues through her conduct and the number and gender of her children, to her role as primary socialiser.

The overlap between the symbolism of the house and that of the body is clearest in the central role women play in the control of the kitchen and the production of food. It is in this role that women become most central to the continued physical and social well-being of the household members. The ingestion of incorrect or polluted foods or an overbalance of particular types of food (all of which have particular qualities of heating or cooling, and are ultimately a balance of qualities of the Gunās (satva, rajas and tamas) leads to internal and consequent social disharmonies, through the alteration of one's physical and mental state. Thus, an overindulgence in red meat leads directly to a quarrelsome and aggressive personality, the result of too much rajas; whereas too much heavy, starchy food leads to indolence and melancholia through too much tamas. Beef or food prepared by 'unclean' (āsuttam) people leads to actual illness.<sup>1</sup> Thus, it is a woman's role, not only to avoid denigrating the family by a lack of control of her bodily relations with the world beyond the house, but also to control her own and others' bodily relations at the core of the domestic space in such a way as to maintain and enhance their bodily integrity and, simultaneously, the integrity of the family by ensuring a correct balance of incorporated material. What enters the body, and who enters the core of the house, determines individual and family well-being and creates the necessary conditions for the successful reproduction of both.

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<sup>1</sup>The fully articulated theory of the Gunās is not something which most Indians in Melaka would be able to offer as a coherent system. Nevertheless, a number of middle class Indians are able to offer well-elaborated versions of the theory, primarily by virtue of their knowledge of the classic Bhagavad Gita. There also proved to be a large number of informants who were not especially knowledgeable of the sacred Hindu literature, who were able to articulate a set of general principles about the qualities of foods which accords with the principles as they are set out here, without using this terminology.

Control of the bodies of women ensures for men that what is socially reproduced is a legitimate and status-enhancing family structure. However, men must also control their own bodies and their products, as well as the material conditions for the reproduction of the household, insofar as this is possible. This dual problem is dealt with in Melaka by the demarcation of the area beyond the rear of the house as an area of containment of the inevitable pollution of everyday life. Here are found the toilet, often the bathroom, and the location of any domestic animals such as chickens or goats. It is through the door to this rear area that a person returning from a funeral should enter, taking a bath before entering the rest of the domestic space.

In Melaka, as in Sri Lanka, the Jaffna Vellalars and other Ceylonese who aspire to their status, are deemed particularly conservative in matters of pollution and the seclusion of women. Paradoxically, it would appear, it is also the Ceylonese who have educated their female children up to tertiary level in many cases and begun to encourage them to enter the professions of teaching, medicine and the law. As I suggested earlier, the Ceylonese themselves often see this as a contemporary necessity for ensuring a 'good marriage' given the competition for men. Other Indians often characterise the change as one based on economic motivation of a more mundane sort. In this, they are sometimes supported by Ceylonese parents who say that young men educated in Malaysia now see women as an economic resource who should not be wasted 'in the home'. Young men say that nowadays it is important that one should have a wife who is at least capable of conversing with visitors and who knows a little of the 'outside world'.

Amongst Melaka Chitties, there is an important difference at both the conceptual and physical level which means that the control of dangerous forces generated by or through women does not necessarily require the extent of seclusion found in the 'orthodox' Ceylonese context. By virtue of their control of what might be termed neo-local or peri-domestic space, the Chitties are able to contain the activities of women largely within the kampong which they own. The kampong is constituted of domestic units which are interlinked in a complex set of cognatic and affinal relations such that in close proximity to any domestic unit will be several closely related others. Almost all these units are contained in the area delineated by the three important Hindu temples which define the Chitties socially as well as geographically. Within this space, which I would argue is conceptually an extension of the domestic space contained by the house, the activities of women are able to be monitored and controlled by all Chitties in such a way as to ensure the reproduction of a collective identity which is deemed 'respectable'. The denigration of one unit is the denigration of all related units which, in effect, means the whole community.

Let me elaborate upon this by a brief discussion of the conceptual parallels of kampong space and domestic space. In order to enter the Chitty kampong by the normal main route, one crosses a clear threshold marked by the arch which holds the signpost indicating the presence at the end of the lane of the community's main temple dedicated to Sri Muthu Māriamman. A thoranam (of mango leaves interspersed with the centre of coconut fronds) is strung across the lane just below the arch. As one crosses this threshold, on one's immediate right is the small temple of Siva, and one faces directly down the lane and into the central shrine of the Māriamman temple. By either of the other two lanes which

enter the kampong, one must also pass by a temple in order to reach the area of concentrated housing. Returning to the main route, proceeding down the lane takes one towards the heart of the community, past the necessarily relatively high levels of pollution created in domestic life, and into the domain of Māriamman (conceived locally as a form of Parvati, Siva's wife and active alter ego) where greater care to maintain levels of purity is taken. As I show in the following chapter (see also Beck 1976 and Kramrisch 1976), at the other end of the temple lane to where one enters the kampong, one eventually reaches the feet of the divine 'mother'. Though her lowest feature, the divine feet, are infinitely 'higher' than any human's head.

It is in the symbolic logic of the ordering of kampong space, a logic which duplicates the structuring principles of domestic space proper, and in the extent to which domestic domains extend one into the other through the proximity of active kin links, that the isolation of women within the single domestic domain becomes obviated. Chitties have no notion of the automatic engagement of their women in illicit sexual relations should they leave the rear of their own houses, nor do they assume the extreme precautions against the vulnerability of women within kampong space that the Ceylonese traditionally assumed for their women even within the compound. Even with the large numbers of Chinese now dwelling within the kampong, the space retains its character as 'Hindu' and Chitty, by a combination of the domination of the temples, both physically and in terms of the very public ritual activities associated with them, and the lack of a single separate community of Chinese with overarching kinship links. Most Chinese houses in the area are domestic units isolated one from the other. Moreover, some members of the Chinese

domestic groups located here, especially women and small children, participate in temple activities, many at the periphery but others by more direct and complete involvement. This is especially the case during the annual festival at the Māriamman temple.

It should be noted that Chitties demonstrate a certain degree of reticence about women leaving the kampong and it is still true that many of the older women normally go beyond the area only accompanied by other mature women or by close male relatives. A few older women will venture to the market alone, if really necessary, but it is less common and less approved than the alternative of sending or being accompanied by a husband. Even the younger women who have found employment in the new multi-national factories in the town which were discussed in the last chapter, wherever possible, go to work in a company bus which picks them up and drops them at the edge of the kampong. A few poor families have women whose income is gained by domestic service or the performance of service tasks such as laundry washing in the homes of other Indians and Chinese in the vicinity of the kampong, but this is considered a sign of the extremes of their situation, and families who can afford to avoid such work.

It is undoubtedly true that the increased standards of education, and the consequent mixing with others from different communities, has had a major influence on the attitudes of women towards their present and future roles, throughout the 'Indian' population of Melaka. However, almost all the Chitty women who have work outside the kampong, and most of those I interviewed from other working class Indian houses, stated that they would expect to revert to the pattern of the domestic- and

kin-centred life of their mothers, on or soon after their own marriages. Their present jobs were seen either as necessities, or irresistible opportunities to make their parents' lives easier and to give their own married futures a better start than they might otherwise expect. Never was there expressed a desire to escape the structures of domesticity and the concomitant narrow range of interaction and social relations which Ceylonese 'career women' were likely to project as a motive for their action. Where it was possible to find several 'independent' Ceylonese women beyond the normal marriage age, this was extremely rare amongst working class women.

Working class women as a category, that is, the wives and daughters of men whose work was unskilled or skilled manual work, clearly have the highest proportion of their number engaged in regular jobs. Indeed, the recruitment of Tamil women even into heavy manual work has been a feature of employment patterns in the estates and in the urban areas of Malaysia since the earliest days of their migration. The relationship to domestic organisation and to caste has to be understood in discussing the reproduction of patterns of female employment amongst the various class categories of Indians and within any class category.

The structuring principles of Indian domestic space, once occupied, are fundamentally the same for all classes. However, the private ownership of house and land, or the 'right' to what is collectively owned, as in the case of the Chitties, constitutes a different order of relationship to the production and reproduction of the relationships it encompasses from that achieved in rented public or private property. In the past, recruitment patterns engaged in by government utility employers enabled



working class families in the labour lines to assume the residential continuity and security of income for a relatively unproblematic reproduction of domestic relations. Men often succeeded their fathers as the 'tenant' of a particular dwelling provided by the employer on the father's retirement. This was made possible by the preference given to sons of loyal workers in the allocation of jobs as I have described elsewhere (see Chapters 1 and 2).

Increasingly in the era since independence, Malay-dominated government bureaucracies have sought to redress what they define as an unfair imbalance in the allocation of both urban jobs and urban public housing. A direct result of this policy has been the greater uncertainty of occupational and residential continuity amongst Indians. It is recognised that working class Indians have the highest rates of unemployment of any ethnic group in Malaysia, and highest proportional representation in the category "urban poor" (see Third Malaysia Plan, page 143, and M.I.C. 1975). Those families who have left the labour line accommodation have mostly sought cheap rented accommodation in the area or, in a small proportion of cases, been given the opportunity to purchase 'low-cost housing', that is, cheap, government-subsidised housing. In most cases, therefore, Indians from the working class occupational category accept the situation of present or potential disruption of preferred patterns of domestic organisation. It is a mark of status and achievement that the woman married to the head of the house, and if possible, their daughters, should not need to work. Thus, the families which can be shown to have raised their occupational status and income levels in comparison with those of the parents, not only seek a new location and outward form of domestic space, but also attempt to organise the division of labour within

the domestic group according to models which derive from a perception of the relations of men and women of higher castes and class positions, particularly those of the Vellalar Ceylonese, and the Malayālis of managerial levels.

From the point of view of the present analysis, then, a rise in social standing tends to mean the increased isolation of domestic units and the greater containment of women within the domestic domain. However, where high status and income levels have existed in previous generations, education for women is stressed and a pattern of the emergence of women from the domestic domain and engagement in occupations with status equal to or superior to that of their fathers is in the process of developing. As yet though, this trend is too new, and there are too few cases of women with careers who have married and had children, for clear conclusions to be drawn on the long-term effects of the reproduction of Indian social relations, either within or beyond the domestic context, for this relatively privileged section of the population.

Indians housed in government-supplied accommodation constituted the first proletarian population proper in Melaka, as I stated earlier, and also constituted small concentrations of an almost exclusive ethnic category, that of South Indian Tamil. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, to discover that some marriages took place on a local basis and that networks of kindred developed within certain labour lines as well as between them. However, there were limitations to this pattern because of the juxtaposition in the original allocations of members of different castes and people from different natal places. At the same time, people of the same caste and from the same natal places were often

to be found in nearby urban areas or in the estates of the immediate rural hinterland. Thus, Indian working class kin and affinal networks tend to be spread wider within the state than those of any other category of Indian. These factors explain in part the failure of these populations to reproduce the sort of peri-domestic space created by the Chitties, let alone the village or hamlet organisation of their original homes.

Nonetheless, the people of the artificial clusters of workers' houses, or perhaps more appropriately, the bureaucratically-created clusters, have attempted to create their own sense of community in some cases. In one specific case, this process involved the building of a communal temple at the heart of the housing area. Internal disputes and the gradual erosion of Indian dominance of the area have somewhat confounded these efforts, but there is still an important sense in which the people concerned were responding to an ascribed identity, that of 'low caste' Indian (the adjectives being most significant to other Indians and the noun to other ethnic groups). They in fact responded with an attempt to transform isolated households into a united spatial formation focused on the symbolic core of the divine force deemed necessary for the successful reproduction of any Hindu group.

A similar, and significantly more successful attempt to focus a residential agglomeration on a temple and thereby create different conceptual relations to urban space occurred at the General Hospital. In this context, however, there was no possibility of the transformation of spatial concepts extending to the relative 'closure' of a now ritually-defined area, a potential which would have appeared realisable at some

historical moments in the former case. There was simply too wide a dispersal and diversity of workers congregated in this general area. However, the temple has been successful in achieving a multi-class and multi-caste symbolic context for the translation of a label "Indians" into an interacting set of individuals and families in opposition to other labelled sets in this context (see Chapter 5).

In this chapter I have shown that a whole range of factors is engaged in the creation of domestic contexts as centres for the development of social identity. I have suggested that the structuring properties of the domestic built form entail and embody principles of class, caste, religious and sub-ethnic differentiation. It now remains to elucidate how the practice of the Hindu religion in the domestic context reinforces the processes I have been discussing so far.

## CHAPTER 4

### DOMESTIC RITUAL AND DOMESTIC SPACE:

#### PRACTICE AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

This chapter extends the discussion of the relations encompassed by domestic space through the analysis of Hindu ritual. For the sake of consistency, the settings for the analysis which dominates this chapter are the houses of Melaka Chitties in the Chitty kampong. The events described are representative of Chitty rites as I observed them over twenty-two months, but they are not offered as "typical" of the domestic rites of all Indians. I make a brief comparative analysis of a domestic rite of one high caste Ceylonese family.

It is important to this discussion that ritual be seen as the major modality for the creation, definition and recreation of domestic space which is conceptualised here as a fundamental unity. That unity is recognised as a set of conceptual relations giving meaning to the built form. It is in this meaning, created of ritual practice, that the basis of the social identity of Indians is to be found. Here also is found the fundamental paradigm of all Indian social relations. Through his ritual incorporation, each Indian individual is constituted as a member of a household sharing domestic space. Through ritual, each household and each individual is thereby constituted as different from other units similarly defined. Besides defining relations within and between households, domestic ritual is constitutive of an identity of a set of households, such as the Melaka Chitty kampong. This I demonstrate by showing the shared form of the practices to be distinctive.

As I use the terms, conceptual relations and ritual practices each entail the other, as it is these together which provide the location for the reproduction of the structuring properties which are "their medium and their outcome". That is to say, conceptual relations understood by the actors, and the ritual practices in which they engage, exist as observable, thinkable realities in which structuring properties are instantiated. It is in the dialectic of their co-existence that ritual change may take place, as emergent contradictions are temporarily resolved. Contradictions may arise within the relationship of conceptual order to ritual practice. Alternatively, contradictions may arise between these, seen as a systematically related set embodying structuring properties, and other domains of social life in which Indians are engaged.

Religiously-based practices are important to the overall discussion of social identity because they variously integrate and divide people in terms of ethnic, sub-ethnic, caste and class relations. It is in the domestic context, especially through the socialisation of children, that these aspects of identity are created as meaning-filled realities through the constitution of a world view. The meaning accorded to relations within the domestic domain affect, respond to, and sometimes stand in stark contrast with social relations experienced beyond that context. Conflicts may arise in both sets of relations as a result. These conflicts are the manifestations of underlying contradictions at the level of the structuring properties of Indian social life as a whole.

#### Thresholds and religious practice

It is useful to begin the description and analysis in this section with some remarks about routine domestic rites in the arenas which provide

the focus for special rites. The spatial convergence of these rites at the front of Chitty houses is more than fortuitous and is integral to the analysis of domestic ritual in general. The threshold and its relation to the ordering of spatial and social relations on either side of it is a key to understanding the import of relations which engage Indians across the whole of their social lives.

Melaka Chitties, like other Indians (and with very few exceptions), operate a daily minimal ritual sequence in the domestic context. This comprises the head of the household lighting a lamp before the family shrine to the deities, at about six o'clock in the evening, after he has taken his evening bath. In the Chitty kampong, the timing of the worship is frequently such that it coincides closely with the ringing of the bell of the Māriamman temple at the end of the settlement's main lane. This bell signals the start of the evening puja, and people will sometimes perform their domestic puja a little earlier in order to attend the temple, especially on Fridays, the main day for regular attendance at the temple. Indian domestic shrines often have strings of small electric lights around their perimeters and these are turned on just before the small oil or camphor lamp is lit and waved in offering (arāthi) before the image of the family's given deity (kula devam). In many of the Chitty houses incense sticks are lit, not only at the shrine, as attractive and purificatory adjuncts, but also to be placed in a small holder which is found on a post supporting the porch of the verandah or on an outside wall, just outside the main door. Chitties explicitly equate this practice with the similar daily offering made by the Chinese 'to the sky god'. This deity is seen as having some influence on what happens in the general spatial environs of the house. The joss stick

offering to 'the sky god' is almost exclusively a practice of Chitties amongst Indians. Some informants were at pains to point out that this was not a Hindu practice.

Fridays involve a regular and important elaboration of daily domestic rites in all Chitty houses. On the threshold to the verandah of their house, each family representative (usually the male head) stands with a small clay pot of live coals on which some mentholated camphor (sambrāni) has been placed. A dense white smoke is given off which 'makes the air clean', that is, purifies the immediate area. First facing the temple to Māriamman, and then turning towards the temple of Siva, the pot is waved with right arm extended and left hand touching right elbow in a threefold clockwise circular movement. This is the standard South Indian deferential worship form for presentation of offerings. In temple contexts I was told that the movement through the air should trace the Tamil letter symbolising the universal 'Om', though no one suggested this to be the case in this context.

Informants commenting on this practice made explicit their understanding that they were addressing the supreme divinity in the forms of Siva and Sakti; the ultimately ascetic formlessness and the engaged universal energy which are its twin male and female aspects. Other informants, or the same ones on different occasions, would merely state that they were paying their respects to 'Amman'<sup>1</sup> and to Siva who 'is like our father', before commencing their household-centred worship inside.

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<sup>1</sup>Chitties are explicit in their equation of Amman with 'mother'. This stands in contrast to Dumont's view (1959).



As the map (page 60) shows, the Māriamman and Siva temples stand at either end of the main land through the Chitty kampong. Between them and the smaller Angalamman temple lie most of the Melaka Chitty houses. In saluting Māriamman and Siva from the threshold of their houses, Chitties demarcate the physical and cosmological limits of the space which defines them and incorporate their houses within that symbolic domain. However, this operates at the level of practical consciousness which rarely if ever is brought forward to discursive consciousness by the actors. Actors, if asked to elaborate upon their intentions, always developed the theme of maintaining and enhancing relations with the personalised cosmic forces who play a regular part in ordering and successfully replicating their social relations.

On turning from their offerings in the direction of the temples, Chitties allow the smoke from their pots to waft upwards to the picture of the deity above the door, who is normally Lakshmi.<sup>1</sup> She is enveloped in the purifying smoke with the same waving gesture before the worshipper moves into the entrance hall where the process is repeated under the pictures of the primary ancestors. Next to the concept of 'cleaning' (cuci (M), suttam seya (T)) the performance of this and similar rites invokes notions of 'paying respect' for all Indians in Melaka as it is reported to do in South India and Ceylon. In discussion, a double logic unfolds in the 'discursive consciousness' (Giddens 1979) of those actors who have reflected upon these practices.

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<sup>1</sup>Lakshmi is the deity associated with prosperity and well-being. Her picture can be found above the lintel of many Indian houses.

Paying respect to deity and ancestor alike maintains a stable relationship with beings of the cosmological world who are potentially and normally benevolent in their dealings with humans over whom they are deemed to have sway. Disrespect, which is shown in failure to perform rites that both acknowledge the dominance of these beings, and symbolically free their localised manifestation from the inevitably accumulated pollution of daily life in a domestic context, risks provoking anger and punitive response. It is not necessary for the divine to act as its own punitive agent. A simple withdrawal of its protective powerful presence, which is normally ensured through time by the invitation of sambrāni arāthi, is sufficient to ensure the invasion of the domestic space by 'dirty' malevolent spirits (djin (M)). These delight in creating social and/or corporeal disharmony. Disaffected ancestors, too, would be likely to intervene through illness to disrupt domestic relations directly, in order to remind the living of their debt and responsibilities to their ancestors.

The second explanation offered by informants for the sambrāni arāthi always lay in the necessity of clearing the air of all potentially disruptive or distracting external influences which might enter the hall of the house and interfere with the worship before the shrine. To be certain that this is achieved, the external 'purification' process is continued in front of the shrine itself, before the rest of the puja is performed. This was said to drive away evil spirits.

The puja consists of lighting incense sticks and sticking them into bananas which have been placed on betel leaves at the feet of the image of the deity, before lighting a camphor lamp and performing another

arāthi before the face of the god. The family looks on, their hands positioned palms together in the standard Hindu gesture of worship. The lamp is often waved in front of the photos of the head's parents next. Since most of the household deities are male in form, the final act in the puja sequence is the taking of sacred ash (vibhutti) from a pot which is kept on the shrine, and either smearing it in three horizontal stripes across the forehead, the distinctive mark of a Saivite Hindu, or more commonly making a single spot of ash on the centre of the forehead. (Red kunkuman paste would be used for a female deity.) The sacred ash is seen as a blessed gift (prasadam) from the deity. Its symbolic referents are manifold and individuals have varying degrees of awareness of the variations of explanation which are available within the Hindu symbolic system. Almost all are able to articulate at some level conceptions of its symbolisation of the purity and formlessness of the divine and the transitoriness of human life. Amongst Chitties and most South Indians, vibhutti is accorded powers of a curative sort, which are the stronger the more important the shrine at which the worship was made.

#### Special domestic pujas and social identity

The most public, spectacular and distinctive domestically performed rites in which Melaka Chitties engage regularly are the twice-yearly ancestor rites called collectively parichu. All South Indian and Ceylonese Hindus have some form of annual rites which are normally required for the placation of ancestors. The form and timing of those in Melaka vary according to a number of different criteria. In most other Indian contexts the first anniversary of the death of any individual, that is, when the same astrological configuration in the

form of a dominant rising 'star' (nāchettiram)<sup>1</sup> is present in the heavens, will be celebrated by an elaborate puja which entails offerings similar to those to be described for the Chitties. Thereafter, the annual puja may be repeated at this astrological conjuncture, or occasionally on the anniversary date according to the Western calendar, for a varying number of years. Or it may be incorporated into a ceremony designed to refer to all ancestors of the household head. In this latter case these rites may be performed on a particular night, frequently that before the festival of Deepavāli, in many households.

What I am about to describe for the Chitty kampong needs to be considered as a total system though two major differentiations occur in time and approach. Parichu occurs on two occasions. The first is in Bulan Parichu, the month of parichu, which falls in the Tamil month of Āni (June/July). This occasion is also known as Parichu Buah-buah or the Fruits Parichu, for reasons which will become apparent. The rites are said to be performed on any convenient night within this month, and the major deciding factors appear to be financial or competitive in nature. That is to say, most families in this working class community need to wait till a day shortly after they have received their wages in order to be able to find sufficient funds for its performance. Also, a family informally coordinates its performance with those of families which are closely related through agnatic or affinal links and whose ceremonies they are normally expected to attend. A second parichu is performed by Chitties on the eve of Thai Pongal, the first fruits or harvest festival of the Tamil ritual calendar.

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<sup>1</sup>Indians vary greatly, of course, in their understanding of the complex Hindu astrological system. The 'star' spoken of here is one of the twenty-seven planets of the cosmos — which are one of the main bases of gauging annual timings in the Hindu calendar.

In many respects, Bulan Parichu is structurally and functionally very similar to the fortnight known as Pitr Pak which Babb (1975) describes in The Divine Hierarchy when, as he says, "agnatic ancestors are understood to be present in the households of their descendants" (page 153), though in the case of the Melaka Chitty community it is a wider range than agnatic ancestors, and their presence is slightly problematic, as will emerge in the following discussion.

The first case took place in the house which forms the main example of spatial relations used in the rest of the chapter. At the time, the house was occupied by two brothers, their wives and children, and their sister's unmarried adult daughter. The elder brother is a linesman in Telecom, the state-owned utility, while the younger is a storeman with long service in the town branch of a major multi-national electrical goods manufacturer and distributor. Both were in relatively secure and relatively well-paid jobs. Neither wife worked, but the sister's daughter had a lowly paid job as a domestic servant in the home of a Chinese family nearby the kampong. There are three children to each couple in the house, all of primary school age or younger. Separate cooking places are maintained by both couples. The niece shares domestic chores, including cooking, with the elder brother's wife and contributes to their budget. It is this girl's parents' home which forms the setting of the second case description.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The description and analysis of the ritual practices which follow are not to be understood as being in any sense complete accounts. Though I do omit much detail of actions which occurred in the specific instances, little is left out which relates to the symbolic relations enacted in the performances. Nevertheless, this is not a full symbolic analysis since I wish to concentrate on the relationship between the rites and the reproduction of spatial and social relations within domestic domains, and what this does to relations between domestic units and with the wider social context.

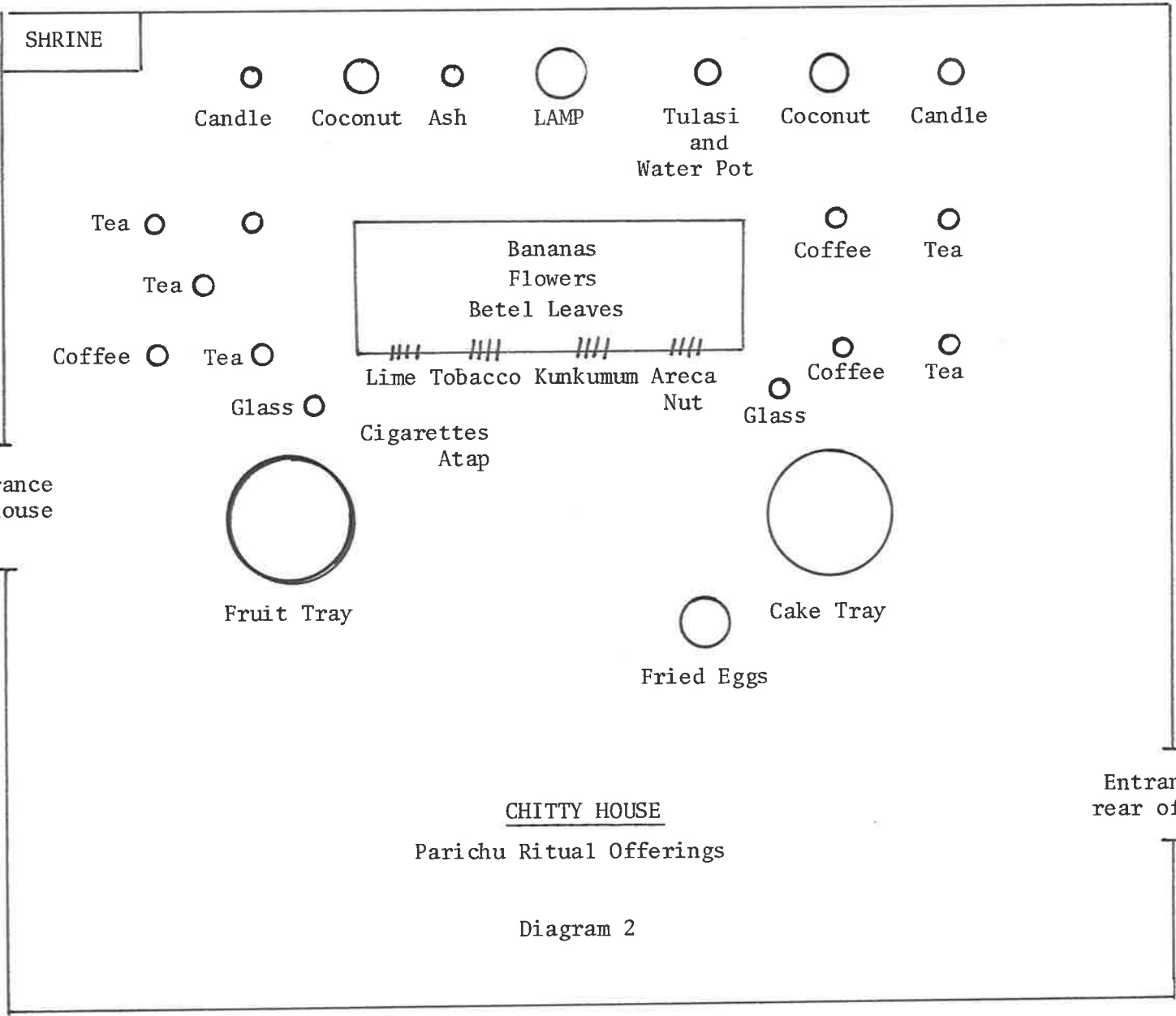
## CASE 1

Arriving at the house between six and seven in the evening, the married sister of the men of the household was found beginning the process of setting out the objects described below on the swept and washed floor of the 'hall' of the house. The furniture which is normally there had been moved out onto the verandah. The women of the household, the wife of the elder brother and the second wife of the younger (his first had died after the birth of their third child), were in the cooking area of the house preparing the foods required for the evening's rites and the meal which accompanies it. Amongst the preparations is a sticky rice concoction laced with the blue dye of the telang (M) flower to produce a layered cake which was said to be indispensable on these occasions.

At seven o'clock the elder brother moved outside the house with the sambrāni pot and performed the arāthi as I described it for a Friday puja above. Having gone through the normal Friday puja sequence, the senior man placed a new garland of jasmine flowers around the photos of his parents, positioned above the lintel of the door to the rear of the house. He then shut the doors of the household shrine.

Jasmine flowers are among the most preferred flowers for presentation in pujas to the deities, both in the temple and elsewhere. Their pure white form and perfume are thought to be symbolic of God's cool purity and 'sweetness' by those with a more discursive approach to their religion in Melaka, but more often the ubiquitous remark of ritual offerings being 'attractive' to the gods, and thereby ensuring their attendance, is offered in the case of flowers too. As always, the garlanding of people in the Hindu practice is also an instance of paying

West Wall



SHRINE

Candle Coconut Ash LAMP Tulasi and Water Pot Coconut Candle

Tea Tea Coffee Tea

Bananas  
Flowers  
Betel Leaves

Coffee Tea Glass Cigarettes Atap Glass Coffee Tea

Lime Tobacco Kunkumum Areca Nut

Fruit Tray

Cake Tray

Fried Eggs

Entrance to house

Entrance to rear of house

CHITTY HOUSE

Parichu Ritual Offerings

Diagram 2

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respect or doing honour to them. In the whole ritual sequence, these three themes of purity, attraction and respect are continually reasserted through the symbolic content of articles and practice employed by the actors.

The ritual goods were now almost set up as in the diagram (diagram 2), and the last things to be done were the bringing and pouring of the various beverages and the offering of a plate of cooked food, in this case a plate of fried noodles. Some betel and lime was taken from a special ornate box and ground in the pestle and mortar which many Indian homes are said to have had but which are less common now. In each case, the beverages and the food and betel preparation were specifically designated as being the 'special favourite' of particular deceased members of the family. Besides spirits (malikat (M)) related patrilineally, the spirits of the head's mother, and the first wife of the younger brother, were particularly prominent as the designated prime receivers of particular offerings. These two individuals were the most recent deaths from the household. The father, who had died when the two men were young boys, was less evident than the women, though cigarettes and drinks were nonetheless offered to him. I was told that there should always be five, seven or nine cups of coffee offered and that the fruit on the tray like the rice and cakes were for all ancestors and the friends they might like to bring along.

When everything had been set up the sambrāni pot with new coals and camphor and a small pot (chatty) of water were set before the whole arrangement. From this moment on, none of the offerings should be moved "even an inch", I was told, lest the ancestors take fright or offence and



leave. The 'prayers' (sembahyang (M)) now began with the elder brother again taking the sambrāni outside the main door of the house, in a sequence which was recognised by all Chitties as 'calling the ancestors'. This consisted of waving the pot towards the temples and then towards the heavens, before returning to make the same arāthi before the whole laid-out offering. A number of visitors will be present at any of these events, but prominent among them are parallel cousins, both matrilineal and patrilineal, who will normally make certain that they 'pay their respects' to shared ancestors, and collaterals. This they do by performing the simple arāthi, normally sprinkling water from the small water pot which contains the cooling 'tulasi' leaves (basil). Amongst those present on this occasion were, from the head's point of view, a MZs, MZD, Z, ZH, MZSD, ZS, and other Chitties said to be somehow related but for whom it was difficult to trace one precise relationship, since they were sufficiently distant to have several overlapping lineal and affinal links. There were also several non-Chitties, mostly Chinese, who were workmates of the head. Some of these visitors performed the arāthi, even when there was no ethnic, let alone lineal, or collateral connection. A symbolic acknowledgement of the necessity for reciprocity is embodied here between the supernatural controllers and the present owners of the domestic space, and between these beings and guests who enter that space.

All invited visitors, and some who just turn up, are invited to take a meal with the family, or with some member of it, as a part of the celebrations. This involves them being taken into the heart of the domestic space, to the location which is usually reserved for close relatives and friends whose status is unproblematic in terms of caste and purity. In

the case of this particular ceremony, those taken into the eating area were a range of people who would cause major difficulties for 'orthodox' high caste Indians within the town. Besides the relatives who create no problems on this score, Chinese (eaters of pork and beef), Indian Christians and South Indian Tamils of uncertain caste origins and even the European anthropologists were taken through the house to the dining table and served by the family.

After all guests had eaten the rice and curry meal, they were all asked to sit on the verandah area where, after the 'prayers' were deemed to be over, they were given tea and fruit from the trays of the offering.

This ritual occasion, in which the supernatural overseers of the domestic space are the main focus, provides the most unusual context for the entrance of outsiders into the heart of the domestic setting. For the Chitties, and especially for higher caste Indians, such entry is normally restricted to close kin and affines, even at the time of 'open house' entertainment of guests during Deepavāli. At Deepavāli, guests are offered food in the outer 'hall'. Yet, on this occasion, all guests penetrate to the core space and share food there. This practice was not followed by other Indians, generally. Indeed it is one feature which marks the Chitties as distinctive.

The important point to note is that this occasion turns the house symbolically inside out. That is, the relationship between the core eating place and the hall is inverted. It is the presence of the 'divine' or 'ancestral family', whose members have come to take food, which must be protected. The earthly family may offer food within, in

space which is temporarily devalued or subordinated, but it would be presumptuous to expect the ancestral spirits to share their 'eating space' with outsiders or even members of the family. While they are present the hall becomes the core space. By comparison the normal dining area is more appropriate as the location for commensality, since all who dine there are more impure than the supernatural visitors.

Informants explained that the coconuts shown in the diagram should spurt their water when pierced at the end of the rite, to show that ancestors had been satisfied. If they did not spurt, it was a sign that something was wrong. Fortunately, on this occasion they did spurt. I was later informed in another context that the coconuts were explicitly for the ancestors to wash their hands after eating.<sup>1</sup> The whole ritual was deemed successful and the ancestors left presumably sated and content. To ensure that all had left, before the fruits and cakes from the trays were offered to the humans present, each cup and vessel was said to have been moved very gently a slight distance. This was after all had prayed and a time had elapsed which was judged appropriate for a meal to be 'eaten' by ancestors. It is often stated by Indians that gods and spirits do not eat the physical substance of an offering, but take of its essence or 'smell'. Yet, as I and the head's nephew (ZS) walked away from the house after this evening, I was told how the liquid in the cups had diminished slightly and how this was a good sign, as it showed that the spirits had come and eaten. I was to discover that this sign had been successfully found in other similar events I attended in other houses.

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<sup>1</sup>Presumably ancestors require the 'pure' water from the inside of a coconut, just as the deities in a temple do.

During the evening I have described and in the second of the annual ancestor rites I am about to outline, the theme of avoiding any disturbance in the hall, for the duration of the rites, was constantly reasserted. One should not approach too closely to the food, and it was deemed not advisable to photograph the arrangement until after the ancestors had left.

On the evening of Thai Pongal, at the same house six months later, a very similar performance was undertaken, except that a meal of rice with an elaborate array of curries was set out on each of seven banana leaf plates. Another difference on this occasion was the fact that luxurious looking items of clothing — a sari and a sarong and blouse — were also displayed. Informants conceptualised this as the more elaborate performance but suggested that there was really not much difference between them. It is true that there were the same essential offerings, including trays of fruit and cakes, though the latter two were less prominent, being fewer in variety and number than on the previous occasion. Again the meal for the guests took place in the family dining area. One revelatory incident occurred on this occasion which graphically demonstrated the process of socialisation which is fundamental to the replication of the understanding of domestic space and the relations — spiritual and human — which it contains.

While the second sitting was being fed inside the house and other guests were relaxing on the verandah outside, four of the family's children were heard coming down the short corridor between the dining area and the hall. They were laughing and joking and as they appeared in the doorway the eldest barred the way with his arm and put the finger of his

other hand to his lips to signal silence. Grinning broadly as the others emulated him, he led them across the hall in an exaggerated tiptoe walk and out onto the verandah through the main door, where they all burst into fits of giggles and were rebuked by the elders present.

What the children had learnt and had reinforced, of course, was that the successful propitiation of the ancestors requires silence and respect. On this and on other occasions, the precariousness of the procedure was emphasised in a number of injunctions. I was told that one should not cough or sneeze in this part of the house while the food was set out. In the case I discuss below, I was able to witness the old father wave two of his sons impatiently from the threshold of the door lest they block the entrance of the ancestors. He told me that one should not sit in this area of the house while the ancestors are thought to be present. The food was explicitly said to be 'as for guests' and while it is not prepared in any special way, it must not be tasted even to check the seasoning, before it has been offered and accepted by the ancestors. If a child should seek to taste it, and succeed, during preparation, then the food would have to be thrown away. I was told by one young man that this had happened when he was younger and he had got a severe scolding from his mother as a result.

It was the same young man who told my wife, as we were walking away from the first occasion set out above, that they (the Melaka Chitties) were 'Indian' but could not speak 'Indian'. He had gone with others as a child to the Tamil classes in the temple, but he was ashamed because he could not keep up with many of the other children who were from Tamil-speaking homes. In all the Chitty domestic contexts, Malay is the

dominant language, though, on occasions such as those described here, at which members of the various other ethnic groups represented in Melaka are present to the extent of entering the core of the house, a certain amount of English will be used. A few of the Chitty houses have parents who are able to speak Tamil fluently, and if the need arises, they will use it. Yet, to my knowledge, only one family claiming to be Chitty makes a conscious effort to use Tamil predominately in the home. There are native Tamil-speaking grandparents on both sides in this case.

The significance of this problem of language, highlighted by the Chitty youth, lies primarily in its indication of the reflexivity domestic ritual may produce. It is in these contexts especially that the status of Chitties as Indians comes to the forefront of their consciousness. This occurs precisely because of the extent to which outsiders are incorporated on these occasions. Similarly, the outsiders who are other Indians find the details, timing and language of Chitty domestic ritual importantly different to their own. I have witnessed several occasions when Chitties have discussed the uniqueness and similarity of the practices in respect to those other Indians. This has occurred not only when talking to other Indians but also when talking to Chinese. Almost always, some reference is made to the domestic use of Malay, and its extension even into the ritual context. The tone adopted is often somewhat apologetic.

By contrast, in all the other Indian homes I was familiar with, and according to the survey I conducted, Tamil was the dominant language except where it vied with English amongst more educated middle class families. Outside the domestic context, many of the younger Tamils

claimed to be as happy using the local variety of English, or Malay, if the people with whom they were speaking were working class Chinese especially. Outside of the occasional work situation, most Indians claimed little regular interaction with ethnic Malays, and my observations support the claim. Thus, in using Malay as their mother tongue, Chitties mark an historical transformation of social practice which has contemporary significance in the role of language in the creation of distinct sub-categories of Indians.

From the perspective of other Indians, language use, physical appearance derived from marriage with non-Indians, the practice of such inter-marriage on a regular basis, and supposed doubtful origins of Chitties<sup>1</sup> are contrasted with the accepted 'orthodoxy' of their practice of religion and their very religious fervour, as a paradoxical problem in determining a correct attitude towards the Chitties. There is no doubt that the Chitties are solidly Hindu, but just how they should be located in any conception of an 'Indian community' is a difficult matter for religious, social and political reasons which I will bring out in the remainder of this chapter and in the rest of the thesis. It is these categorical difficulties which in part explain the rarity with which other Indians are to be found in Chitty homes, and Chitties in other Indians' homes, for that matter.

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<sup>1</sup>Some local folk etymologies of the term "kling", which the Chitties recognise as a legitimate original term for their community, suggest that the word emulates the sound of the chains of Indian prisoners shipped from the Andaman Islands. Though prisoners were shipped to the Straits Settlements, especially Singapore, there is no evidence to support this etymology, and certainly none to support the story of Chitty origins.

Notwithstanding the problems I have outlined, the structural ordering of domestic space on the basis of religious conceptualisations of the meaning of space/cosmic relations is pervasive in all Indian contexts. This is not to say that I believe that these structural relations as manifest in practice determine Indian social relations in all contexts, or that they even explain all such social relations as some all-encompassing ideological principle. What the spatial relations embody is a set of orderings of the social world which are transmitted in and through practices such as those I have described, but which are recognised by Hindus themselves, to be at odds with the direction of the patterns being developed for the wider social order of Malaysia of which they are a part.

## CASE 2

In this brief outline of a second domestic group's annual rites, I want to make only a few contrasting and a few confirmatory points to those I have discussed in the two sets of parichu described earlier. The setting of this particular parichu was the home of an elder sister of the brothers spoken of in the previous description. It is the small, single room annexe of the house of another of this woman's relatives (MZD) who shares it with her Tamil husband, and with her adopted son (her BS) and his Chinese wife and children. Eight children were brought up in this annexe home, which has a small kitchen and bathroom set beside it, and a cupboard to half-screen the sleeping from the dining area. At the time of my research, the two eldest children were married daughters, and the third is the niece spoken of in the previous account. The two eldest sons had rented a room to sleep in from a Chinese family, so there were only three sons who slept with the parents, though all



five ate there. One of the married daughters lived in an adjoining house, and the other some forty metres further off. One of these daughters had married her FZS.

Since the head's wife in this house was a prime actor in the rites just described, along with her younger sister whose own house was also very close by, it is not surprising perhaps that the form of the rites appeared very similar, with the variation lying primarily in the lavishness and range of offerings rather than in any difference of form. Though the head and his sons all had contributed something towards the financial burden of the evening, their clearly expressed understanding of the event was in terms of the obligation of the head to perform the rites on behalf of the whole household. It was therefore the head who made the vast majority of the invitations to those who attended. There were one or two friends of each of the sons who came and took food and drink at the house, but other than collateral and affinal relatives, the guests were Chinese and Indian people who were enjoined to share what the head himself defined as a very happy occasion.

As on the previous occasions described, the head's own sister was present at the setting up of the offerings and adjusted the position of lamps, checked the suitability of items and the type and quantity too. She also made an arāthi even before the head himself. A notable feature of this performance was the fact that the packet of cigarettes which was part of the offering, along with areca nut, a 'traditional' alternative, was taken by the father and offered to each of the sons of the house first, with an injunction to smoke one as these were sembahyang or 'from the prayers'. The use of the standard Malay term for Islamic prayers had

a certain irony for the observer, but the concept being conveyed was evidently that of prasad, or blessed gift of the 'leftovers' from an offering made to a super-human being in the Hindu orthodoxy. The ancestors had had cigarettes lit for them from the packet, and these had been set going by the eldest son of the house, who took care not to touch the filter or to place the cigarette in his mouth. The rites took place on the ground beside the sleeping platform, where beds and sleeping mats would also normally be placed at night. The offerings were set against an east-facing wall as in the previous description, though the guests were mostly entertained outside where a table had been set up for the purpose of a formal meal which was very extensive and sumptuous by any standards, and liberally lubricated by expensive alcoholic drinks. As a proportion of annual income the two parichu rituals, with attendant meals, and the Deepavāli festival accounted for a very large part of the budget of this family, in comparison to that of other Indian families.

The serving of the meal outside was said to be for lack of room within the house, but it was also in this context that I was told that to sit, or to eat, in front of the ancestors was wrong and showed disrespect. No such problem existed if the meal were taken outside the house. Again, in this house, the area of the offering was well lit and all the doors were open to let the ancestors in, though care was taken not to cause a noise to be made within the house itself, even when there was considerable hilarity just outside the door.

I sought from the Melaka Chitty elders a reason for their unusual practice of performing two ancestor rites per year. Even the most articulate elders were unable to give any rationalisation, though one

remarked that he too had wondered, and that when he had asked his father he had been told that he did not know either, but that the ancestors were certainly not going to complain if they were worshipped twice instead of once. He added that once the practice had begun, it could not be stopped. This accorded with another statement I had elicited from the head of the house in the last description, to the effect that 'if once you put rice (as an offering) then you must always put rice'. I also received the inevitable 'it's just our custom'.

This latter statement I take as important, however, as it represents for me another incidence of the force of what Giddens (1979) calls the 'practical consciousness' (inherent in everyday life) being brought into reflective moment by the performance of rituals. The reflective moments do not, to be sure, always result in a level of articulate 'discursive consciousness' sufficient to resolve the implied problem which the question 'why do you do it this way?' suggests. Nevertheless, it does once more bring into focus the markers of ethnic differentiation and reproduces the processes of formation of a social identity through practice. An important overall point about that practice is that its precedence as 'custom' carried the weight of supernatural sanction. As such, its replication is a necessary consequence which entails the recreation of a particular identity as an outcome, whether or not that outcome is intended.

Interestingly, an elder of the community once pointed out to me that there was apparent justification for the celebration of ancestor rites in the Tamil almanac which listed the night of Thai Pongal eve as Bhogi Pandikai. This, a Tamil teacher of Hinduism described as the festival

for the departed spirits of rishis and other enlightened people who lived 'next to god' in the kingdom of Indra. No oral tradition existed, as far as I was able to discover, as to the timing of the Bulan Parichu and its form. As there was an awareness of the different practices of the other Indian groups, the important point here is that in the attempt to relate this practice to 'orthodox' Indian ways of doing things (a constant theme in Chitty accounts of themselves), the emphasis was on a Tamil literary source which could be interpreted as displaying how even the Tamils had lost some of their orthodoxy in the lack of practice of a calendrical rite. An important part of Chitty presentation of their claim to be Indian is always the conservative form of their Hindu practice.

#### Ceylonese annual rites

By way of contrast, I shall briefly describe one occasion when I observed the Thithi rite of a Ceylonese family. It should be pointed out that the perception of many Indians in regard to the Ceylonese Tamils is of a group who jealously guard their wealth, caste status and daughters, and who are very orthodox in their practice of Hinduism, largely through their high level of education and literacy. Working class Indians will also suggest that it is much easier to be pious and have lots of rites in your name if you are wealthy. It is sometimes said that a main concern of Ceylonese in performing lavish rituals is to enhance their status in the community in order to ensure the successful marriage of their children, and so increase both wealth and status even further. Even some of the more cynical Ceylonese will state this about members of their own community. The importance of such perceptions, for the purposes of my discussion, lies in the extent to which such practices as those I am about to describe reinforce the perceptions themselves and

constitute the conditions for their recreation. I argue that this also provides the ideological basis of the reproduction of actual social divisions within the imposed category "Indian".

The occasion of the anniversary of the death of a family member amongst Ceylonese Tamils in Melaka tends to be far less public event than that of the Melaka Chitties. The rites take place with a relatively small number of invited guests and members of the immediate family in attendance. In one specific instance, the main emphasis in the invitations appeared to be towards non-family members of the Ceylonese community who were prominent in religious matters and known for their knowledge of the correct performance of the rites. As with the Chitties, the occasion I observed involved the presentation of a standard set of ritual goods: a very similar set-up of banana leaves flanked by oil lamps, young coconuts, incense sticks and trays of food offerings. A tray offering a neat set of clothes was also present and the requisite offering of bananas on betel leaves formed the central offering before which the sambrāni pot was set. A notable if minor distinction on this occasion, as on those of other middle class Indians I was able to witness, was that the garlanded picture of the deceased formed the centrepiece, set against the east-facing wall, and the offerings were explicitly placed before this image as if before the image of a deity in a temple. Again the ceremony took place in the main hall of the house. Guests sat on the floor facing the picture of the deceased, which was raised on a small table to be roughly at their eye level. Pirartenai (prayers) were sung, led by a man 'who knew how' and mantras chanted culminating in the 'Om Shanti, Shanti, Shanti' injunction which was considered particularly apt as the whole rite was said to be aimed at atma shanti, or the Soul's peace.

Important for the Ceylonese rites was the fact that the ancestor spirits, who are deemed to come and take the essence of the offerings, were even more susceptible to offence and taking fright than those of other Indians. According to the accounts offered, and the practices observed, the emphasis is on a literary understanding of the potential for disaffected ancestors to become pēy or evil spirits. The practical consequences of failure to satisfy the spirits were not taken as seriously as a projected explanatory device of misfortune, which would be certain to follow, as was the case for other groups. However, the Ceylonese Hindus were certain that there was a great possibility of failure to satisfy the ancestors if a set of prescribed procedures were not followed. Most important of all these was that, when the spirit had been attracted and pleased by the singing of holy verses and the performance of a simple puja (of very similar style to all other domestic and simple temple forms of worship), it was thought that complete closure of the room, and the avoidance of conversation by any of the guests for a few minutes while the lights were out in the empty room, was the minimal requirement to ensure the successful attainment of shanti or peace.

As with the other groups, an important part of the performance of the rites as a whole was the shared meal in which it culminated. The importance of commensality, especially in the context of Indian social life, has frequently been cited in the anthropological literature.<sup>1</sup> It is necessary to underline only a few points here, therefore, in order to develop the analytic theme I wish to pursue. It needs to be highlighted that commensality in the domestic context is the prime expression of the

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<sup>1</sup>See Marriott (1968) for the most important example of this approach.

symbolic importance of shared food. For Ceylonese, who in Melaka are constituted of largely high caste, literate and articulate individuals many of whom have extensive knowledge of their religion, a clear division has grown up in practice and ideology as to the relation between commensality in the mundane context and commensality in the religious context. Thus, though it is still relatively more rare for a Ceylonese Hindu to open his house to 'strangers' than for lower caste, working class Hindus, entertaining guests from other ethnic groups and castes is becoming increasingly common. Deepavāli, the only annual festival day of the Hindu calendar to be given the status of a public holiday in Malaysia, though a religious occasion, functions also as the major occasion on which Indians entertain outsiders in their homes. A direct and conscious reciprocity for Chinese New Year and Malay Hari Raya is operated on this day, and most Indian homes offer guests meals, sweetmeats and alcoholic as well as non-alcoholic drinks. The point is that the entertaining of guests is separated from the ritual activities in time and conceptual importance in such a way as to make the audience of the rites purely a domestic one, while the space is redefined later in the same morning to allow outsiders to enter.

Thus, the sharing of food at a rite within the domestic domain, as in the case of that described above, is defined contextually as an occasion when the audience tends, though not exclusively so, to be a set of co-religionists of equal caste status for the Ceylonese population. In combination with the greater tendency for this population to have puja rooms, the greater social closure of domestic ritual in general makes a significant marker of social distance for the rest of the Indian population. The theme of the distance and aloofness of the Ceylonese from

other Indians is a commonly repeated feature of the comments which such Indians make in reference to this wealthy and educated section of the population. Though individuals from the community are recognised by others to be more approachable and to treat other Indians with some respect, these are viewed as exceptions who sometimes have ulterior motives such as the promotion of their own political careers, or the financing of temple projects or similar events. The latter type of explanation as to why a particular Ceylonese is more prepared to interact with other Indians is seen frequently as a very insidious way of enhancing the status of the Ceylonese community through religious events at the cost of people who are otherwise despised. People who would make such accusations are also likely to cite the closure and distance from them of Ceylonese homes as evidence for the ways in which the 'big shots', as the Ceylonese are sometimes called, choose to interact with others only when it suits them, and entirely on their own terms. In important ways, it is this sort of contradictory aspect of interaction (which reflects both an infrastructural and ideological contradiction) which is fundamental to the reproduction of the fragmented identities encapsulated within the imposed label "Indian".

The infrastructural contradictions within the context of the social formation of Melaka as an outpost of Western capitalism I have dealt with in previous chapters. From the point of view of this discussion, the infrastructural contradictions are manifest in the differing class locations of the Ceylonese, as these are made apparent to other Indians in the form of a house and its location and ownership. Though the Ceylonese chose to be labelled Indian in the 1970 Census, their history, wealth, level of education and occupational locations all create and



reproduce divisions of interest between them and other Indians, which are at odds with any simple overarching, all-embracing identity. Moreover, beside the different interests inherent in their class location, Ceylonese ideological understanding of their position differs from that of other Indians in two main areas which again relate to class and caste. It is these that I deal with in the following pages, but it may help to summarize their primary features as their belief in education as international currency, and of themselves as religiously superior.

Analytically, the contradictions are both inter- and intrasystemic, therefore. The class contradictions of interest are internal to the class system of the Melaka economy as part of the world capitalist economy, though I have already pointed out the fact that not all classes are homogeneous in terms of shared objective interests in this concrete social formation. The ideological contradictions lie in the relations within the class system at the level of differing understandings of the world which are generated in part by experience of life in a particular class. However, they are also a product of the relations of a class system to the caste system of the homelands from which the Indian migrants are drawn.

The caste system in a jajmani sense of ritualised reciprocal obligations in the material world and in the sense of a ranked order of jātis has never existed in any sense as a replication of what existed in India and certainly not as the ideal type model which Dumont (1970) may be said to evolve in his representation. Nevertheless, attempts to preserve separate units of endogamous jātis and to generate locally understood ranking systems are apparent in the history of Indian migration. The

problem that one of the jātis attempting to establish themselves at the pinnacle of the ranked order was Ceylonese, and bore the name of a caste group whose status in mainland India was somewhat more equivocal than that which it held in Ceylon, established another source of conflict within the emergent local caste structure. The criteria of local ranking shared with those of India concerns with purity and pollution as a basis for status, but they incorporated a sense of 'traditional status' which was carried to Malaysia from the homelands. Thus, it is still possible to find people whose caste is of low status but who have become upwardly mobile in the class location which they occupy, and, vice versa, to find relatively poor people in wage labour factory work but who are Brahmins by birth. This results in interactional problems for Indians in this complex urban context where principles of social standing entail not only principles of caste and often contradictory occupational status as a manifestation of class position, but also the principles which order an individual's position in terms of ethnic criteria. These place him categorically in a political rank order which is in turn associated with ideological positions centred around religious distinctions. Thus, Indians of all classes and castes carry to a greater or lesser degree a conception of being Indian, which resides in membership of a category which is politically and economically ranked third in the social order of the nation.

Before I return the analysis to the more mundane aspects of the use and meaning of domestic space, I would like to comment briefly on the structural logic of the practices I have described as domestic ritual, from the point of view of the ways in which certain ideological features are reproduced, which conceptually unite Indian Hindus regardless of their class or caste affiliations.

Ancestors are called or invited to re-enter the hall of the family house in order to partake of the food offerings and thereby witness the fact that a caring and respectable family has done its duty. In a similar way, each Friday the deities are invited into the house to witness the family's devotions. In both cases, the invited are guests whose presence requires certain etiquette but also entails certain risks. Incorrect handling of 'guests' can threaten later unsought invasions which result in misfortune. At death, a family member leaves the heart of the family space and is at first literally laid out in the front hall, with all portraits reversed and shrines closed. Later his own image will be established in this space in the form of a photo-portrait. Death inverts the normal soul's living relationship to the domestic space and it moves from the realm of the intimate human family to the realm of the superhuman and 'guest' whose relations to the house are governed by distance and a quality of uncertainty and potential danger. The move is from a setting in which relationships are controlled because they are implicitly predictable, to an area in which they are predictable only inasmuch as they are strictly controlled through a pattern of explicit and rule-governed, or prescribed, practices.

In ancestor rites of the sort I have described, there is a restatement of the collective relations to domestic space of all past and present members of a domestic group, as well as a clear restatement of their divinely sanctioned interdependence. However, this is also a period when the highly controlled introduction of the outside world into the inner world of the home inverts a series of normal relationships; guests enter the family space, other women may be involved in the preparation of food in the cooking area, women take over the arrangements for setting

up the ritual goods in the front area of the house, while men serve food to their guests in the dining area.

In many ways, the ceremonies exhibit the liminal characteristics of a rite de passage, as Turner (1967) identifies them. Lying in both time and space, 'betwixt and between', they contain elements of *communitas* and anti-structure which Turner sees as necessary stages in the re-establishment of structure. No single transformation takes place here, however, but rather the re-enactment and confirmation of a prior transformation, that of family member to ancestor spirit. During this period, the meaning of the spatial context is altered and confronts the everyday meaning of domestic space, paradoxically ensuring the ultimate reproduction of the everyday meaning and thereby the stability of the domestic unit.

In the process of being altered in the formal context of ritual, the new meaning of the space at one level incorporates the everyday meaning, highlights some structural elements and offers moments of reflexivity. In the case of the Chitties, such reflexivity may be enhanced in the reaction of an audience composed of members of other ethnic groups more often than is the case for other Indians. All Indians are aware at some level though, of the way their rituals, domestic and public, are markers of distinctiveness. As one aspect of their religious practices, domestic rites are seen by many as fundamental to the maintenance of their identity at a conscious level, which is achieved in part in response to a perceived threat of long-term efforts to make Malaysia an Islamic nation.

Symbolic inversions and cultural reproductions

In many respects, what I have described as the form of the Indians' domestic space and the practices, mundane and ritual, which take place there, are an inversion of the form and practices which take place in the temple. The built form and the social and cultural meanings of the temple are the basis for the analysis of the following chapter. However, it is worth pointing out here that the most sanctified area of most Indian houses in Melaka lies just beyond the threshold and that, as the 'head room' where deities frequently reside, it is analogous to the inner sanctum of the temple which is conceptually the head of the symbolic body which provides the form of the classic South Indian temple. As with the sanctum, only those in a ritually acceptable state may enter this domain. At the same time, acceptance into this domain marks a symbolic recognition of equality or superiority to the status of the head of the house, at least ideally.

The centre of the house, like the main hall area of the temple area, is the protected space where 'members' normally operate in their imperfect states. It is also the area where one eats protected from outside forces of pollution and danger, partaking of a meal which symbolises the unity of all present and their identification with the 'owners' of the place. It is also the context in which subtle displays of hierarchy and status are manifested and worked out. To the rear of the house, as in the area to the front of the temple, lies an area subject to the effects of polluting agencies which are only marginally in the control of those with authority in that particular domain. Symbolically in the temple this is the area seen to represent the legs and feet of the divine, the most pollution-prone features of the anatomy normally exposed (see

Chapter 5 below). In the house, as the diagram shows (see diagram 2), it is an area where uncontrolled and uncontrollable nature dominates. On returning from a mortuary rite one enters through here, bathing before going into the house if at all possible. On returning from defecation in this area, one washes one's feet, before entering the house, removing one's shoes at the threshold. On entering the temple compound one should proceed to the tank to bathe, at least symbolically for the whole body, but with particular attention to the feet.

While suggesting these symbolic inversions, I am also suggesting that the domestic and the temple space are ordered according to fundamentally the same principles. These principles are not available to the consciousness of the ordinary Indian in Melaka under normal circumstances.

However, what I, following Giddens (1979), would point out is that it is the practice of normal social life which is the locus of 'unmotivated' reproduction of the principles which organise the system, and I would add, of the identity of those performing the practices.

Nonetheless, domestic contexts and practices, especially ritual practices in this case, do also provide the setting for reflection upon those practices. This occurs primarily in the face of an audience of guests and onlookers who are of different ethnic origins. Comments, responses to them in justification of practices, and observation of the practices of others are all means by which such reflection may be engendered.

Once begun, such reflective processes lead in many cases to consciousness of the markers of collective identities, both in relation to self and to others.

As indicated earlier in this discussion, one of the major ways in which practice creates, recreates and provides the context for reflection upon identity (in an unmotivated way mostly, though not necessarily) is in the use of language in the domestic domain. It is not possible on the basis of my present data to develop a full analysis of the relation between the use of Tamil and the use of Malay as more than markers, indeed, as the fundamental basis of identity of self and of group, but it is necessary to note that the temple and the home are the two major contexts in which Tamil is used for most Indians. The Melaka Chitties as Malay speakers speak of shame at the loss of their 'mother tongue' and make conscious efforts to maintain the use of Tamil and Sanskrit in their temples.

The style of Tamil spoken and the degree to which Indians are able to speak English are important markers of social standing. In many middle class Indian houses, especially those of the Ceylonese Tamils, a considerable amount of English is in regular usage. Making a decision to use English outside of the domestic context, rather than Malay or Tamil, is often a 'political' decision which I take up in a later chapter.

What I am suggesting by all this is that whatever conceptual unity within the Indian population that the analyst is able to find, or the interested politician may seek, the effort is thwarted by the subversive effect of social practice in the form of class relations, caste relations and ritual forms.

This is not to say that 'grey areas' do not exist. On the contrary, the relationship of the domestic space to the immediate space surrounding it

is ambivalent and fraught with qualities of the unknown and unpredictable. Many Indians present their perceptions of their social relations with Indians of other classes and castes, let alone their relations with members of other ethnic categories, in much the same manner. I shall show in the next chapter how the archetypal cultural space of the Hindu temple provides yet another context in which bounded space and its conceptual ordering relate in an ambiguous and complex way to its social environment.

Essentially, my argument may be summarized in terms of the interplay of cosmology and space in both contexts, which operates to produce the recurring patterns of both ideology and social action, in such a way as to give meaning to wider social processes of which they are a part. If I am correct in my assessment of the house as paradigmatic of social relations, and as the prime metaphor of those relations, I am also now suggesting that it stands as a paradigm for a cosmological order distinctive to Indians. More than this, the same proposition may hold for the process of defining sub-populations within the category "Indian".



## CHAPTER 5

### SACRED SPACE; CULTURAL SPACE:

#### HINDU TEMPLES AND THE REPRODUCTION OF IDENTITY

Just as the previous two chapters stood together as an overall discussion of domestic contexts, so this and the next chapter parallel them in a combined discussion of Hindu temples. Temples are taken first as heavily laden symbolic representations of a particular cosmological order. The form of a temple puja is then analysed as the practical context in which the meaning of sacred space, the Hindu cosmological order, Indians' shared cultural values, and, ultimately, Indian identities are created and recreated. Thus, the two chapters examine together the two dominant perspectives on the social meaning of temples; the one residing in structure, the other residing in practice. In fact, the separation is a false one, in the final analysis, and amounts to an heuristic device. Neither can be shown to exist in any sense without the other.

#### Temple form

Many of the temples which are prominent in Malaysia's urban settings were designed by Indian migrants. In some cases, specialist Indian builders and artists were engaged, and brought over from South India, to undertake the construction. Modeled in the grander temples of Kuala Lumpur and Penang is a long tradition of South Indian and Ceylonese Tamil temple building. However, many temples in Malaysia are not in the great tradition of the famous city temples of South India. No temple in

Melaka possesses the multi-tiered gate tower or gopuram which is so common in Tamil Nadu.<sup>1</sup> Lack of money was the most commonly given explanation for not having the preferred form of temple. Several of the temple management committees had long-term plans to improve their temples towards the agamic ideal.<sup>2</sup>

The oldest of the Hindu temples of Melaka is dedicated to Ganesh and it does conform to the ideal model in some degree. It alone is constructed as a series of concentric squares at the centre of which is the image of Vinayagar (Ganesha), the elephant-headed son of Siva. Most of the other temples in Melaka consist of a rectangular hall with a central square molasthānam, or shrine chamber, dedicated to the deity which gives the temple its name. They all also contain smaller shrine chambers in varying number and of varying size, which house images representing other forms of the divine, but not arranged in a concentric order as they are in the ideal model.

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<sup>1</sup>Despite the present absence of a temple in the classic style, Melaka does have temples which conform to the conceptual structure of the South Indian temple in its ideal form. Just as the divine body provides the model for the total Hindu universe (see Shulman 1980:41), a body which encompasses universal space in its heart, so the temple is modeled on the divine/human body lying on its back (Beck 1976 and Kramrisch 1976). The diagram (diagram 3) shows the usual way this is represented. The body is symbolically contained in the temple's architectural form. The ideal version of this consists of a series of concentric squares, the innermost of which contains the head of the divine figure, which is considered the controlling order of all divine, human and animate beings' bodies.

<sup>2</sup>Even those who were unaware of the Agamas as the final literary authority for temple architectural form and meaning had the practical examples of temples in Kuala Lumpur or South India as standards by which to judge theirs. They also possessed a degree of understanding of the specific symbolic import of aspects of the form through similar practical knowledge gained in performance and transmitted in oral tradition.

In the case of the Vinayagar temple mentioned above, taken in the horizontal plane and viewed through the door arches set in the inner walls of the temple, the effect of perspective produces a visual pin-pointing of the innermost chamber and the central deity residing there.<sup>1</sup> The inner walls provide a series of 'streets' (vithi) by means of which the devotee may circumambulate the inner chamber. At the same time, the walled areas provide a number of thresholds which have to be crossed in order to reach the most sanctified centre. Each thresh<sup>h</sup>old marks a step nearer the divine image and a step away from the mundane world of the outside. Each walled area is increasingly more sanctified and more enclosed against the invasion of a human or supernatural sort. At the very centre of the temple is the garbhagriha or 'womb room', which is accessible only to the priests who should ideally be pure Brahmans.

Several informants were able to articulate notions of the temple as a physical manifestation of the divine and understood that as such it should be as complete a representation as possible. This in itself was sufficient reason for wanting to build a proper, domed molasthānam to house the central black stone sculpture and simultaneously represent the upward-facing head of the divine image which the temple as a whole forms, through the form of the vimānam or decorated dome which rises above the chamber. Similarly most of these informants would point out the classic understanding of the gopuram or gate tower, the dominant structure of the preferred temple form, as the representation of the feet of the divine to which all Hindus should aspire. As such, the temple was

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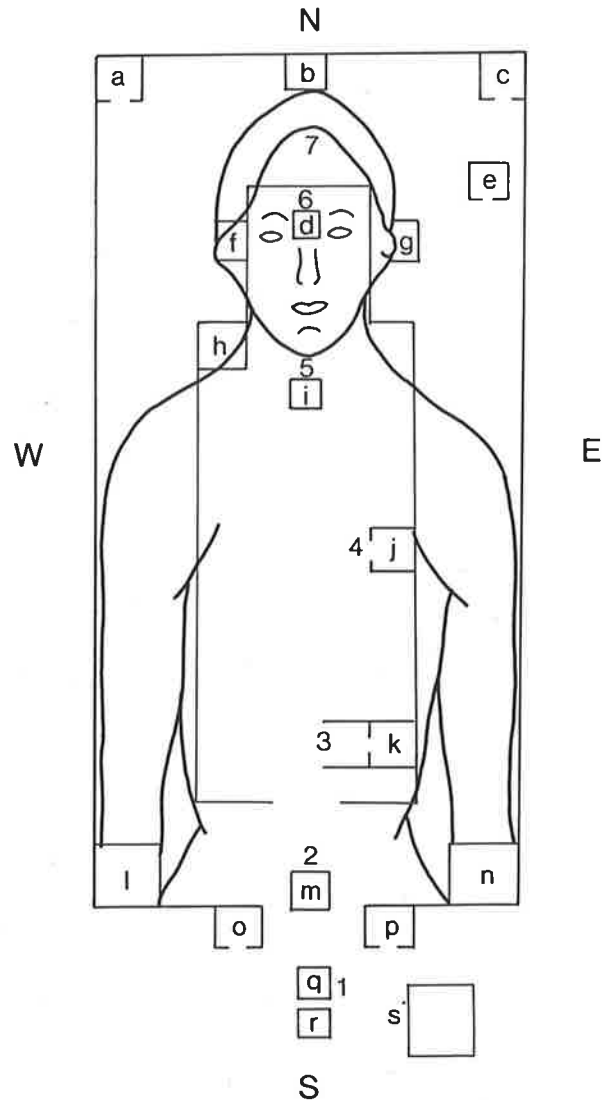
<sup>1</sup>In the ideal temple, which is orientated in space so that it faces the direction east, and its life-giving forces, the rays of the rising sun fall on the face of the divine image, reflecting its beneficence.

**Key to Major Shrines**

- a – Vināyakaṅ
- b – Aiyāṅar
- c – Arumukam
- d – Siva liṅkam
- e – Canisvarar
- f – Tashināmūrṭti
- g – Caṅṭikesvarar
- h – Uṭcavar
- i – Nānti
- j – Maṭarājar
- k – Ampikai
- l – Curiyaṅ
- m – Mānti
- n – Pairavar
- o – Vināyakaṅ
- p – Canmukar
- q – Sacrificial alter
- r – Flag pole
- s – Nine planets

**Key to Body Parts**

- 1 – Sacral plexus
- 2 – Prostate gland
- 3 – Navel
- 4 – Heart
- 5 – Larynx
- 6 – Pituitary gland
- 7 – Pineal gland



TEMPLE AS BODY  
Diagram 3.

(Following Beck (1976), from Kramrisch (1976)).

incomplete without one because devotees should be visually reminded of their ultimate source and their religious duties. They should be able to see the towering symbol of the lowest part of the divine presence which stands so far above them and which may be recognised from afar by the initiated and the devout. Particularly devout Ceylonese and South Indian Tamils will sometimes prostrate themselves at the entrance to a temple, especially at times of the annual festival, in a gesture of submission in which the highest part of one's own anatomy, the head, is placed at the feet of God.

The act of entering a temple and progressing towards the innermost chamber is to trace an ideal journey through life. As age and wisdom allow, an ideal man should journey towards a realisation of the divine and seek to approach his feet.<sup>1</sup> The journey towards the divine involves four stages of human development. Essential to the process of self-realisation is the lifting of the veil of illusion or maya. Curtains and doors in the temple symbolise this when they are opened in the course of a puja.

The temple literally embodies the nature of the divine; it focuses and contains the divine power in the figurative representation, which takes

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<sup>1</sup>This may not be achieved in one lifetime, however, and is usually a longer cosmic journey of many rebirths. Until one is reborn a Brahman, one is inherently too impure for it to be likely that one may realise God, under normal circumstances; at least, so say the Brahmans. If one is reborn a Brahman, then correct practices will enable one to enter the innermost chambers of the divine and truly realise the God which is in all of us. Thus the journey of the body through the temple is the journey of the soul on its way to self-realisation and an ultimate identification with the divine form which is at the centre of the universe and yet makes up its totality. Thresholds mark stages on this journey.

the form of a black stone image at the very centre of the innermost chamber. Around the centre, which is held by the supreme being, are concentrically ranged the lesser divine forms who are at the one time conceptually differentiated from the central deity while simultaneously being recognised ultimately as manifestations of the same divine force, given particular illusory form for the sake of aiding human understanding.<sup>1</sup>

In entering the temple, one is entering the divine body in order to better enter one's own body and there find the universal divine. Thus, the body itself becomes conceptually a temple of subtle thresholds which must be accorded its own due respect in order to permit the transcendence of its own limits.

So it is that the temple represents the qualities of the conceptually unchanging and universal truths in its very form. Yet, it also contains in its form the necessity for process in order to achieve those innermost truths. In undertaking the processual journey inwards, one progresses towards the still small centre whence all power emanates.

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<sup>1</sup>It is the path towards enlightenment then which is symbolised in the temple form. Just as one moves ever inwards in the temple, to reach the ultimate power residing there, so should one move ever inward from one's outer superficial body through the subtle bodies and the mind, towards the soul which controls one's destiny and which lies beyond the grasp of normal perception. What lies within is the ultimate unity of unillusioned time and space where impurity is banished and true power is to be found. This is the sole source of those positive forces which in turn are real life: a state beyond normal life and free from re-birth. The ultimate goal is to ascend from the realisation of the true nature of the divine which is at the centre of all creation, to a region of freedom from life as humans know it, that is, moksha. This passage is symbolised in the notion of the power of the deity emanating from the image and up through the small hole in the dome (vimānam) which is directly above it, and which leads symbolically to nothing and yet everything.

Yet, this power personified in its particular form and contained in the black stone image is also conceptually everywhere and therefore inherently beyond containment. Hindus with knowledge of the Hindu literature frequently state that the temple is really a "kindergarten" where the images and surroundings are designed to focus one's attention and allow contemplation. Like a child, the devotee needs to be 'tricked' into centering his mind before he may achieve understanding. Once focused, the understanding mind transcends its surroundings and the individual subject is united with the divine object of its contemplation when realisation comes. For such people, the temple's physical and symbolic forms become almost mnemonic devices, aids in guiding the devotee ever towards the truth even as he unselfconsciously performs the prescribed rituals.

At the highest level of exegetical interpretation then, Melaka Hindus may apparently contradict themselves and other Hindus and deny that the temple is in any special way unique in its relation to the divine. Such interpreters come close to denying the very sacredness of this space by identifying it with the universal space where the divine is all-pervasive. At this level, all space becomes sacred and it is only illusion (maya) which prevents the ignorant from realising this.

Thus, such contradictions are common in exegesis, but they also inhere in the structural oppositions within the religious system which are marked by the dedication of the temples of Melaka to so many different forms of deity.

The temple form also represents the controlled moral order or dharma as a set of hierarchically arranged conceptualisations about the 'true' nature of the universe. The temple entails a progression from petty outer forms and concerns which are the province of humans and lesser manifestations of the divine, towards an increasingly encompassing form of divinity which is correspondingly more difficult to approach and realise. Enlightenment then becomes the highest moral state because it lies beyond the moral order of living things. Puja practice, as we shall see, points to the conclusion that the all-encompassing divine transcends even form itself.

In Melaka, the all-encompassing aspect of the supreme being is given different specific forms in different temples. As Siva he is represented in only one small temple as the central deity, by a crude stone lingam. In other temples his son Ganesh or second son Subramaniam stand in his stead. The latter is represented as a warrior carved in the powerful black stone mentioned earlier. Conceptually, the power of Subramaniam is focused in the Ceylonese-dominated temple, for example, through the installation ritual in which the image is placed over a copper plate inscribed with a powerful yantra. Yet, the same deity is also the central image in the South Indian-dominated temple at Batu Berendam, and in the Chettiar temple at Sannyasi Malai. Thus, the power of a given form may be captured in several locations in the town and used as a symbolic basis of differentiation for populations of Hindus.

The political statement entailed in the creation of a temple housing the same form of the divine as a temple which already exists is part of a wider discourse about superiority and equivalence. A community seeks to



assert its equivalence or superiority through its choice of a 'high' form of the divine as its central image. Superiority may also be claimed in the attempt to create the built form of the temple as one which conforms more closely to an ideal form derived from the Agamas than that of a competing group. Temple form and choice of deity do more than reflect the continuing concern with notions of superiority and equivalence. They also provide the main locus in which the ideological basis of this concern is embodied. Temples, therefore, are crucial to the recreation of the divisions and underlying ideology within the Indian population. In making temples the major symbolic statement of one group's equivalence to another, Indians continually reassert the importance of the discourse about social status in their lives. This reassertion of a particular ideological form, made apparent in temple proliferation, is one of the major distinguishing features of the Indian population as a whole.

As a last comment on the form of the temple per se, I would just point out that all temples, even those which conform only minimally to the ideal architectural form, contain in them the twin aspects of the immanent and the transcendent God. The deity at the centre of the temple is not just the representation of divine power, it is that power focused and concentrated by correct ritual performance. In order to ensure that the power is retained, ritual is required regularly. It is also required regularly in order to contain the power as much as retain it. It is not merely a question of power 'escaping' or dissipating, but also one of how to ensure that it is directed positively. A neglected deity is a potent and dangerous entity which may seek out those who have ceased to perform their duty; it will exact vengeance.

Temple deities and cosmology

I shall now proceed to examine the relationships of congregations to their temples by considering the nature and structure of the pantheon as it appears in worship in Melaka.

Classification of Melaka's Hindu temple deities could be approached from several perspectives through the application of various criteria. An attempt will be made here to consider the problem in terms of structural relationships within local Hindu cosmology, the functional differentiations applied by local Hindus, and the way in which particular deities relate to particular, identifiable social groups and categories.

The fact that the present Hindu temples<sup>1</sup> in Melaka are those built to serve populations essentially from South India and Ceylon means that there exists a pattern in which particular deities appearing in Melaka are those which occur in the 'homelands'. However, the existence of a 'tradition' external to Melaka does not render unproblematic the patterns of worship within Melaka. Nor should we assume that the same factors are necessarily at work in both contexts. Nonetheless, Hinduism in Melaka did not appear 'ex vacuo' and the presence of a strong religious 'hinterland' has to be taken into account in considering both the establishment and the worship of specific forms of the divine.

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<sup>1</sup>In March 1978 there was a partially completed Hindu temple being constructed in Melaka by the Gujerati community of Malaysia which is well represented in Melaka. Most worship by Gujeratis took place at a shrine in a community leader's house. There is also an important Sikh temple in Melaka.

Two striking facts emerge in relation to Melaka's temples immediately one examines the deities they house. Paradoxically, there is at once a large number of shrines dedicated to a large number of gods, and yet the dominant temples are very limited in the primary deities they house. As the table shows, the six (or eight) temples served by full-time priests, that is, the larger temples in Melaka, are primarily for worship of Subramaniam (three), Ganeshan (two) and Māriamman (with Siva and Angalamman).

Of the nine temples and shrines not normally served by members of a priestly caste, it will be noted that two active temples are dedicated to Māriamman and two, also active, to Kāliamman. In the local pantheon, both Māriamman and Kāliamman are familiar female forms of the divine and are classified as wives of Siva, that is, forms of Sakti or Devi. Ganeshan and Subramaniam are usually said to be, respectively, the elder and second son of Siva and Parvati. Thus, in the prime deities of temples in Melaka, a cosmology dominantly Saivite in conception is clearly reflected. Moreover, the deities are largely subsumed within one nuclear family structure in myths of origin.

As with many South Indians, local Hindus conceive of Siva as being the name, or one of the names, of the supreme divine force, but also as a deity with a personality, history and set of relationships. He is an ascetic, yogic figure usually removed from the concerns of the world, human or divine. Though the ultimate power, his power is normally latent and vested in his female aspect/companion Sakti, also known as Devi, Parvati, Kāli, etc. Sakti is seen here, as elsewhere, as divine

Melaka's temples and their deities

<u>Temple</u>	<u>Priest</u>	<u>Major deity</u>	<u>Other deities</u>	<u>Controllers</u>
Sri Poyatha Vinaayagar Moorthi	full-time Brahman (Gurukkal)	Ganesha	Siva, Māriamman, Subramaniam, etc.	Nattukottai Chettiars
(Hospital) Sri Pulleyar Alayam	full-time Pandaram	Ganesha	Attendants only	Hospital Hindus
(Cheng) Sannyasi Malai	full-time Pandaram x2	Subramaniam	Ganesha	Nattukottai Chettiars
Sri Subramaniam Devasthanam	full-time Pandaram	Subramaniam	Ganesha	South Indian Tamils
Sri Subramaniam/ Draupathi Amman	full-time Brahman	Subramaniam/ Draupathi	Ganesha, Krishna, Kamachi, etc.	Ceylon Tamils
Sri Nuthu Māriamman Kovil	full-time Pandaram	Māriamman	Ganesha	Melaka Chitties
Sri Kalaisanathar Kovil	full-time Pandaram	Siva	Ganesha, Subramaniam, Rama (Pic)	Melaka Chitties
Sri Parameswara Angalamman Kovil	full-time Pandaram	Angalamman	Ganesha, various unknown	Melaka Chitties
Sri Māriamman/ Muniswaran Kovil	resident Pusari	Māriamman	Ganesha, Muniswaran, Kali, etc.	South Indian Tamils
Sri Māriamman	pari-time Pusari	Māriamman	Ganesha	Municipal workers
Sri Kāliamman Kovil	part-time Pusari	Kāli	various pictures	South Indian Tamils
Sri Kāliamman Kovil	Pandaram† annually	Kāli	Ganesha	Melaka Chitties
*Kattaiamman Kovil	Pandaram† annually	Kattaiamman	none	Melaka Chitties
*Lingadariamman (né né) Kovil	Pandaram† annually	Lingadari	none	Melaka Chitties
*Dharma Raja Kovil	Pandaram† annually	Dharma Raja	uncertain	Melaka Chitties
*Amman Kovil	Pandaram† annually	Amman	uncertain	Melaka Chitties
*Ayenar Kovil	Pandaram† annually	Ayenar	Ganesha	Melaka Chitties

† Also a part-time pusari runs pujas for young men on an irregular basis.

\* Largely dilapidated shrines with one major annual puja in Ade month.

power or energy given form.<sup>1</sup> The form depends on the aspect of divine power dominating, which in turn depends on the relationship of an individual or group to the divine. Such, of course, is the wisdom of those Indians educated and articulate in Hinduism. Their education is achieved both through oral tradition and from the reading of popular books and pamphlets written both in Tamil and English.<sup>2</sup> Many of these are Indian in origin, though a few are produced in Kuala Lumpur by such organisations as the Divine Life Society, or the Hindu Sangam. As one might expect, it is the highly literate middle class Indians in Melaka who are best able to express the nature of the divine, but many less literate Indians are able to recount at least an approximate version of the above explanation and those to follow.

It is not in Siva himself then that the divine is most readily approachable. Rather, one must look to other forms for both understanding and help. Many local Hindus repeat the familiar formula cited above that all gods are the same but the divine can take many forms. They add that each man has a form to which he is best able to relate, his chosen god or *Ishta Deva*, and that it is not important which form one worships. Beside this generalised sense of an appropriate god for individual personalities, there is also the specific appropriateness of the attributes of particular forms of the divine. This becomes relevant when one is seeking explanations and cures for misfortunes.

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<sup>1</sup>See Walker (1968), Daniélou (1964), Monier Williams et al. (1974[1883]) for this view of Sakti.

<sup>2</sup>There is a small number of people very learned in Hinduism in Melaka. Of these, most are highly literate both in Tamil and English.

In speaking of Māriamman, Dumont (1959:79) advocates that she should be interpreted as 'Smallpox Lady' as her function is to ward off smallpox from the village. He goes on, "While it is true that the village places itself under the protection of such a Lady, it does not follow that it honours her as a (or its) Mother". In the Melaka Chitty kampong or village, Māriamman is recognised as being the goddess related to smallpox, though primarily as the goddess able to cure smallpox and other diseases which manifest themselves as skin eruptions. However, she is also frequently referred to in English as 'Mother' and in Malay as 'Ma', and occasionally linked with Mary, as the mother of God. In turn, it is frequently said that Siva is our father and Māri our mother. Like all mothers, it is she who has most contact with the children and she who will 'scold' us if we do bad things. Conversely, it is she who rewards those who pray to her regularly and live a good life.

Māriamman stands in relation to the Melaka Chitty kampong must as she stands in relation to South Indian villages, as the prime deity, potentially both benevolent and malevolent, who forms the articulating node of public ritual activity. However, it is a mistake to consider Māriamman in either context as an aspect of some localised 'little tradition' divorced from Brahmanic Hinduism. As was stated above, Māriamman is conceived of as a form of the wife of Siva and therefore represents at one level, Sakti. Nonetheless, operationally, in many situations, Māriamman worship for the Melaka Chitties is what Holström calls 'group religion', which "consists of the cults of particular closed groups, whether they are castes, families, or villages, and is largely concerned with the group's protection, welfare, and interests" (1971:29). This is seen in the organisation of the temple and its annual festival.

The reduplication of Māriamman temples in Melaka marks the divisions within the local Hindu population, in particular of the working class section of the population. Māriamman is portrayed as an imposing figure who rides a lion and has great power but she is also approachable and helpful to her devotees. In Melaka, she is opposed to Kāli, the fierce and highly dangerous manifestation of Siva's wife who is considered a much more direct and likely threat to the safety and well-being of Hindus. In the Melaka Chitty-owned temple, an image of Kāli sits in the front hall of the temple, always draped in the black saris offered her by the mothers who promised to give her just such a present if their confinements went well. She has a very fierce expression with prominent extended canine teeth and is hunched forward as if angrily demanding an explanation from a miscreant devotee. There is none of the strong serenity of the Māriamman image with its beckoning hand and hand of reassurance.

Though red was a frequent colour in which to dress the images of Māriamman, it was not exclusively so, and no informant claimed it should be so. Rather, it was thought appropriate that she should be dressed in any fine, rich colour such as silky golds, deep blues and greens. Significantly, she was never dressed in black, Kāli's colour, or white, the colour of a widow. Māri was considered to be too alive, and too much an honoured wife and mother, to be adorned in anything but the best that one could desire for one's own wife or mother.

Most images of the main temple deity in Melaka, and many of the subsidiary temple deities have a small statue of their vehicle (vahanam) facing the main image. None of the Māriamman temples has the lion which is

known to be her vahanam, though the dome (vimānam) of the Chitty shrine has sculptures which depict lions attending Māriamman. An association which more than ever links her to Sakti or Devi, the wife of Siva.

Though intellectualised in terms of being a manifestation of a universal Hindu principle, the relationship of devotees to Māriamman is a very personal one and deals largely with matters affecting individual and collective destinies. As a deity who is directly approachable and amenable to aid devotees, and with her role as protectress of the community which was familiar to most migrant South Indians who came from small villages, it is perhaps not surprising to find Māriamman at the centre of two major collections of Hindu houses and as the deity worshipped at the site which stands beside another former set of Hindu houses. In each case, the people living near the shrines, who form the main congregation, are working class Hindus, many at least formerly very poor, and frequently with problems of failing health. It is in her intervention in the mundane aspects of life that Māriamman is dominant. It is clear that her major function is to help those who feel that they have least control over their destinies to achieve a minimal degree of influence, if not more.

The sentiment that only God will help the poor is not an uncommon one expressed by working class Hindus. The worship of Māriamman at the various temples normally serves to mark working class (usually lower caste) Hindus from the better-off, but it also marks the felt social differences between sections of the working class population, particularly the recent Tamil-speaking labourers and the Malay-speaking Melaka Chitties. At the same time, the principle of integration is not violated



since Māriamman can easily be assimilated within an overarching philosophical tradition. Thus, at times of major festivals, other Hindus are able to suborn differences and worship at the Melaka Chitty shrine.

Whitehead claimed (1921:17) of village deities, amongst whom he included Māriamman, that they "have no relation to the universe. They symbolise only the facts of village life" (original emphasis). Whether this is, or ever was true for South India, I very much doubt. What is certain is that in Melaka, Māriamman can situationally be related to universal forces, what Whitehead called 'great world forces', in a multitude of ways. The elimination of animal sacrifice in the precincts of the Chitty Māriamman temple is one way in which she has emphatically been identified with the sanskritic/brahmanic pantheon. This is an aspect which Chitties stress at the festival time when other Hindus are worshipping in large numbers at their temple. In attempting to legitimate their own worship in this way, they are also seeking to legitimate and extend their own self-evaluation as good and orthodox Hindus. The acceptance by others of this Māriamman as a form of the universal Sakti in no way impairs the functional application of Māriamman's power away from contemplation of the infinite towards the mundane, where the situation demands it.

In a similar, and perhaps even more vivid way, Kāli, like Māriamman, is both a form of the divine principle, the universal force, and a highly individualised personality with whom Hindus are able to relate directly. Kāli is always presented as awesome and terrifying. She is highly volatile and subject to rage. She seeks bloody sacrifice, even if she does not always do so publicly these days. Her intervention is almost

always negative and she must be placated or she may cause many and horrible misfortunes. It is dangerous to keep her shrine in one's house as a minor indiscretion may provoke fearful consequences. Conversely, her power is great if it can be put to use by the devotee.

At one analytical level, Kāli is identified by many as the Sakti equivalent of Siva's destructive aspect, seen as necessary in the eternal cycle of evolution and karma. Thus, the negative becomes ultimately positive, since it is through the destruction of the past that the path to self-realisation and release from the cycle of rebirths (moksha) may be opened. As we have seen, temple worship and temple deities are said to be the 'kindergarten' stage of worship which provides the first focus for contemplation of the infinite. The many forms the deity takes are nothing but aids, so the intellectualist argument runs, which later lead us out of the illusion (maya), away from a concern with observable or material forms and towards an understanding of the transcendent nature of the formless principle, which should be every Hindu's ultimate aim. In the meantime, we are able to comprehend only small parts of the puzzle and only in our own terms. We have advanced when we can worship the Siva Lingam, representative of the formless and generative Siva, and even further when the jyothir flame is sufficient symbol for our worship.

In Melaka then, it is not the form of the deity per se which determines necessarily the collective evaluation of the devotee, but rather, the devotee's attitudes and practices towards the deity. In the eclectic version of Hinduism put forward by many middle class Hindus, any form of the divine is acceptable as a focus of worship and contemplation of the ultimately single universal force, providing it is approached in the correct manner.

It is in the manner of worship, for example, in the use of animal sacrifice, that demonstration is made of one's level of understanding. The belief in the need for blood in the worship of Mahakāli is, to many middle class (largely higher caste) Hindus, sufficient evidence to show that one is at a very low level in Hinduism and will require many re-births before escaping the cycle. That many who sacrifice in this way are low class and low caste is supporting evidence for their position in the social hierarchy has been determined by their previous conduct and their accumulated karma.

While I would agree in good measure with what Monier Williams said when, in discussing Saktism, he noted, "The worshipper is inclined to turn with greater devotion to the goddess than to the god when he supplicates any powerful intervention on his own behalf in circumstances of unusual exigency or peril" (1974:181 [original 1883]), I should remark that many modern urban Hindus will themselves state that seeking direct reward in this way is another false way of relating to God, another aspect of maya. I suggest, therefore, that the power of many of these deities now lies in their very ambiguity and ability to be situationally defined in ways which allow a maximum number of devotees to appear to be worshipping the same deity.

The many forms of the divine in Melaka can all be reconciled with a view which indicates the educative necessity of personifying the paradoxical and, at times, contradictory elements of the supreme universal force. At the same time, it is recognised that such personifications may become 'real' to individuals and that great devotion to a particular form of the divine is an alternative path towards self-realisation. This

'bhakti' notion has been well covered by other scholars (see Singer 1972, for example), and it may be said that, in Melaka, the path of devotion (bhakti) is seen by many as a growing part of Hinduism, even amongst literate, middle class Hindus. There are trends towards more examples of what Holström, following Dumont, calls 'religions of choice', the often recent development from traditional bhakti, which put emphasis on personal responsibility and egalitarian values and which are associated with the teachings of a renouncer guru. As Holström points out, the participation in a religion of choice is itself no bar to continued participation in Brahmanic or group patterns of worship and there is considerable overlap and merging between the categories.

In the context of Melaka, Māriamman and Kāli are worshipped at various times with an emphasis on pan-Hindu, Brahmanic values, or as protectresses of an identified group for whom there is a collective responsibility to worship, or as a personal guide and mentor to an individual devotee. This capacity is inherent in all the temple deities, but in many to a lesser degree than to Amman, or mother, in her various forms. A closeness is possible in the relationship with Amman, which is rarely attainable in other divine/human relationships.

#### GANESHA

Ganesha is the most commonly used name in Melaka for the elephant-headed son (usually thought of as the elder son) of Siva and Parvati. The two temples dedicated to this deity officially employ other names, however, The larger of the two, the Sri Poyatha Vinayagar Moorthi Temple in Jalan Tukang Emas (Goldsmith Street), is the oldest Hindu temple in Melaka which is still in use. Although the central and most major shrine

belongs to Ganesha, this temple also has important shrines to Siva, Subramaniam, Minakshi and Māriamman as well as lesser shrines to Rama and Sita, the nine planets (Navagraham) and attendant deities. The smaller temple dedicated to Ganesha as Sri Pulleyar is a much simpler and more recent temple in the grounds of the General Hospital. It has only one major shrine with its single stone image.

As the first son of Siva, Ganesha is obviously fully incorporated with South Indian Saivism and the Brahmanical tradition. Myths known in Melaka emphasise Ganesha's loyalty to his parents, his role in transcribing the Hindu religious masterpiece, the Mahabharata, from the sage Vyasa, and his role as the remover of all obstacles. Ganesha is the deity to whom all Hindus should pray first in puja or before undertaking any important task. He is wise and compassionate, never forgets, but often forgives.

Again, as with the forms of the wives of Siva, Ganesha is seen as exercising power on Siva's behalf. His power lies in the area of malevolent spirits and demons which he controls, if propitiated, that all ceremonies and even one's life might proceed as they should. To this extent, Ganesha worship is usually generalised in Melaka, most devotees seeking insurance against potential interference, rather than the redressing of specific ills.

Several authors (for example, Daniélou 1964 and Nityachaitanya n.d.) speak of Ganesha as a paramount symbol of the unity of apparently opposite principles: Northern and Southern versions of Hinduism, the microcosm and the macrocosm, the divine and the human. Though this

explanation was not offered by my Melaka informants, several noted the similarity between the profile of the deity and the formation of the Tamil **ஓம்** (Ōm or Aum) which is considered the most fundamental and universal sound and which is also the prime mantra of Ganesha.

The notions of unity and the universal principles are apt in that both the Ganesha temples were founded to serve multi-caste populations. The Sri Poyatha Vinayagar Moorthi temple was to serve the kampong kling community of 1781, led by Nainu Chettu, but almost certainly consisting of eight or nine different castes. It has more recently been given over to the management of the Nattukottai Chettiar community, though it forms the starting point of important phases of the Melaka Chitty-run Māriamman festival. It is this latter community which still owns the temple. The hospital Ganesha temple, by contrast, is run and supported by hospital workers and others, from all levels of class and caste.

Ganesha seems particularly well suited, then, to a complex urban pattern of worship for a generalised body of devotees. Relatively few Hindus in Melaka said in interviews that Ganesha was their chosen deity (ishta deva), though a great number followed the practice of praying first to Ganesha, even in their own home shrines. The success which Ganesha offers is not normally particularised in the way it is for other deities, but is highly relevant to an environment which is deemed by most Indians to be, at least potentially, very hazardous in a multitude of ill-defined ways.

In Holmström's terms, worship of Ganesha is primarily Brahmanic as it is not in Melaka mainly associated with any particular group, though it may

help define Hindus of a particular category, e.g. Chettiars or hospital workers, as 'good' Hindus. Though not exclusive, Ganesha worship is neither a focus of significant bhakti cults nor of ecstatic individual worship which might in any way challenge the fundamental hierarchical tenets of a Brahmanical perspective of the Hindu world. The unity of Ganesha lies in the integration of the divine and the human, the developed intellect and the well-fed body, the animal and the brahman, nature and culture, but it is a hierarchical unity with emphasis on balance and stability rather than on egalitarianism and radical challenge to a social order based on caste. Ganesha, or Ganapati, to give him another of his well-known names, is the 'lord of hosts' or 'lord of categories', as Daniélou (1964:291) would prefer. It is his mythological task to control, to maintain order, to ensure that all elements of the divine system remain in their proper relationships.

Ganesha's mythical vehicle is a mouse or rat (eli), the smallest of land animals. The symbolic import of the largest land animal being able to ride the smallest is said to lie in the demonstration of divine power. Others remark that it shows how all creatures, the great and the small, are the same in the eyes of God. Amongst many Hindus there is a reluctance to kill rats because of their association with Ganesha.<sup>1</sup>

#### SUBRAMANIAM

Normally considered the second son of Siva, Subramaniam is chiefly referred to in Melaka as a powerful warrior in the cause of good

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce Kapferer (personal communication) also points out the latent (for Melaka) opposition between the domestic rat and the supernatural elephant as a marker of the encompassing of the contradictory by the divine.

overcoming evil. An extremely popular deity in South India, he is also familiarly known as Murugan and in his boy form as Kumara. He is always depicted carrying his vēl or spear which many see as symbolic of his power, and fewer say to be symbolic of truth or wisdom which penetrate like a brilliant light into the realms of darkness, ignorance and illusion (maya). Where Ganesha is still, contemplative and fat, Subramaniam is slim, youthful, vital and ever-ready to rush into battle.

As a more passionate and active fighter for good than his elder brother, Subramaniam is a powerful figure to have on one's side. One of the many myths surrounding him tells how Siva created him to be the vanquisher of the demon hordes at the supplication of the devas who were losing the celestial battle. Moreover, Subramaniam is popularly thought to have two wives, Valli and Devasena, who are described as low and high caste, dark- and light-skinned, and, sometimes, as representing the southern Dravidian tradition and the Brahmanic northern tradition, respectively.

In Melaka, Subramaniam is the single most popular form of the divine, in terms of the number of regular worshippers before his image. Three important temples are dedicated to him and each has a specific and identifiable category of Indians at its congregational core, as was made apparent in the previous section on Melaka's temples.

Whereas Māriamman and Kāliamman are associated with the Brahmanic pantheon as forms of Siva's wife, Ganesha and Subramaniam are always represented as the sons of Siva. As such, they have roles assigned them by Siva, but are not credited with highly specific problem-solving roles by local Hindus in the way Māriamman cures skin complaints and Kāli can



choose to protect children and mothers in the birth process. However, like both Māri and Kāli, Subramaniam may choose to solve any problem brought to him by a faithful and penitent devotee. Thus, many Hindus carry the ritual burden or kavadi at Subramaniam's annual festival of Thaipusam, in the hope that he will aid them to overcome personal difficulties. In this respect he is closer to the mother goddesses than the more ascetic Siva and even Ganesha who are rarely courted in this fashion.

As the handsome son of Siva, Subramaniam is said to be worshipped by women who wish to bear handsome sons themselves, but also sons who are brave, virtuous and devout. A very attractive figure, Subramaniam is thought to epitomise all that a young Tamil man should be. His powers and his attributes combined with his closeness to Siva, with whom he shares many characteristics, serve to make Subramaniam a deity with whom Hindus can relate at all levels. Especially dear to Nattukottai Chettiars, who run temples dedicated to him throughout Malaysia and Singapore, Subramaniam is the god whose worship stands as the most typically South Indian, or rather Tamilian, and it is he who forms the centre of three sets of people who are in a sense competitors for the headship of the Hindu population in Melaka, the wealthy Chettiars, the wealthy and prestigious Ceylon Tamils, and the newly emerging non-Chettiar South Indian elite.

Before every status of Subramaniam stands an image of his vahanam or vehicle, the peacock (mayil). Locally, the mayil is said to symbolise the notion of beautiful illusion (the eyes of the peacock's tail) being overcome by truth and wisdom (Subramaniam). Also, the peacock is said to be able to kill snakes, symbols of sexuality and falseness, and is therefore deemed appropriate to carry the conqueror of evil.

A special day in each month is set aside for a special puja to Subramaniam, when the star associated with him is in its ascendancy. These Kartigai pujas are celebrated by two temples, the Cheng Chettiar temple and the Batu Berendam South Indian Tamil temple. The third temple, that run by the Ceylonese, celebrates the last Friday of each Tamil month with a special puja, for Subramaniam and the other deities housed in the double-halled building. Thus Subramaniam figures in the most regular days of special worship throughout Melaka.

#### SIVA

Siva himself, though the ultimate focus of the South Indian Hindu tradition, and the recognised 'father' of the gods, receives little in the way of regular worship in Melaka. Pujas are performed before his two shrines daily, but by paid priests and with little participation by active devotees. Very few Melaka Hindus take him as their chosen god as he is felt to be too yogic and remote for most to comprehend and approach. However, a recent trend has been to form a kind of bhakti movement around Siva, following the trip of a Swami Ji from India.

The new surge of active interest in Siva centres on a group formation known as the Siva Family, who meet early on a Sunday morning in a devotee's house to chant the Siva mantra 'Om Nama Sivaya' and the 'Triambagam' mantra, to meditate for a short while, and sing a few bhajans. The guru emphasised that the taking of coffee together afterwards and the joint worship should all be part of a unity of devotion. Shortly before I left the field, a youth group has been formed at which a similar procedure was adopted, but this time using a Monday evening and the Siva temple belonging to the Melaka Chitties.

Though nominally open to all, this movement was largely the result of a joint effort on the part of a group of middle class friends and acquaintances who included Brahmans and other high and middle ranking castes.

The one time of general worship for Siva occurs on Sivarātri, his annual festival. On this occasion, the Melaka Chitties recruit an outside group to run the celebrations and again, as I observed it, it was primarily a middle class affair.

Seen at one level, the mythical family of gods at the core of Hindu worship in Melaka forms a hierarchy of complementary oppositions. The principles involved in the worship of Siva, Sakti, Ganesha and Subramaniam, are descending grades of understanding of the universal force equated by some with the paramatman<sup>1</sup>. Particular forms of Sakti, such as Kāli, and the lesser gods like Angalamman seem normally to rank lower than the sons of Siva. What is certain, for almost all Hindus, is that there is a clear hierarchy which appertains to the mode of worship of the deities. That is to say that there exists a dominant set of values, articulated by literate middle class Hindus, which forms an orthodoxy and the basis for an orthopraxy, to use Harper's distinction, which working class Hindus are aware of, and aware that they deviate from on occasions (see the discussion of the sacrifice of a goat below).

Of the remaining primary deities shown in the table, two are males with equivocal status. Muniswaran is recognised as a divine attendant to Māriamman, but in his particular temple is accorded almost equality with

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<sup>1</sup>The paramatman is one term used to convey the supreme source of being.

her. The pusari is often possessed by Muniswaran, who is called 'grandfather' (tātā) by many of the regular devotees. He can be very fierce and demands sacrifice of animals.<sup>1</sup>

Ayenar, for whom a semi-ruined shrine exists in the fields behind the Melaka Chitty kampong, is described as the watchman god, but is generally accorded few specific attributes. As with the deities of the other ruined shrines dotted around this area, Ayenar has no regular worshippers other than at the annual large puja in the month of Adi. A few older members of the Chitty community say that these shrines were originally built by each of the castes which went to make up the original Hindus known as Melaka- or Straits-born. They vary as to which they believe to have belonged to which caste, but all are accepted as the general responsibility of the community as a whole today. None of these deities is thought of in the personalised and specifically attributional way that Māriamman and Kāli are thought of.

An anomaly, in one sense, is the shrine to Draupathi which makes up the second half of the double temple run by the Ceylonese. There is no image of the deity other than a simple stone. Beside it now, however, is a large black stone image of Kamāchi, the deity of the South. Both are covered with ornate cases of silver at the time of special pujas, and while Draupathi is physically represented at this time in the form of the silver case, Kamāchi dominates. Draupathi is, of course, the wife of Arjuna and his four brothers in the epic Mahabharata. This temple also has a shrine to Krishna and a plaque for Hanuman and,

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<sup>1</sup>See Aveling (1978) for further discussion.

therefore, shows an affinity with the Northern Vaishnavite tradition not evident in most of the other temples in Melaka.

Draupathi is the centre of the annual Timithi (firewalking) ceremony discussed below in Chapter 7. Kamāchi is treated by most Ceylonese as a form of Sakti but is also occasionally attributed with the specific power to help with marital and sexual problems, especially by South Indian Tamils. In its eclectic approach to the divine, this temple is itself symbolic of the contemporary urban tendency towards a universalistic approach to Hinduism amongst the educated middle class.

#### Social reproduction and cultural reproduction

The foregoing account of the structure of the Hindu pantheon in Melaka and of the form of the temple is important to my discussion insofar as I conceive the Hindu religious system to be central to the question of how ethnic identity is produced, reproduced and transformed in Malaysia. However, it is also important in that symbolic systems need to be accounted for in themselves, as a prerequisite to an understanding of where they are located in the process of social reproduction as a whole. Nevertheless, I would wish to emphasise that the description of the symbolic and relational basis of Indian religion is not conceived as in any sense sufficient. Practice in relation to structuring properties (rather than static structures alone) in religion, as in other areas of social life, is my central concern. Here, I am considering the body of class- and caste-differentiated knowledge about the religious system and the way this relates to the physical and social reproduction of temples and deities. This is done specifically as a precursor to developing an understanding of the relationship of religion to identity and class

formation through a discussion of religious practices, which is the subject of the following chapter.

Thus, I am not taking a position in which culture is given a complete autonomy even in the realm of the reproduction of ethnic identity, though I am concerned to examine briefly the extent to which cultural transformations appear in the context of overseas Indian populations. Rather, the position adopted here is one in which the relation of cultural forms and social processes is rendered a central problematic. So, for example, I will show how Hinduism in this context is, by virtue of its location in a new social formation, a set of relations which take on different, if overlapping sets of meanings to that which they would have in India.

I have already suggested that historically, and continually, a process of reduplication appears in the creation of contexts for religious practices. This reduplication occurs in the sense that sets of worshippers, or 'congregations', within the Hindu population arrive at a point when they are numerically or financially strong enough to appropriate a temple or to build a separate one of their own. The Nattukottai Chettiars manage a temple close to their core space, a temple owned by the Melaka Chitties whose own numerical and financial situation made maintenance of the temple difficult. The Chettiars also bought land around a sanctified site at the edge of town and built their own temple dedicated to the divine form which is particularly important to this caste, Subramaniam. A temple in the centre of the urban area dedicated to the elder brother, Ganesha, and one at the edge dedicated to the younger brother mark the wealth of this community; but they also mark the independence of the

community and its preservation of a distinctive identity reproduced in part by caste exclusiveness. Once established, this temple control provides in itself the spatial and social context for the reproduction of the group's identity through control of the practices and personnel admitted there. For most purposes, the Chettiars remain the dominant congregation present for worship.

In a similar fashion, the history of the Subramanian/Draupathi Amman temple, now managed and 'owned' by Ceylonese, demonstrates how emerging dominance and social fission are marked and recreated in the production of new temples which reproduce old symbolic forms and themes. From numerous local accounts, it appears that the present temple was originally a small shrine covered in a corrugated iron roof. At some time before the second world war, South Indian workers, in particular railway workers who were themselves supervised by Ceylonese Tamils, decided to upgrade the temple and develop it as a centre of Hinduism in the town. Prior to this time there is evidence that an annual firewalking ceremony took place there and that animals were sacrificed. Melaka Chitties claim that their involvement in the temple goes back to the earliest times and they remain the main ritual actors in the annual rites. At the time of the war, once the railway had been ripped up and moved to Siam by the Japanese, the influence of the railway workers began to decline, though they had by this time involved the local Indian petite bourgeoisie and their Ceylonese supervisory staff in the temple. The post-war period saw the development of the temple still further, until it became an imposing structure of twin temples. However, the nascent rivalry between the Ceylonese and the South Indian Tamils was also developing, and came to a head in about 1959, when the South Indians

effectively decamped and went to build a new temple on a threatened sacred site to the north of the town. In both cases, the temple developments were along the same basic lines as described at the beginning of this chapter and the main deity became Subramaniam, a deity who had already had a temple built for him by the Nattukottai Chettiar community.

A similar pattern occurred when a Ceylonese administrator in the government hospital set up a small shrine to the elephant-headed Ganesha, here known by his alternative name of Pulleyar. There already existed a major temple to the deity but it was in the very heart of the town and was run by Chettiars. In time, the shrine grew to a temple and became the focus of active Hindu worship for most Indians in the hospital and in the surrounding area, where various state housing settlements were located.

In each case, the reproduction of temples is susceptible of being interpreted in political and class terms. In each case, the negotiations and manipulations which went on in order to develop a temple and gain control over it were clearly political acts. They marked, and in a sense created, the status of a set of individuals whose class location in the local economy enabled them to gain access to sufficient wealth to undertake the endeavour, while simultaneously engaging them in necessary competition for an active congregation beyond the immediate set of kin and clients who form the necessary core set for any such adventure. It would be possible to run an account of the temples in terms which saw them as the only real source of status and prestige-creation open to individuals and groups of Indians in Melaka, given the ethnic and religious bars to the achievement of either in the wider context. That



is, in a national and state polity increasingly articulated in terms of, and controlled by, those of a Malay ethnic identity, Indians had increasingly to look inwards to members of their own ethnic category in order to find acceptable symbolic expressions, as well as social locations, for the marking and reproduction of social status and individual prestige.

It would appear to me that such a style of explanation is certainly a necessary part of any adequate account, yet it remains an inadequate explanation in and of itself. This is precisely because the political aspects themselves are more than class-based and reproduce more than just class or class-based perceptions. Indeed, the very labels I am forced to use in categorising the people involved, labels which are those of the local population, demonstrate that both caste and a lower-order ethnic identity frequently appear as organising principles of temple ownership and control. Thus, even if one concentrates only on the political aspects of temple organisation, it is still essential to consider the extent to which the processes of fission and reproduction I have described are the product of attempts to close off self-identifying subsets of the Indian population or to seek to assert a status for each group in terms of values located within the cultural system of Hinduism itself. Quite clearly, the social divisions I have shown to be marked by the process of temple proliferation cover all three major analytically distinct areas of the reproduction of class, caste and ethnicity. In the case of class this occurs in the form of temples dominated by one set of people but attended by a majority of another, such as that of the hospital. In the case of caste, this was achieved in ways such as that process whereby the Chettiar community sought first to control and then to own a temple which was unequivocally theirs to manage. It is

exemplified for the creation of a secondary ethnic identity in the case of the coup achieved by the Ceylonese community in taking over the Subramanian/Draupathi Amman temple.

I am not denying, of course, that in each case there exists an element of class conflict. I am asserting, however, that to restrict the analysis to class conflict would be to miss the degree to which other socially reproduced factors both create the context for, and directly influence, the social actors whose actions are the focus of attention. In seeking to dominate the prime setting for ritual action, the various sets of people seek to link their production of a local social status to a cosmological order. This legitimates their own claims in the face of competition from others, through the manifestation of adherence to supremely cultural values. Just as class is omnipresent in these processes, so more covertly is caste. To be Ceylonese in Melaka is almost synonymous to being of the Vellalar caste. The separation of middle class South Indians and the formation of their temple is in part an attempt to claim social equivalence in both class and caste terms with the Ceylonese Vellalars who came to dominate the temple which they had largely been attending up to that time. During my fieldwork, the pattern was threatening to reproduce itself yet again, following a dispute at the newer temple when the largely middle-ranking caste and middle class managers of the annual festival excluded some low caste, working class youths from the temple when they were in trance and carrying kavadis, the ritual burdens dedicated to the lord Subramaniam. The youths in question complained of this made it perfectly clear that they considered it to be a slight on both their class standing and their caste origins. They threatened to boycott the temple in the future, an

act which might have serious repercussions for the managers since an important portion of their reputation and therefore the wealth of the temple was generated by their ability to attract the working class Indians.

An important feature of Indian social life in Melaka remains the tension between contradictory tendencies to seek equivalence and to reproduce hierarchy. In the proliferation of temples and the focussing of the newer temples on forms of divinity already represented, both aspects are recreated.

Initial attempts to set up a temple occur when a group seeks to reject incipient or assumed subordination to a politically dominant group. Control of temples and therefore of sacred space is symbolically highly charged, given the meanings I have outlined already in this chapter. Control of the space provides control over the people who enter that space, at least under normal circumstances.<sup>1</sup> Such control of the bodies of others may be extended to the control of the ordering of the serving of the prasadam or blessed gifts following worship, or to the attendance or non-attendance at a puja given by a member of another social group. These and other more or less subtle modes of bodily inclusion and exclusion in the context of temple space constantly reassert the importance of hierarchisation based on religious or cultural evaluations which inform the practices of Indians. This is not to say that there have not been important changes: no Indian is overtly excluded from any temple on the basis of his caste, and many Indians assert the demise of caste or at

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<sup>1</sup>Festivals see many of these 'normal' patterns subverted or overthrown (see Chapter 7).

least its bankruptcy as a basis for the moral ordering of society. The very choice of one of the 'high' deities of the South Indian pantheon for the larger temples by their dominant congregations is a statement of the right of all Indians to worship the same gods and an unarticulated assertion of equivalence.<sup>1</sup> Siva and Sakti, Subramaniam and Ganesha are the deities of 'respectable' people, but more than this, they are the deities who most clearly epitomise the pan-South Indian tradition.

In many ways the chosen forms of the divine for local temples are those which stand at the pinnacle of the South Indian hierarchy of deities. As such they are the forms which are thought to resolve many of the contradictory aspects of social life. In their form, they provide the model of the best of a particularly valued social trait such as wisdom, bravery, compassion, virtue, detachment, and yet they also transcend all these by being a representation of the power which is beyond all social and therefore earthly concerns. They may at one and the same time be transcendent and immanent, male and female (Siva); and their abodes may be places of power and places where the power of the living is rendered meaningless.

In more mundane contexts, temples function as meeting places, as centres of gossip networks. They are places to which visiting gurus and learned swamis are brought from India to give discourses on the meaning and role of Hinduism. Here, too, performances of religious plays, sacred music and readings of sacred texts all take place. As such, the temples of Melaka are true centres of community activity. The community is one of

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<sup>1</sup>See also Parry (1974) for a view of Hindu society which highlights some egalitarian qualities missed by Dumont.

Hindus and like all communities its internal coherence is frequently problematic. Nonetheless, all Indians of the Hindu faith in the town are linked through their temples to a conception of the cosmos which is distinctive and largely self-replicating. It is in temples that the conjuncture of the social world with the universal cosmic powers is thought to occur most readily. To Indians then, it is not surprising that others will see the temples as the clearest symbolic manifestation of an Indian identity.

I have already suggested or implied that temples embody a 'world view' and that their spatial and deity relations entail a set of understandings and practices. It is these practices and their role in the reproduction of an Indian identity which is the concern of the chapter which follows. As a precursor to that chapter, I would merely make the point that the functional distinctions made by Aveling (1978) for Penang, and the transformations in temple practices, are not replicated in the Melaka situation precisely because the same temple may be used for each of the functions she describes and for more. Moreover, to gloss temples as even dominantly of one functional type is to suppress<sup>P</sup> the fact that its overt function, such as being a "community temple", may belie its propensity to act as a centre of dispute and division.

## CHAPTER 6

### TEMPLE PRACTICE:

#### REPRODUCING THE COSMIC ORDER

#### AND REPRODUCING THE SOCIAL ORDER

In this chapter I shall build upon the account of the meaning of temple space and the relations of the Hindu pantheon contained in the previous chapter in order to consider how the ritual activities which take place in that spatial and symbolic context reproduce the symbolic structure of the cosmic order upon which they are built, yet also provide the main context in which divisions within the Hindu population are marked and reproduced. I will also argue that these practices provide the locus of the major distinguishing feature of the Indian population in their relation to other ethnic categories, and that thereby the wider social order of Melaka, which is characterised by these distinctions, is in part reproduced here. I shall show how the practice of puja integrates the hierarchical cultural system of deities and religious practices with the hierarchical tendencies of the reproducing system of social divisions.

The process is important not least because many Indians and members of other ethnic categories imagine that their religion must be the basis of their unity. Indeed, I would point out that many of the temple activities are explicitly assumed to be contexts in which unity will be achieved, at least by their middle class organisers. The process they articulately describe would appear to express a wish that the encompassing notion "Indian" become a reality, transcending its status as a mere

categorical distinction to overcome the distinctions which normally divide the Hindu 'community'. Here I shall show that the clear parallels between such notions of encompassing hierarchical social categories as social order and the hierarchical cosmic categorical order, are continually prevented from becoming realised as a single, unitary field by the activities which Hindus undertake in the course of the practice of their religion.

To return to the form of argument generally espoused in this thesis, I shall argue that it is contradictions in the social and cosmological orders which are manifested, reproduced, and on occasions exacerbated in the course of temple rituals. I shall demonstrate that the tendencies towards closure of the group and the subordination of the non-controllers of temples continually generate fission, and that this is understood and symbolised through cultural understandings of the meaning and use of ritual space. As with the three previous chapters, I shall begin with a discussion of the form of that which I am analysing, in terms of its internal structure, before relating its meaning 'on the ground' to contextual cultural and social specifics.

#### Puja: the problem of Hindu worship in Melaka

For Hindus worshipping in Melaka, as for practitioners of many religions the world over, a major problem confronting them in the course of their worship is how to overcome the perceived separation between the Human and the Divine. Whether the worship takes place within one's head, one's home, or one's temple, this essential problem remains, and the meaning of the form of the acts of worship and the symbols employed is better understood in relation to this struggle.

In this chapter I wish to examine the notion of puja, its structure and its meaning, in the context of temple worship in the Melaka town area. To do this, I intend to consider initially not one actual puja which I observed in the course of fieldwork, but rather offer an analysis of a minimal form of puja derived and abstracted from the hundreds I was able to watch. In seeking to invest puja, or rather its form, with meaning I am not assuming a priori that the Hindu religion provides a single, unified system of beliefs and values for all those who call themselves Hindu and worship in what they consider to be a Hindu manner. To put it another way, I do not see the religious activities of Melaka Hindus as providing either a single 'model of' or a single 'model for' (Geertz 1966) their world and their relations in it.

In contrast, I shall argue that the logical form of puja permits two major orientations, or models, which, while they appear to conflict analytically, are not entirely mutually exclusive for the people who operate them and operate with them. At the same time, the central problem of the 'realisation' of the Divine pertains to both models, and I shall take this up accordingly in order to elucidate what local Hindus understand the process to be.

I should perhaps add, at the outset, that I am not attempting to promote a return to the postulate of two separate traditions, a great and a little, which somehow remain in uneasy coexistence. What is being elaborated here is, rather, an attempt to show that the distinctions identified by the analyst represent contradictory aspects in the basic relations to the Divine as enacted by different people, and by the same people at different times, within a contemporary set of beliefs and



values. The contradictions in these values, through a process of selection similar to that identified by Evans-Pritchard (1937), rarely become manifest for any individual.

### Temple worship

While some minor differences of detail do appear in the temples around Melaka when the Hindu population meets to worship, the rites leading up to and following the sequence of events labeled puja, and performed by an officiant of a priestly caste, Brahman or Pandaram, have a structure which can be simplified into the following pattern: (1) preparation; (2) invocation; (3) contemplation; (4) blessing.

For each of these stages a further sequence of symbol-laden events occurs. Although the label "puja" is most often only applied in Melaka to the third stage as I have identified them, every puja requires the other stages, whether they are in an elaborate form, such as on some 'special day' in the Hindu calendar, or in a truncated form on ordinary weekdays. Therefore, I shall consider each of these stages in turn as parts of the puja complex. Each stage will be examined in terms of its particular form of practice and to test the idea that there exists a clear dichotomy in possible interpretations, both for the analyst and for the actors.

#### (1) Preparation

For all Hindus in Melaka, it would be impossible to conceive of an effective puja without the performance of preliminaries to clear away the obstacles which are otherwise bound to intrude in the process of

reaching towards the divine. The primary action required is the ritual cleansing (suttam seya), or purification.

Just as it is a common notion amongst South Indians that the ideal Hindu temple spatially symbolises the human body,<sup>1</sup> so the human body should be conceived of as a temple with God at its heart. To bridge the gap between God and Human, both temples must be 'clean'.

The bricks and mortar temple housing the images of the divine must be thoroughly swept and washed as a first step. Laymen can do this, but they cannot enter the molasthānams or image shrines, which remain the domain of the priest. To do so would be to offend the deity and show a lack of respect which would be punished. With the temple physically clean, the priest must perform at least some actions to ensure the purity of the temple for religious purposes. On the opening of a festival this sequence, called punniathanam, may be highly developed, involving the circumambulation of the temple by a flaming coconut frond, over which powerful mantras have been chanted, but more commonly it involves the sprinkling of specially prepared saffron-yellowed water throughout the temple, a practice which appears as the second stage on very special days.

In some temples, the use of incense smoke first appears at this stage, as sambrāni (benzoin) is set on hot coals, either in a large pot before the deity, on the ground, or in a smaller hand-held pot which the priest uses in the course of his preparation of the saffron water.

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<sup>1</sup>See Chapter 5 for a discussion of this.

This latter process usually involves the reciting of mantras and the tossing of flowers to a kumbum, a small, narrow-necked pot, garlanded, surmounted by a collar of mango leaves and a coconut, containing water with the five products of the cow (panjakariam) or sometimes just saffron; it is a pot which explicitly represents the divine. The flame of a camphor lamp is offered to it in arāthi before the priest removes the coconut and uses the mango leaves as a spoon to sprinkle the water around the inside of the temple and over any people present. He then circumambulates the temple in a clockwise direction sprinkling the water as he goes.

The water the priest sprinkles is said to be transformed by the performance of the rites into Ganges water and is therefore especially powerful and purifying. However, the problem for the complete understanding of all the preparatory rites lies precisely in the meaning of purification. It is here that we first meet the two major themes of interpretation offered by the actors themselves, and the abstracted dichotomous principles I wrote of earlier.

In the exegesis offered by local Hindus, the fire, the smoke and the water are often said to have power to drive away 'evil spirits' which are thought to inhabit the air around the temple, particularly at each of the four outside corners, and to prevent the invasion of the internal temple space and the bodies of the devotees. This explanation was given by Hindus from differing backgrounds, but appeared most frequently when working class Indians were explaining what was happening. For many of these Indians the necessity to drive away the spirits was important for two major reasons. These were that the god would be displeased and

refuse to come, and that the spirits might enter the worshippers and lead them to believe it was the deity, thereby leading them into false ways. While the latter part of the explanation was often similar amongst middle class Indians and Ceylonese, the influence of the spirits was more often considered to be in terms of the distraction of the devotees from proper concentration on the divine.

In this simple difference lies the key to the two main elements of the different 'models of' the nature of the divine, the cosmos, and the world, and the concomitant different 'models for' relations to each of these and within each. 'Cleaning' the temple is not merely a matter of removing a vaguely conceived set of 'impurities' or 'dirty things', though there is often a sense of pervasive hinderance allied to the negative power of the 'impure', but there is a specific danger that spirits (pēy) will actively intervene to maintain the gap between humans and the god. For one set of people, the danger is that the divine will not be present as a force, a presence which becomes crucial for what is to follow; while the second set see the problem in terms of the impediments the spirits will place in the path of their mental contemplation of the divine.

The realm of dirt and impurity is the realm of the evil spirits, and they will be attracted to any place where such conditions prevail. Normally, the temple is pure enough to be unattractive, while the power of the forces there present resists incursion by the spirits. However, this is a delicate balance and can only be maintained by ensuring that all those who come to worship are themselves not unwittingly adding to the risks. Therefore, worshippers should enter the temple only after

bathing and putting on clean clothes. Before moving inside the temple, they should remove their shoes and at least wash their feet at the tank provided. Ideally, they should also wash their hands, mouths and sprinkle some more water over their heads, in order to ensure that the journey from their home to the temple has not resulted in unnoticed pollution.

Besides keeping the temple clean by this process, the devotee is ensuring that the body as temple is also kept clean and is therefore less liable to invasion by evil forces. For those mainly working class Hindus who are open to possession by the deity on such occasions, such inner purity is considered a necessary prerequisite. For many middle class Hindus, the washing is seen as symbolic of the washing off of worldly concerns and attachments which inevitably include sinful acts, and is a mental preparation facilitating the concentration necessary for true devotion. Moreover, this more intellectualist approach shows repeated concern with the integrity and discipline of self in relation to the divine. To realise God, it is first necessary to know one's self totally, and ritual preparation of this sort is a part of the training for self-awareness.

Preparation for the central act of puja continues in temple worship with a shift of focus, from the space which can be held to contain the deity, to the image of the deity itself. In most temples, this may in fact be several images of a special black stone, each housed in its own shrine, and each being thought to represent a particular form of the divine. In an elaborate ceremony, the priest removes any paraphernalia around the image, leaving it in its basic black stone state. Having initially washed the image in plain water, the priest then starts the sequence of

ritual bathing of the deity in a prescribed set of highly symbolically charged substances.

Though the substances and sequence vary in practice, the bathing of the deity or abishekam, has an ideal form which is followed fairly closely on many occasions. The priest will apply the substance, light the camphor lamp and wave it before the image. He then scrapes off the substance, where necessary, and washes the image thoroughly before proceeding with the next substance. Usually, there are said to be nine separate substances, which should appear in the following sequence:

- (1) gingelly oil; (2) milk; (3) curd; (4) sugar cane water or honey;
- (5) coconut water; (6) a sweet mixture of five fruits (panjamuratham);
- (7) sacred ashes (vibhutti); (8) sandalwood paste; (9) rose-scented water (pannir).

Each of these is considered an auspicious substance, and where substitutes are made, they are of other auspicious substances. When asked further as to why the deity was bathed in these things, informants would say that these were things which were pleasing to the god, would make the god happy, or would show the devotees' love for god, and occasionally they would attempt partial explanations of the detailed symbolism of each item.

Just as for Ortner (1975), there is a problem here in the notion that the gods should need to be pandered to, should need to 'be made happy'. The major deities are, viewed from the intellectualist stand point, beyond the needs and cares of worldly comfort, for they are manifestations of the supreme being who is total bliss, and total detachment. However,

operationally, and in exegesis, many local Hindus offer the view that the deity must be enticed to become a vital presence. If one fails to perform the rites, She (this relates especially to Māriamman and the other female forms of the divine, though it also applies to male forms) may not come, or may not intervene on behalf of the worshippers to reorder their worlds. Moreover, if one fails to perform the rites, She may actually be displeased and punish those who have failed Her.

Similarly, the adorning of the image, or alangaram, which follows straight after the bathing, is interpreted by many locally as being another offering designed to placate the deity and put Her in a receptive mood. She must be dressed in fine clothes and adorned with pure gold or silver. Anything less would be an insult and provoke anger, and thus (often unspecified) danger.

Again, Ortner's material would seem to parallel this data and suggest that, at least at the latent level, the offerings made to the stone image are a means of manipulating the deity by making a physical attachment to corporeal form represented, in this case, by stone. A stone is used which is said to have a mystical power of its own and which rests on a copper plate inscribed with a powerful mantra, the power of which lasts twelve years and is funneled up through a hole in the dome (vimānam) under which it resides. Since the stone image represents, permanently, a particular form of the deity, care must be taken to ensure that actions are performed which are appropriate lest Her wrath fall.

But the apparent neatness of this analysis is somewhat spoiled by the fact that an alternative explanation is frequently given by middle

class intellectuals. These Hindus view the approach of many working class Indians to their deities as being, for the most part, far too selfish and doctrinely misguided. Their interpretation of the bathing and adorning of the image is that the acts should not be seen as an attempt to ensure that the god is present, because the god cannot but be present in the image, when the divine is always omnipresent. No, the rites are to be seen as necessary acts of love and devotion (bhakti), such that the concentration of the devotee becomes entirely focused on the adoration of the supreme, undivided God. The need to conceive of a particular form of the divine, say the intellectualists, marks a low level of spiritual development.

Even the intellectualist standpoint is not entirely consistent, however. Individuals who offer this view of the nature of the divine and of the appropriate form of worship toward it, often make sure that they drink and take home some of the milk in which the image has been bathed. This milk is considered as a sort of prasadum or blessed return gift from the deity, and is thought to have absorbed some of its power. The struggle to ensure that some of the milk, and later some of the panjamuratham fruit mixture, are ingested, would appear to belie the purely symbolic interpretation offered by some middle class Indians that the act is merely a way of demonstrating one's humbleness before the divine. Otherwise intellectually-orientated devotees refer to the curative powers of the abishekam milk, just as they will comment on the suitability of the mode of dressing and adorning the deity's image in terms of its beauty.



Once more, the intellectual rationalisation emphasises the attractiveness of the adorned image in terms of the strength it has to draw one's attention and adoration, in order to ensure contemplation of the divine alone. The more instrumental explanation talks of the pleasure the efforts will bring the deity and how this is likely to make Her amenable to 'help' Her devotees. Both emphases result in practice in comments on how well the officiant has performed his duties. In either case, the devotees will have to wait to pass judgement, for the dressing takes place beyond the drawn curtain which shuts the image off from the gaze of the worshippers until the initial climactic moment of the puja proper. Before this begins, the ritual moves from the preparation stage into the invocation phase.

## (2) Invocation

It is the intellectualist worshippers who most often create and elaborate separate phases of the rites surrounding puja, in which the praises of the divine are sung and the devotees are most actively involved in the process. Known as kudupiratinei, the invocation takes the form of songs of praise led by an individual or small group and supported by the rest of the congregation. The songs and verses chanted vary in content and origin, some being sanskritic and vedic, other Tamil and more recent. All have an ambiguity about them. They are at one and the same time a means of bringing the minds of the devotees to concentrate on the divine by rhythmic repetition, while they are also often powerful emanations which may have the ability to cure illness or drive away other evil.

As with other sections of the worship, this phase has a different and more instrumental aspect viewed from the perspective of many Hindus.

The singing of the praises of the divine, in particular the praises of the form which dominates in the temple, is deemed to make them happy and incline them to attend to the desires of those who are making the offering of their voices. At times, just like the priest's mantras in the course of the puja proper, these invocatory songs are said to have a power, if performed properly and with devotion, to somehow compel the deity to pay attention. Thus, for different devotees, and for the same devotees at different times, there is an oscillation in the notions underlying the summoning of the god.

The climax of the invocation overlaps with the beginning of the next phase of the rites, which is marked by the ringing of the large bell outside the temple, and by the beating of a small gong and the blowing of a conch in the Siva temple and at one of the Subramaniam temples. At this stage, the priest enters the shrine which is still curtained off from public gaze. Once inside, he sprinkles with water the area at the feet of the image at which some food, bananas at least, and usually some of the rice which will later be served as prasadam, has been placed; the water he uses is again the Ganges water, and he mutters mantras as he rings a small hand bell and uncovers the food which is beside the fragrant joss sticks. Still ringing the bell, he lights a lamp, places it at the image's feet, makes a further clockwise pass over the area with the sacred water, and then raises the lamp before the face of the god.

An intellectual Hindu informant explained that the reason the deity is offered food behind a curtain is because the deities, like ideal Brahmins, do not absorb just the outward value of the food but its inner essence.

This they achieve by super concentration and is only possible if there are no external distractions. This intellectual, like others, was accepting the idea that the divine would partake of the food offering, other things being equal. For other Hindus the taking of the food depended on the correctness of the prior steps in the ritual sequence and was the culmination of the process of summoning the deity's presence.

For the intellectualists, the offering and taking of food is again seen as relating to the duties and demonstration of devotion which are necessary to overcome one's egotism and allow one to begin to realise the meaning of God. The problem for this school of thought resides with the worshippers' attachment to the world and the barrier this creates between the human and the divine. The deity's acceptance of the offering, which must be made in a selfless manner, is a sign that the divine accepts the possibility of communication. For the instrumentalists, the acceptance of the food is the final stage in the summoning of the deity and sets the scene for the rites which are to persuade the god to aid Her loyal and correctly behaved devotees. It should be noted here that the food is never seen as a bribe, or other directly manipulative resource. It is, rather, a necessary means of avoiding anger which, if presented properly, will please the god and make Her more inclined to be indulgent.

### (3) Contemplation

When the deity has been fed and the lamp lit and raised to Her face, the priest throws back the curtain to reveal the god, in all Her glory, to the congregation who raise their hands, many high above their heads, palms together, in obeisance.

The curtain itself may have had a printed representation of the god on it, but its thrusting aside is always a dramatic revelation of the divine. To the one set of people the curtain is symbolic of illusion or maya which hides us from the divine and attaches us to the falseness of the worldly. To the other set, the curtain is less important than the fact that its withdrawal breaks the last barrier between them and the darshan or blessed gift of the divine presence. It is on this revelation that frequently, in temples where working class devotees congregate, the divine presence not only enters the temple finally and unequivocally, but also enters the bodies of those whose inner temples are ready to receive Her.

Trance and possession are beyond the scope of this present discussion, so suffice it to say that these phenomena rarely if ever occur amongst middle class Hindus, who intellectualise on the nature of the divine and say that it is always in all of us, if only we know where and how to look. Nonetheless, they recognise the fact that the divine force is very strong in some people at certain times, under certain conditions, and will press forward with others to receive blessing in the form of holy ash and flowers or leaves. They may even seek words of comfort from the divine personified, in the form of assurances about the resolution of a personal problem and the correct form for overcoming it.

The drawing of the curtain represents the realisation of the presence of the divine for all Hindus. For some this is no more than the intense contemplation of the force which is within oneself and everywhere; while for others, it is the contemplation of the particular manifestation of the divine which has been induced in the image and whose presence may be exploited.

Essentially, the contemplation sequence of the puja, as I have identified it, consists of the vertical, clockwise, and circular presentation of a lamp or lamps before the image; the chanting of the divine names and the tossing of flowers for a male deity (except Siva, who has a special leaf instead), or red turmeric powder for a female deity; and a final waving of a camphor lamp. According to the exegesis of knowledgeable Hindus, each lamp has a particular significance. On special days a large multi-tiered lamp containing 59 or 108 separate lighted wicks, is the one which appears when the curtain is first thrown back. Such a lamp is a symbol of the manifold forms of the divine, and specifically, the 108 commonly known names which are chanted for each deity, many describing a particular attribute. Similarly, other oil lamps represent, for example, the five elements which make up the body, the five senses, the three principle forms of the divine (Brahma, Vishnu and Siva), and the ultimate oneness of the divine. The symbolic importance of each separate lamp is not known by every Hindu, but the waving of each lamp produces a response from each worshipper: the raising of hands and the quiet repetition of a mantra, if they know a suitable one.

Once more, the intellectualist view sees the problem of worship in terms of sublimation of self, submission before the powerful evocation of the omnipresent, omniscient God. The symbolic acts become manipulative of the worshipper's psyche and recreate a unity which has been missing in the dark separation of illusion. The flames are transcendent in that they have number and presence, but no fixed form. They are light and warmth, guiding and comforting. They attract the mind and the soul, and burn out desires, pride and attachment to the world.

For the non-intellectually-minded devotee, the lamps serve to light up the face of the deity and are the best light by which to capture the beauty of the divine. This engenders more love and devotion in the worshipper and in turn serves to make the god more pleased with the devotees. In this sense the symbols are manipulative of the psyche of the deity, which will bring blessings and, perhaps, more tangible rewards on those responsible.

In Hindu worship, the sense of the divine is pervasive and directed to each of the five human senses in the course of the symbolic acts which make up a complete puja. Not only should one be forcefully struck by visual representations of the god, but one should experience Her through hearing, smelling and tasting as well as prostrating oneself before the god to symbolise touching Her feet. Moreover, the intellect and the emotions should be engaged in the worship so that one's total being is infiltrated by awareness of the divine.

The joss sticks in front of the deity, the sambrāni incense the priest will wave before the image prior to the lamps which follow the one at the moment of revelation, and the scent of the flowers which form the garland, and which are tossed as the priest chants mantras, all serve to produce an attractive smell which evokes the divine for most Hindus. For many too, the scent is deemed attractive to the gods and unattractive to evil spirits.

So it is too with the chanting of mantras. Not only do these focus the hearing on the divine, engendering the correct approach in the human devotee, but they also have power to engage the deity and attract Her

commitment to those present. Mantras too have the power of warding off evil influences.

Thus, the contemplation of the divine is accompanied in each case by acts which intensify the fragile unity which is being created between the human and the divine. For most Hindus this unity remains partial and hierarchical with the devotees at best attaining a place at the feet of the god. For others, there is achieved a sense of mixing with the divine and leaving behind the sense of hierarchical separation. In both cases, the acts create 'transcendental moments' (Kapferer 1977) when 'communitas' appears to dominate and the normal social world is left behind as all share a sense of awareness of the divine. The major moment coming at the end as arāthi is performed with the camphor lamp; camphor being a symbol of many things including our sins and our souls which are totally consumed in the divine light.

It should be noted that the invocation and feeding of the deity cannot be interpreted here as Ortner was able to do amongst the Sherpas. Even for the most clearly instrumental in their approach to the gods, there is no sense in which the deity can be said to be trapped by being brought to eat in this form. Since the deity is normally hierarchically superior, the taking of food in the temple or home of the devotees is an honour for those devotees and they would be the losers if She were to leave. Her very presence is a gift which outweighs by far the honour and adoration given by the worshipper. Inappropriate behaviour or inadequate preparation threaten to provoke the angry withdrawal of the 'guest'.

(4) Blessing

The hierarchical relationship with the divine is marked at one level by the taking of what Babb (1975) identifies as the 'leftovers' of the deity's food, otherwise known as prasadam. Prasadum is more than just the food which has been offered to the deity and had its essence consumed. It is also the flame which has been used for the final arāthi and is now brought round by the priest for each devotee to waft the effects of it over the head and face, before taking sacred ash with which to mark the forehead and the neck (ideally, with three horizontal stripes which distinguish a Saivite). Prasadum is also the sandalwood paste and the red turmeric powder with which to make a central tika on the forehead, and it is the holy water (thirtham) which the devotee is given to drink. Each is purifying and each is symbolic of some aspect of the deity. Each is also a public act of identification with the divine.

In each case, the notion is one of accepting the god's gifts of things which have already been dedicated to Her. Often, the substances given have been used in the abishekam. However, from the intellectualist perspective, the gifts have symbolic value of a specific sort, which relates to the nature of the world, human frailty, the passage of human life, sakti (the divine energy given form), and the purging of sins as a prerequisite to self-realisation and release from the cycle of rebirths. It is only by one's own efforts, say the intellectualists, that the true blessing of the 'gifts' is realised. The blessing lies in the fact that these are of the divine and lead the aspirant to a correct understanding of the divine, rather than that they are given by the divine.



In discussing the meaning of puja, I have suggested that there are two major orientations which provide different meanings for different actors, and provide a clue for the analyst as to the alternative models of the universe encapsulated by the acts. The central problem of bridging the gap between the human and the divine is common to both models. The method of solving the problem varies with the interpretation of the cause of the gap. For most Hindus, the gap exists because of the deities' detachment from a world polluted and uncaring. To overcome the detachment, the environment must be freed from pollution and humans must be made to perform the correct rites to show that their devotion is strong enough to merit divine intervention in their lives. The structure and practice of the puja then are responsive to the necessity of pleasing the god.

It must be stated here that many who otherwise adopt what I have called an intellectualist approach to their worship, will become much more instrumental if they have a pressing problem. Intervention of the deity to cure an ailment or to aid someone in trouble, is achieved in the manner described, but is interpreted as resulting from the show of faith in the person who instigates the puja.

I would like to suggest that it is vital to understanding practical Hinduism to appreciate the importance of ambiguity in the process and to note that this ambiguity is in part a product of a vast array of literary sources of authentication for a wide range of activities. Thus, it is not possible for anyone to say that either approach to the divine outlined here is wrong. Both are sanctioned by usage and a long literary tradition. Moreover, it is the very ambiguity which gives the puja its

strength as a structure. Ambiguity allows for selection of emphasis to change. Individuals are able to highlight an aspect of interpretation which is appropriate to their requirements and suppress one which is not. It also allows a development of broadly class-based differences in interpretation, which allows the middle class to make hierarchical statements about the value of working class interpretations.

Puja not only reflects social reality, it helps reproduce and reorder that reality. A dialectical relationship exists in which the ritually sanctioned high caste status contradicts a generally low ethnic status in the wider Malaysian social order, for some Indians. There are others whose overall social standing has always been and remains low. Puja accommodates both positions and provides a mechanism for dealing with them.

Within its structure, puja has the capacity to provide a model of individual responsibility which places stress on the personal relationship one has with the divine forces. Personal integrity here determines spiritual development and success in a system of values in which obstacles are seen as the products of ignorance and a lack of self-discipline. It is through knowledge (jnana) that one advances, knowledge gained from inner contemplation, study, and the attendance at discourses.

Again, this emphasis stands in a conflicting relationship with another which has much support from within an orthodox tradition of Hinduism, the bhakti or devotional approach, which the Bhagavad Gita, amongst other texts, offers as an alternative means of finding God. In this case strong faith, made manifest in intense worship, becomes the focus.

Intellectual examination of self and the nature of the divine is considered unnecessary.

Intellectuals recognise that this is a valid approach to puja, but argue that many working class Indians are not displaying great faith and devotion, so much as greed and selfishness, in their approaches to worship. On the other hand, many working class people view the middle class way of addressing their religion as cold, lacking commitment and concerned with self-display rather than faith.

Puja offers, then, a series of dialectics between alternative ideologies, between practice and ideological interpretations, between internal symbolic logics, between the external social world and the sense of traditional practice, and between the human world and the divine universe.

As Ortner points out, the structure and content of ritual are inextricably intertwined. While, at one level, the structure of puja is consistent, it is impossible to understand the structure without understanding the symbolic content and its logic. Conversely, the content makes no sense unless placed in its structural context. Puja is structurally a process of moving from separation towards closeness with the divine. However, the meaning of that closeness would be missed without an examination of the meaning of the symbolic content of the process.

#### Rank and 'special day' rites in Melaka's temples

In the previous chapter it was suggested that each of Melaka's temples catered for a particular congregation on 'normal' puja days. The

particular congregation which dominated could be identified through consideration of class location, caste, and a secondary ethnic identity within the category "Indian". The three components were more or less present in each case and it was partly a matter of situational selection as to which was emphasised by the local population in discussing temples. In this section, I shall consider how each of these elements appears in the interactional context of 'special day' (vishesha nāl) rites in a number of the temples. I shall also proceed from this aspect of the account of actual religious practices to a more general consideration of the social meaning of ritual practices in this context, and their relationship to social reproduction.

The particular rites I will now focus on are those occasions of 'special worship' (vishesha puja) which take place on specially marked days of the Tamil ritual calendar. These are to be contrasted with the full-blown festival days (thirunal) which mark the culmination of a sequence of rites usually stretching over a period of about two weeks. I shall argue in the chapter which follows this that significantly different though outwardly similar processes occur on the festival days.

It should be stated at the outset that not all the temples in Melaka are settings for the involvement of Indians from a wide range of backgrounds, even on 'special days'. Moreover, only the larger temples are able to attract a socially diverse collection of Hindus even on their festival days. This in itself will provide important clues for the discussion to follow. Thus, while I am considering here how special days in temples mark division in the Indian population and are one context for their reproduction, I shall also argue that these rites, as

'transcendental rites', in Kapferer's terms (Kapferer 1977, 1978), by their very nature render problematic the idea that a pan-Indian ethnic identity might be produced and reproduced through the 'communitas' (Turner 1967 etc.) of temple worship.

The particular rites I am concerned with here are not then 'transformative' in the sense that any person or group's social identity is substantially altered in the process. That is to say, that identity transformations which may take place do not last beyond the context of meaning of that particular event in that particular setting. Thus, though such phenomena as trance or possession might be deemed to have occurred on such occasions, the changes are considered temporary alterations of a state of consciousness rather than an alteration of one's social status.

Stevenson (1953:45) says of Hindu society that

Status in the system is linked to behaviour patterns which are themselves linked in some degree with particular exogamous units such as lineages and sapinda and pravara groups, but mainly with particular commensal and especially endogamous groups. (By which I assume him to mean jātis.) The first important point to note is that there are two kinds of status — secular status and ritual status — each derived from different sources and socially manifested in different ways.

While I would argue that there is far more to caste than behaviour patterns per se, even in relation to purity and pollution, and that Stevenson's dichotomy of secular and religious may be misleading, nonetheless, it does seem that Stevenson recognised very early on that there is not necessarily any single status, based on caste, attributable to an individual in all contexts. Indeed, in modern contexts, such as that of Melaka, there may frequently be tensions between caste status and the status normally accorded to occupation, class and wealth.

In examining the relationship between concepts of rank (that is, socially produced hierarchies) and temple worship, the first and most obvious ethnographic observation to point up is that the temples which regularly celebrate such special days in the Tamil calendar as the monthly puja of kartigai (in honour of Subramaniam) or the annual ceremonies to honour a particular deity (such as Vineayagar Sathurthi or the Saraswathi Puja) are those temples which normally cater for congregations dominated by middle class Indians. The domination may be numerical or it may be one achieved through control of the management committee which runs the temple. An exception to this rule is the Māriamman temple which is largely run for and by the Malay-speaking Melaka Chitties. This working class community does attempt to celebrate occasional special day rites, though these celebrations are rarely as elaborate as those performed in other temples of the larger type.

The Chitty rites, I would argue, constitute an expression of a desire on the part of the elders of the community to achieve and ensure a status for the Chitty community as a whole, which is closer to that recognised for the organisers (if not the total congregations) of the other large temples in the town.<sup>1</sup> The Chitty community is spatially and socially focused on its temple, though it still remains marginal to the Indian community as a whole in terms of its incorporation into Indian political activities and with regard to the equivocation that other Indians express as to the status and origins of the population. The performance of religious duties, or more accurately, the perception by others of such performances, is crucial to an understanding of the current

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<sup>1</sup>It should be remembered that Chitties claim derivation from a number of middle-ranking castes. They transmit their caste labels patrilineally (see Chapter 1).

processes of status evaluation amongst Hindus in Melaka. Its relation to other factors involved in the process must remain problematic for the moment, but I shall return to this at the end of the chapter.

The six major temples which employ full-time priests of either the Brahman or Pandaram castes all engage to a greater or lesser degree in the performance of 'special day' rites. The two temples managed by the Nattukottai Chettiar community, and catering largely for them, mostly restrict themselves to days which are deemed especially significant for the major deities of their temples; that is, Vinayagar and Subramaniam respectively. The Hospital Vinayagar (Pulleyar) temple also celebrates relatively few 'special days' other than those related specifically to Vinayagar himself. However, a significant difference appears in the organisation of the rites in the two cases.

Whereas 'special pujas' in the two temples run by the Nattukottai Chettiars are performed as 'temple pujas', paid for and done on behalf of the community as a whole, those of the Hospital temple are based on a system of obayams or offerings made by specific individuals or groups who finance the whole performance. The Melaka Chitty community has few outsiders who take on the role of obayakarren or giver of the gift for its special days. However, as at the other large temples, except the two managed by Chettiars, at the Chitty annual festival the sequence of pujas is broken into a series of obayams offered by Hindus from both within and beyond its normal congregation.

Two temples, the Ceylonese-dominated Sri Subramniar/Draupathi Amman temple and the South Indian-dominated Sri Subramaniam Devasthanam, both

utilise the obayam system most regularly for all their special day ceremonies, and both produce calendars with the day, date (in English and Tamil), and the sponsor's name for the annual complement of special pujas. Such lists of sponsors (obayakarrens) show that while both temples compete to some extent to attract prominent Hindus, especially businessmen, Ceylonese continue to dominate one list and South Indians the other. Moreover, direct competition occurs on some occasions as a number of the special days were duplicated in both calendars.

The structure of the special day pujas is usually an elaborated version of that which one observes on a normal Friday in Melaka temples, and for the most part it accords closely with the description given in the previous section. Frequently, almost always in the case of the South Indian-dominated temple, it culminates in a procession (oorvalum) of a portable image of the deity carried clockwise around the temple on a small palanquin supported on the shoulders of the devotees. Informants in Melaka say that the procession of the deity is a way of showing respect and that they treat the god like they would a king. That is, they rock him and pay him obeisance. They sing songs of praise at each corner of the temple, and they explicitly equate the process with the surveying of his domain by an earthly king. On its return to the front of the temple, the image of the deity is 'welcomed', its feet are symbolically washed and offerings are given before it re-enters the temple. The small circumambulations of the temple are considered substitutes for the ideal longer processions which would take place around the locality. At times of festival proper, such processions take place on a grand scale and the deity is said to be both surveying its realm and offering the opportunity of darshan or gift of its presence to



devotees who cannot come to the temple. It is also reminding devotees of their duty.

The procession can be best understood as a kind of extension of temple space and meanings beyond their normal frames. The circumambulation undertaken makes the point that the influence and importance of the god is not confined to the temple site alone. The true god is all-pervasive and its presence and rights are to be recognised as being extended to the very homes in which Hindus live out their mundane lives. At the time of an oorvalum, the boundaries between the sacred and the secular are broken only to be restructured by the elaborate reincorporation of the deity within the temple space proper.

In all the temples the final part of a special day rite consists of a relatively elaborate meal of blessed food prasadam in the temple hall or mandapam. In theory, and exceptionally in practice, the prasadam may consist of nothing more than a simple handful of either sweet or saffron rice, or perhaps some cadjan (bengal gram). Most often in the two Subramaniam temples, the sponsor ensures a comparatively large meal of several vegetarian dishes.

Clearly, the whole event can be and often is used as an opportunity for the symbolic display of wealth and status. Indeed, one marks and to some extent creates the status<sup>1</sup> of one's social position through the public performance of these rites which frequently involve considerable expense. Prominent men will often ensure that distinctive leaflets

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<sup>1</sup>In no sense can one deny a status entailed in one's caste in this manner, though this may anyway be a moot point. One can improve the status within a caste.

advertising the occasion are distributed to the public and that the ritual bathing of the deity (abishekam), as well as the prasadam meal, is done with most impressive elaboration. Again, the number of worshippers who are attracted to a particular obayam, and the number of prominent people present, are considered to be foremost demonstrations of a man's worth in the Hindu community. The more recent temple dominated by the middle class South Indian Tamils, many of them recent recruits to the middle classes, is the arena of greatest competition in this regard. This is partially explained by the more established class standing of most of the Ceylonese in the town, and by their longer and more extensive kin and caste relations.

The degree to which temples are open to people for the performance of obayams marks the degree to which status remains negotiable within the Indian community. Closed temples, or rather those where obayams are non-existent or restricted, are more than simply exclusive, they represent symbolic statements about the relative status of that group which controls the temple with respect to other like groups. Thus, the two Chettiar temples operate essentially as centres of what Holström calls 'group religion'. In an early statement (1972:770), Holström asserted that in traditional India "power was to be respected only when it was shown in proper relation to religious duty". My own evidence suggests that there is an element of the same phenomenon in the contemporary urban context of Melaka. Respect or status in association with power, be it economic or political, is achieved, maintained and occasionally lost at the temple.

The essential structure of the special day rites I observed was the same at both temples where they were a frequent and regular part of the ritual calendar. A long and elaborate version of the ritual bathing of the deity (abishekam) takes place in the afternoon, much as I described in the previous section. A small audience, usually of retired men and a few women, watches this along with the obayakarren or his representative. It is a sign of a man's high standing if he is able to achieve a large gathering at this stage of the ritual sequence. Similarly, the subsequent sections of the sequence — the collective singing of devotional songs and the chanting of mantras (kuddupiratenai), the puja itself, the religious discourse which often follows, and the taking of the prasadam afterwards — all provide opportunities for men to demonstrate their wealth and influence by succeeding in attracting a large audience containing prominent people and by ensuring that the performance is long and elaborated, making full use of various talents of 'specialists' amongst the laymen who sing well, speak well or are especially learned in religious teaching.

A particularly successful special day sequence is one in which general approval is elicited for the event and this often coincides with the generation of one or more transcendent moments in the rites when a unity is achieved, according to informants, such that all mundane divisions and concerns are overcome. These occur most commonly at the climax of the puja. Here the jyothir mantra is sung by the congregation of the South Indian temple as the priest holds a camphor lamp before the image, prior to passing it round the audience who take the blessing of the flame and annoint themselves with sacred ash. A degree of transcendence beyond the normal mundane world may continue into the temple hall or

mandapam when normal patterns of commensality are overcome and prasadam may be taken sitting on the floor, cross-legged before a banana leaf sitting in rows where your neighbour may be of another and much differently ranked caste. On the whole, though, prominent people (which means usually those from higher castes with a high socio-economic standing) are clustered at the end of the rows nearest the serving points, and a clever obayakarren will usually attempt to ensure this is the case and that no one of significance from his point of view can be given any cause, however remote, for taking offence. It is recognised that some prominent men will deny the need to accord them special positions in the prasadam meal, but that some of these, according to astute informants, would nevertheless be offended if they were not asked.

Thus, it is usually the case that subtle arrangements affecting the serving of food begin to reassert values which are external to the temple itself. To use Turner's terms, the element of *communitas* which may have appeared at the moment of the climax of the puja gives way to the re-emergence of structure. The final reassertion takes place at the point of quitting the food hall when clusters of men and clusters of women gather to exchange a few comments on the performance, or items of gossip, before leaving to return home. In these interactions there is no overt appearance of caste though my own information demonstrated that the dual principles of caste and class ordered the choice of gossip partner. It was rare to observe extended interaction between people of widely disparate caste origins. Where these did occur it was usually the case that the person from the lowly-ranked caste had become wealthy and located higher in the class structure of the town than most of his

caste mates. To a certain extent, this reflected the overlap of broad caste and class positions. Though no clear ranking system for jātis was present or evolving, people in Melaka were aware of those whose rank in their area of origin would have been roughly equivalent to their own. However, I do not feel that an assumption that conscious caste discrimination was present as a normal practice is always warranted. Patterns of association on the basis of class-reproduced patterns of caste ranking association by virtue of the location of the members of various caste categories in the local economy. This was a process which was begun, as I have already stated, at the foundation of Melaka's British colonial economy. Thus, unmotivated reproduction of caste avoidance relations is implied in the class divisions within the Indian population.

Outside the temple area, specifically in the homes of Indians, such patterns of interaction were also produced in like fashion. Here, however, caste entered more directly and consciously by selecting who would be invited and who would accept invitations to enter and dine in the home. In many middle caste homes, the patterns of acceptance and interdining did in fact seem to be relatively unrelated to the detailed caste origins of the inviters or invitees. A generalised understanding that someone was from a 'respectable' family, that is, from a family with no suggestion of origins amongst untouchables or extremely low ranking castes such as washermen or barbers, would be sufficient. In both temple and in domestic settings there were, let it be stated, people who made a specific point of interaction with members of all castes. Some of these were making political statements and pursuing political careers, but others appeared to have no motivation which could be labeled strategic. It was frequently stated that people were in

ignorance of the caste of others, though my own evidence after a long period of suspicion was that people had a pretty good idea of the caste of those with whom they interacted regularly, and avoided those who might be problematic.

While no temple overtly, or to the best of my knowledge covertly, has a policy of exclusion of low caste people, it remains true that many lower caste people remained reticent about entering, and sometimes even attending, the larger temples run by those they labeled 'big shots'. They were often uncertain, as informants, whether their discomfort was based on their perception of the attitude of the middle class Hindus as caste- or class-based, or as a combination of both. The very ambivalence was a strong reason for avoiding the possibility of a snub, since it was always possible that aspersions were being made as to one's caste origins but being couched in class and behavioural terms. Some older men, especially, of low castes would not proceed beyond the threshold of the Ceylonese temple, for example, unless specifically invited to do so. When they were invited to do so, of course, this reproduced the understanding that it was by the grace of the high caste men that this person was allowed to enter, even if that was not the way the high caste men had intended their act to be understood.

It is not possible for a low caste man to achieve status by the giving of an elaborate obayam alone. The special day pujas provided contexts when it was possible for a person to fail as well as succeed. People might not turn up, or they might turn up and condemn a man for 'trying too hard' and making a show which was too overtly based on his attempts to gain social prestige rather than demonstrate his faith in the deity.

It is perhaps not surprising therefore to discover that obayams were almost entirely a middle class and petit bourgeois phenomenon, when it came to the performance of special pujas outside the context of a festival proper. The attendance of the lower caste, working class population of the town is minute in proportion to their numbers in the town, and attendance almost never serves as a way of improving one's status, but rather tends to reproduce contexts for the subordination of the working classes beyond even that encountered in their mundane lives. Where working class people are directly involved, their role is usually as the provider of a service designated the role of specific low castes in the traditional Indian situation. Thus, torch bearers and gong beaters, temple decorators and cleaners may be people who have a position known to be low in the caste order, though this need not always be the case. It is sometimes said by the middle class Hindus that it is difficult nowadays to find the 'proper' person to perform the secondary tasks at the temple. A concomitant complaint is frequently the cost of hiring people to perform tasks which in the old days they would have done out of 'duty'. Working class Indian informants made it clear that they were explicitly avoiding contexts for the reproduction of their own subordination in situations where it was no longer necessary for them to participate, given the lack of influence the higher caste people had over their ordinary lives.

Besides being contexts for the potential and realised reproduction of social divisions and categories, special day pujas are the primary context in which the dominance of the middle classes, in attempts to reproduce and transform the symbolic order which is Hinduism, becomes most apparent. However, the control which the middle classes have over

the performance is always somewhat limited, mediated as it is by trained priests. The major aspect of symbolic reproduction which becomes apparent under these conditions is the relationship between a cosmological system structured in a particular way, and an emergent social order which stands in tension to it in many respects.

In the last chapter I described the pantheon of the Melaka Hindu temples and talked of the symbolic import of the temples and the space they contain. An emphasis on the body in symbolic representations became apparent and it was suggested that there was a problem of why and how temples and deities became replicated in Melaka. Special day rites, as elaborate versions of the puja type of worship, provide good examples of how the problem of the separation of the divine and the human is confronted. I have suggested that moments of 'communitas' may occur on such occasions, and that informants associate these moments with an idea of having attained a closeness with the divine which is not normally available to them. However, I have shown that 'structure', in Turner's terms, continually reasserts itself and that working class people of lower caste origins largely exclude themselves or are excluded from temples on special days in the temple calendar. What is occurring is the relative closure of temple space through social devices, which, even if not designed consciously so to do, reassert the cultural values which I have suggested are apparent in the structural arrangements of temples and the pantheon. Thus, the temple provided a hierarchical model of the divine which culminates in the transcendent deity being given supreme status. The pantheon provides a nuclear family model which is ultimately encompassed and transcended by the formless Siva. Normal pujas offer contexts in which it is possible for at least two major approaches to the



divine to become apparent. The one reproduces and acts on the divisions into male:female, active:passive, immanent:transcendent, compassionate:unforgiving, in the conceptions of the deities. The other emphasises ultimate unity and responds to the deity in an essentially intellectual manner, disparaging the instrumental and over-emotional approach of the first.

I wish to argue that special day rites exist as contexts in which the dominant symbolic meanings are those proffered by middle class intellectuals. Though working class people who do attend may still operate differently, the control the middle classes exert over the space and the practices which take place there is itself an intellectual concern with the body, its control and the role it is to play in the realisation of the divine which resides within it. The whole emphasis is on order and the organisation of space. The practices then lead in a closely controlled way to the *communitas* of jyothir and the realisation of the light of god. It is a process of the reproduction of a hierarchy leading to an all-encompassing reality. All other spatial and deity referents become submerged, and even social divisions may be temporarily suspended.

It is in this last point that I believe the clue to the resolution of the paradox may be found. I have described how special day rites in the context of Melaka mark and reproduce social divisions and yet I have also suggested that they are marked by a central concern with unity and order. The point is that in order to achieve the latter the former is a prerequisite. That is to say, that when differences in caste, class and approach to the divine are apparent within a congregation they

potentially subvert the achievement of the smooth progress towards a common appreciation of the nature of the divine. As members of the middle classes gained wealth and power, they were able to translate that into increasing control over their ritual space. This enables them to exclude or eliminate those potentially invasive forces which interfere with their approach, or to create contexts which facilitate the progress of an identifiable set of people with the same values towards their understanding of the realisation of the divine. To put it in other terms, class location and wealth are the means by which the cultural system as a set of differing understandings and practices is sustained. Middle class conceptions of the hierarchical unity of deities as lesser forms of the ultimate universal divinity are asserted in their temples at the cost of reproducing social divisions. These social divisions reproduce cultural divisions, but also reproduce an encompassing concern with notions of control of intimate cultural space viewed as bodies divine and human.

Therefore, in a multi-ethnic polity such as that which exists in Melaka, under conditions of rapid and conscious social transformation, the erosion of the class positions of Indians in the wider economy (where the strategic positions of Ceylonese in the bureaucracy and the secure wage labour of the South Indians are fast disappearing) is matched by the proliferation of a set of archetypal cultural symbols. Where little power is executed outside, and status of individuals and groups is largely dependent on the 'race' on one's identity card, both power and status are worked out within the category "Indian" through attempts to exert symbolic domination over temples and temple practices.

## CHAPTER 7

### MAHABHARATA AS METAPHOR

#### Introduction

The core argument of this chapter is that the form of the Hindu temple festival, though structured largely by the logic of Hindu culture and the cosmological order, is both reflective of, and active upon the manner in which Indians are located in the mundane social world. I shall argue, contra Sahlins (1976:55), that a dialectic can and does exist between the cultural logic of the Hindu form and performance, and the demands of daily life practice in Melaka. In turn, this position will be shown to render problematic the very notion of a given Hindu culture with a single structure. To put it in terms of the argument of another major writer in this area, where for Dumont (1970) practices in the traditional Indian context are an enactment of fundamental ideological principles which appear immutable, in this context, the exigencies of position of Indians in contemporary Malaysian society will be shown to be in a dialectical relationship with, and at least potentially transformative of fundamental ideological principles. The pre-existing structuring properties, as one side of the dialectic, tend to limit the potential transformations to a range which is conceivable or 'thinkable' to the population whose world view was so structured previously. It is not that there is a mysterious meta-structure but rather that the wider social transformations which act as the antithesis are relevant to Hindus only in terms of the culture they live, seen as thesis. Thus, the ultimate synthesis which is the new cultural form is necessarily determined to a

great extent by the form of the original cultural logic or thesis. It is in this manner that I consider that the continuously dynamic process of cultural evolution is tied to the more apparent and more rapid processes of social transformation within the social formation.

The events described in what follows manifest the practical problems of the control of sacred space at the time of a festival. Moreover, they show that a tension exists in the practice of Hinduism between the requirements of a ritual form sanctioned by long usage and simultaneously deemed to be a form ordained by divine decree, and that understanding of the Hindu world which emphasises Brahmanic ritual practice through reference to literary sources. This latter tendency produces congregation members who often philosophise and debate about the 'real meaning' of the acts and words employed as major symbols in their rituals.

In Melaka, the two approaches to worship are strongly pursued. It would be misleading to represent the division of proponents simply as an opposition of high caste and low caste, or educated and uneducated, since individuals from either category of both sets will on occasions indulge in each form. However, it is generally true that it is the higher caste, wealthier and better educated who are most troubled by the practices of other Hindus, and it is they who most commonly seek to modify or 'reform' those practices in more or less subtle ways. The analytical point to be made is that such concerns take place in the context of the interaction of Hindus with practitioners of other world religions who have stood, for the most part, in a dominant relation to them. A level of reflection upon the religious practices and a concern to validate them to others and to themselves has followed as a logical consequence for many Hindus.

Thus the festival form as an extremely public and necessarily focal expression of Hindu beliefs and practices becomes highly problematic for such people who are highly conscious that others may pass judgements on all Indians in terms of their perceptions of these occasions.

Some especially concerned informants were aware of the analytically important point that what was being enacted in the performance of festival rites was not simply an expression of Hindu values for consumption by outsiders and the benefit of present believers. It was also, they recognised, the prime context for the reproduction of Hindu values and of Hindus themselves in the important sense of it being the main setting for the communication of a system of beliefs and practices to a new generation of Hindus, the children.

A festival such as that I am describing can appear conventional, and to a functionalist would undoubtedly seem symbolic of continuities of tradition or the unity of a shared world view. Indeed, I would argue that on occasions it may symbolise these things, or at least be said to do so, which comes analytically to the same point, especially for non-Indians who form a significant proportion of the audience to the proceedings here being considered. In fact, however, the major observation to be made is that the ritual acts and the more mundane features of the performances coalesce to produce a setting in which the mundane and the supramundane social relations of Indians are brought into sharp and revealing focus. I show that this happens in a manner such that the difficulty in separating the two aspects of the social life of practising Hindus is made very clear. It will be argued that the understandings of the cosmological order, reproduced here, pervade and order social relations in this ritual context and beyond.

Furthermore, it is argued that the overtly cosmologically orientated social order of ritual is interpenetrated by the mundane urban social order in all its complexity, and that the structuring principles of the event are thereby to be found residing ultimately in a set which is not bounded by the limits of Melaka as an urban spatial location. This allows varying subsets to appear which shift in time and context as those primarily relevant to understanding any given sequence of events. The effect of this is to generate more than merely the obvious analytical problems for the anthropologist. Actors involved in the events are themselves constantly engaged in situations of ambiguity and ambivalence. The power of the ritual sequence is shown to lie, to a large extent, in the degree to which it captures and enhances this element of ambiguity and ambivalence in the ritual itself and in the social interaction surrounding its performance.

The form of the festival is important also inasmuch as it is a situation in which the dynamic and continual self-reflection of contemporary Malaysian Hindu practitioners is encapsulated. Thus, the description which follows is designed to demonstrate that the symbolic processes in which Hindus engage during a major temple festival are such that their articulation with the everyday world of Indians in Melaka renders both the festival and 'everyday life' problematic; problematic, that is, for the actors and the analyst alike.

To return to Sahlins, the thrust of the discussion will endeavour to elaborate the analysis of a sequence of events in order to show that the cultural basis of Hinduism contains its own internal contradictions which become manifest in ritual practice, and that these practices

serve to highlight the contradictory aspects of the structuring principles of the social lives of Indians taken as a whole. The argument is that these latter contradictions are worked out in part in the course of the performance of a festival, but are also reproduced in that context. The result is a view of culture which sets about the problem not as one of how a culture is made manifest and preserved in social life, but, rather, of how a culture is continually being generated and reproduced in the developing religious practices of the adherents to one particular belief complex.

A detailed symbolic account of the temple and the festival on which I wish to focus the analysis is a crucial precursor to a further discussion of their meaning in the wider social world. In this description, a number of the major features of the internal logic of Hindu practice in Melaka are drawn out in concrete settings, and once more related to an account of the social divisions, and understandings of those divisions, developed from what has been written in the earlier chapters of this thesis. The purpose of this mode of approach is to examine the performance of a series of ritual acts in a Hindu temple with a view to elucidating the relationship between the cultural forms of practical Hinduism I observed, the control of meaning of religious symbolism, and the political implications for the everyday social life of Indians in this polyethnic context of Melaka, in which all religious acts are perforce political acts. I return to the political aspects of ethnic identity in the chapter which follows this.

The specific setting for this ritual action is the annual festival, known by its climactic moment as Timithi, at the Sri Subramaniam/Draupathi Amman

Kovil, observed twice, in 1976 and 1977. This temple (kovil) is effectively two contiguous temples sharing a dividing wall. In orthodox fashion for South Indian temples, the Sri Subramaniam shrine faces east and the main entrance to the temple grounds. The shrine contains a black stone image of the warrior form of the second son of Siva. On his immediate right is the image of Ganesha (also known as Vinayagar or Pulleyar). Ganesha is said to demand, and certainly usually receives, the first offering in any sequence of worship. On Subramaniam's left is an image of Krishna, also set in a small sanctum of its own, as are the other images. On the right of these male deities, i.e. to the south of them, is the Amman Kovil, reached through a normally open doorway in the dividing wall. Here, on a raised area which can be screened off by a single large curtain, are the two major female deities, set on individual plinths, side by side and facing east. A small uncarved, column-shaped piece of blackened stone forms the image to Draupathi. To its right, and slightly forward of it, is the larger roof-covered shrine (molasthānam) containing the larger carved black stone image of the South Indian deity Kammachiamman. It might seem surprising, but it is the smaller, apparently less significant shrine from which the temples derives its name. Though she is central to the festival I am about to describe, Draupathi is second in precedence to Kammachi in normal pujas and in some of the symbolic acts which mark the beginning of the festival. I develop the analysis of this apparent anomaly in a later section of the chapter.

#### The festival form

With the exception of the climax of the festival which lasts throughout a complete day, most of the ritual activity takes place in the evenings



and is centered on a formal puja conducted by the resident Brahman priest. A group or individual bears the responsibility for the cost of the evening's activities, and for making any arrangements to extend the programme by such events as religious discourses or the singing of verse-form celebrations of the deities. The last responsibility, and usually the major expense, is to provide the food which all devotees are invited to share at the end of the puja. It is this person, or group represented by a leader, who is the obayakarren spoken of in the previous chapter.

The whole performance, known as an obayam (offering or gift), is always done on behalf of a named group or individual. The secretary of the temple management committee has the duty of ensuring that each evening's worship is covered by somebody. The categories of the people making offerings constitute in themselves a revealing portrayal of the complexities of Indian social relations.

A poster providing a calendar of events and list of those making the offerings is published by the temple prior to the festival. Several of the labels given the sets of offerers are occupational categories. Three of these are in fact low-ranking caste categories; washermen, barbers and toddy tappers, though careful circumlocutions are used in some cases in order to avoid caste names which may appear pejorative and cause offence to those so named. Other labels are not caste-specific though there are status assumptions inherent in local perceptions of the people filling these occupational categories which relate to caste clusters and traditional occupations in India. Thus, one obayam is the province of 'traders', who are mostly from middle-ranking castes, such

as Chettiar and Reddiar, and the organisers are largely confined to prominent South Indian businessmen. Other obayams are made by sets of people who work in one of the government departments where Indians tend to be concentrated, such as the Health Department and the Public Works Department. Here, the organiser is often a senior Hindu officer in the bureaucracy who takes it upon himself to collect money from his Hindu subordinates and colleagues. The set of people thereby represented is heterogeneous in terms of class and caste affiliations. In one case, however, the collection is almost entirely from and on behalf of workers of low caste origins.

The festival proceeds through a series of prescribed and stereotypical stages, which it shares with any of the annual festivals for a South Indian or Ceylonese Tamil temple. Thus, it commences with a purification (punniathānam) of the temple and the surrounds, and the raising of a flag (koddiēttram). It proceeds through the special daily pujas to a climactic day during which worshippers who have made a vow to the deity fulfil that vow. Finally, there is a ritual closing to the festival on the day following the climax, when sanctified water, dyed yellow by turmeric, is splashed around the temple grounds in what is usually described as a carnival-like abandonment of the normal rules of interaction, and which results in the soaking of most people present. Finally, at some time after the festival as such is over, a separate puja is made to the temple's guardian deity 'to thank him for watching over the rites' and for enabling them to take place without problem.

This initial outline sketch of the temple, of some of the actors and of the festival structure provides some immediately apparent problems which

require further explication. Clearly, the relationship of the deities and their temples have, in most cases, a mythical validity which is peculiar to the South Indian/Ceylonese Hindu system. There are major aspects of the cosmological order represented here. These consist primarily of the representation of the male and female cosmic principles whose personifications become in turn the focus of a complex sequence of rites dominated by the mediation of a Brahman. It is the Brahman's caste, of course, which makes him the type of human closest in form to the divine, and therefore most suitable to act as mediator for others. These themes are developed in the discussion which follows.

In part, the organisational arrangements as I have outlined them are immediately discernible as a context for the reproduction of divisions within the Indian social world. Those divisions, as I have indicated in earlier chapters, are themselves a complex of caste, sub-ethnic and class distinctions. However, the relationship between the Brahman, as the employee of the Ceylonese-dominated management committee of the temple, and the clients for whom he performs the rites, is one in which many of these elements are already crystalised. This is a critical relationship because the Brahman temple priest constitutes, by his intervention in the worshipping process, an important judge of the legitimacy of particular practices by which others seek to approach the divine. He also sees himself as the possessor of the correct understanding of the relationship of humans to the divine. The very foundation of a Hindu's social world may itself be rendered highly problematic in the course of a festival which generates debates about the validity of his beliefs and practices. Yet, the Brahman is an employee who must bow to the wishes of his Ceylonese employers, and as an employee they require him to allow practices of which he does not approve to take place in the temple.

It will assist the argument if I elaborate on some of the peculiar features of this temple, and of its festival. The internal structure of this temple's space reflects a significant set of structural features of the contemporary form of eclectic Hinduism practised in Melaka. Though many of the more erudite of the Indians in the town will claim that the South Indians come from the Saivite tradition and should, therefore, follow the tenets of the body of philosophical literature forming the 'Saiva Siddantha', there are in fact very few pandits of this school and even fewer who worship exclusively the deities of the traditional Saiva pantheon. In this temple, the accepted Saivite deities of Subramaniam and Ganesha are juxtaposed with the Vaishnavite Krishna (and incidentally, a wall image of Rama's devotee and warrior commander, the monkey Hanuman), while the Amman Kovil contains a semi-divine figure from the Mahabharata, an essentially North Indian epic. Draupathi is herself set beside a specifically South Indian popular deity in Kammachi. The manifest oppositions of Northern/Southern Indian, Vaishnavite/Saivite, male/female, popular/literary and transcendental/immanent deities are apparent not only to the analyst but also to the more well versed Hindus worshipping at the temple.

In the performance of the festival sequence these oppositions are brought to the fore in the ritual categories which, on occasions, parallel them. Thus, Northern/Southern Indian, Ceylon Tamil/Indian Tamil, high caste/low caste, middle class/working class are significant categorical oppositions for the actors, and relate to sets of people who have particular roles even within the rites. However, these are not merely oppositions. That is, they are not static relations. There is a continual process of negotiation as to the significance of each aspect of both types of

opposition, and an endeavour by some, resisted by others, to rank aspects either implicitly by the ordering of ritual action, or explicitly by statement and discourse.

The importance of these actor-perceived categories is twofold. On the one hand, they reflect distinctions which exist at the level of structuring principle; that is, at a level beyond the control of any individual, and as analytical categories which remain unaltered by negotiations as to content. However, the more important consideration is that the actor-perceived notions are the context of particular ritual practice in the sense that they provide part of the explanatory force for the form of the practices as a specific performance. As such they have the potential to transform practices, and ultimately the structuring principles themselves, under conditions where non-sustainable contradictions emerge.

As I have said, the processes which generate new perceptions, and thereby new practices, derive themselves from developments in the world capitalist system, in the structural relations within national social formations within that system, and organically within cultural systems encapsulated by those social formations, and in the intersystemic relations between these systems. The relationship is not simple, direct, monocausal or uni-directional. Since all elements are present at all times, reproduction and transformation of the relations structuring action are dependent to some degree on each element in all cases. The reciprocity and simultaneity of these relations are made apparent in the following account, and we shall return to the analysis of the rites in terms of these general propositions after considering them first in terms of their specific contemporary context.

Temple rites: the division of labour

Nowhere are the social divisions amongst Melaka's Hindus more clearly displayed than in the 'negotiated order' which is the division of labour in both the mundane world and the ritual organisation of a major temple festival. Each of the highly charged symbolic acts which together constitute the festival has the potential to become the locus of dispute and tension. It will be shown in this section that the difficult choice of a ritual leader, the legitimacy of a particular practice, the control of sacred space and the decision to attend or not to attend a performance all provide opportunities for the manifestation, exacerbation and reproduction of important social divisions. However, each of these situations and the overall form of the festival have a basis in the mythological and cosmological order of contemporary Hinduism. This account takes cognisance of this fact as a crucial feature of the analysis since it is this basis which gives ritual its peculiar social force.

The ritual sequence of the Timithi festival is divided into two by the second of two flag-raising ceremonies eight days before the climactic day. Thus, the sequence of rites is most accurately seen as two festivals conjoined in time and space, performed by the same actors but, nonetheless, symbolically differentiated. The first flag raising (kodiēttram) occurs at the new moon of the mid to late part of the Tamil month of Adi.<sup>1</sup> The flag is prepared anew each year by a man who is said to 'know' how it is done. This man and his brother, along with their sister's son, are considered to be ritually important members of the

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<sup>1</sup>Beck (1972:53) notes that Tamils believe the first eighteen days of Adi are those when the battle of the Mahabharata took place. In this, Draupathi's five husbands defeated their enemy with the help of Krishna.

Malay-speaking Melaka Chitty community. They are accorded this status by other members of that community although (or arguably, because) they are each able to cite a recent, immigrant Tamil, patrilineal ancestor. All three men play crucial roles in these ritual performances. For the flag preparation the three men seated themselves in the Amman Kovil, directly in front of the image of Draupathi. After the Brahman priest had sprinkled sandalwood paste over the specially purchased new white cloth made of cotton, and over the man and his nephew, they began drawing the figure of what was said to be Hanuman, in total silence. The representation was done in red outline and portrayed the loyal monkey commander of god Rama's forces in his fight with Ravana, the demon king of Lanka, who had abducted Rama's wife Sita.

Already, a glimpse of the wide differences in approach to the ritual becomes apparent. The three Melaka Chitties involved in this preparatory act knew precisely what was required from them in terms of a set of ritual acts in order to conform with correct practice for the opening of this festival. They were not unduly concerned to know the strict canonical sources for the choices of figure to be drawn, nor were they very clear on the story of Draupathi and the Pandavas as a complete myth. Rather, they knew detailed versions of episodes relevant for the rites they were to perform. They legitimated their own part in the festival on the basis of past practice while they felt themselves to be faithfully reproducing.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Another informant offered the view that there had been a conflation of the two distinct stories of Sita and Draupathi. He said that it was Sita who proved her purity by walking through fire, on her return to Rama from Lanka. Draupathi never walked through fire, he said.

The flag was raised on its pole in a direct line with Draupathi in her shrine after the priest had first performed a homa fire sacrifice and then a punniathānam purification rite. Whether more appropriate to Sita of the Ramayana or to Draupathi of the Mahabharata, Hanuman remains to all Hindus the symbol of loyalty to Rama as an incarnation of the god Vishnu, who is accorded supreme status by the Vaishnavite school. Draupathi is the wife of the Pandavas, particularly of Arjuna the warrior follower of Krishna. It is to Arjuna that Krishna, another of Vishnu's incarnations, reveals himself. In some of the versions I heard, Draupathi was thought to be the daughter of Krishna's mother's sister. In both cases, Sita and Draupathi represent highly valued aspects of Hindu womanhood. They are both shamed and placed in sexually threatening situations but remain chaste and pure despite the endeavours of their husbands' enemies. This symbolism makes the representation especially significant for the Ceylonese. I have already alluded to the particularly conservative view which Vellalar Ceylonese are reported to hold with respect to women and sexuality. Moreover, the notions of purity and chastity are closely related to conceptions of self-control amongst many contemporary Hindus from middle class backgrounds. Self-control is a quality which is much emphasised in the teachings of many contemporary gurus whose teachings are communicated to Melaka's Hindus in magazines, books, and in the course of lecture tours which an increasing number of such swamis are undertaking in Malaysia.

The homa and the punniathānam are ceremonies which, though requiring the assistance of a washerman (vannan), remain very much under the control of the Brahman priest. It is his knowledge, especially of the mantras in sanskrit, which give these ceremonies their power. As is shown below,



his control is temporarily relinquished after the nāvathāniam or planting of nine grain seeds has been performed. In this rite, the nine seed types are planted by all the 'officials' of the temple, to the accompaniment of the Brahman chanting mantras, in an earthen pot of soil, as a symbol of the desire for the festival to be fruitful. The positive sign that it has been so, according to informants, was that the seeds should have germinated and grown healthily by the end of the sequence. Success of this sort is important to all participants since divine approval is thought to have been shown in this manner. However, for the temple committee members, and for other senior people who do the planting, there is a question of personal prestige and of group status involved. This is because the act of planting not only marked the status of the set of people who did it, but also symbolically asserted their responsibility for the conduct of the rites. Assertion of responsibility, and thereby of authority, does not necessarily correlate with actual power or control over the total performance. We shall see repeatedly that such power or control are in fact very tenuous for the largely Ceylonese temple officials. Nevertheless, the success of the festival as shown by a luscious growth of the nine types of food grain (each of which is highly laden with symbolic import) enables the Ceylonese to seek legitimacy in their claim to be the blessed authorities whose guiding hands have ensured benefits for all.

Once the nāvathāniam rite has been completed by the offering of a single flame from a camphor lamp to both female deities, the Brahman's control over the event is immediately lost to the three Melaka Chitties spoken of earlier. Carrying the trident (soolam) associated with the female aspect of the divine, with two pots, a parang (curved chopper) and a

large bunch of small margossa branches in full leaf, these specialists move off to the front of the Chitty community's temple dedicated to Māriamman. They are accompanied, for the most part, on this short journey by other Chitties and South Indians, rather than by Ceylonese. The trip is said to be an alternative to adjourning to a river or pond. In this case, the major actors did not enter the temple but bathed themselves and the pots, trident and margossa in the water of the small tank in the front of the temple. The trident and the margossa branches were then stuffed into the pots which had already been placed on some uncooked rice on a banana leaf. The pandaram (non-Brahman priest) of the Māriamman temple then made a small puja before the pot which had been filled with water and which is thus transformed to a karagam.

In Tamil "karagam" has a secondary definition as water of the Ganges, the most powerful water in the Hindu world. Though no one offered me the exegesis that the puja transforms normal water to Ganges water in the karagam's case, they did do so for the more frequently encountered kumbum in which the prime symbolism is of the transformation of a pot, coconut and mango leaves into a divine image, 'dressed' in an intricately woven thread.

The important point for the argument at this juncture is that the working class Chitties and South Indians are again generally not concerned to elaborate symbolic meanings exegetically. They are, instead, concerned with the correct performance of the rites in order to ensure the correct outcome to their efforts. Thus, even before the puja was complete, one of the two older men began to go into trance, leaping about, shaking his head and thrashing his arms around his body. He eventually grabbed the

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parang (chopper). This had also been washed and had sacred ash smeared in three horizontal lines in three places across its blade, besides being spotted with red kunkuman powder and yellow sandal paste. Like the three prongs of the trident, the point of the parang has had a lime placed over it, 'to stop all the power coming out'. The smearing with ash, and the spotting with kunkuman and sandal, besides being symbolic, amongst other things, of death and purity, life and motherhood, and coolness and control, respectively, are the standard procedure for transforming the mundane into the sacred. In taking up the parang then, the man is completing the process of taking in the spirit of the minor guardian deity which accompanies all female gods, in this case, the 'strong man' Katovarayan.

In contrast to the coming of Katovarayan with all the violent struggle he has in order to emerge, the younger carrier of the karagam waited quietly, feet apart, arms folded and eyes closed until quite suddenly his breathing increased, a spasm passed through his body and with a cry he surged forward and swept the pot up onto his head and immediately turned to march briskly off down the lane leading towards the road where some 300 metres away the Draupathi temple stands. As he reached the road junction, he encountered the small temple dedicated to Siva. Here, as Amman, equivalent in local thought to Sakti, Siva's female and active aspect given form, he stopped before the entrance 'to pay respect' and to be offered a flame in arāthi which had already been offered to Siva.<sup>1</sup> This over, he moved off down the road and back to the Draupathi temple.

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<sup>1</sup>In a rare picture above the door of the shrine, and in myth, Siva is represented as being the source of the Ganges which flows from his matted locks. As such his origin as the source of Sakti or the active, engaged, aspect of the divine is here being acknowledged.

There he was received by the Brahman priest with another arāthi, before rushing forward into the shrine where none but the priest and his assistant normally venture. Here, he placed the karagam on a raised shelf beside the nāvathāniam pot and collapsed to his knees to pray before the image of Draupathi. He then picked up the flag which had been stored on the same shelf and brought it to the front of the temple, where aided by his uncles and the priest, he ensured that the flag was spotted with sandal and then he tied it to the prepared flagpole. The priest waited while the Chitties raised the post and aligned it carefully on a north-south axis. When it had been set in its hole, the priest made a puja. The elaborate puja incorporated the tying of saffron threads to the wrists of the deities in both temples and to the lectern on which the books of the Mahabharatam rest throughout the festival.

It has already become apparent that the tenuousness of the control of the Ceylonese temple management over the relationships inherent in the festival is pervasive. From mundane aspects of the organisation and performance of the ritual through to the supra-mundane, the Ceylonese perceive that their relationships with others are fraught with the potential for collapse and breakdown. Yet, theirs is the responsibility for the setting of the conditions of success, and it is a burdensome responsibility to some precisely because of the unpredictable nature of these relationships. Both the Brahman priest and the Chitty pusaris (ritual officiants) receive monetary payment for their parts in the proceedings, and are therefore engaged in a form of contract. However, the priest is a permanent employee of the temple whereas the others gain very little financially, are subject to few sanctions, and yet remain indispensable. It is the temporary and contractual nature of the

relationships with the major actors in the performance which is the main problem for the Ceylonese. There are no jajmani-type caste relations which exist to bind the high caste Ceylonese to lower caste performers. In their absence, even in the ritual arena, all relationships entailed in performance are potentially fragile and, therefore, problematic.

This is not to say, of course, that caste and caste-based perceptions are irrelevant to the explanation of the principles ordering relations between the Ceylonese and others. It is, instead, to suggest that caste itself is an uncertain transformation of caste in South Asia in this situation. Uncertain in both the sense that it is very much in a state of flux, and in the sense that people who know their own and other people's caste are not sure what that knowledge implies in the contemporary Malaysian context.

The Melaka Chitties express their involvement in the festival in terms of rights of usage and of plain necessity. From their point of view, the Ceylonese are seen to want the prestige of the event but not to want "to get their hands dirty". The Chitties, on the other hand, have always known what must be done, and have simply got on with the job. Not to do so would be offensive to the deities and such neglect would be potentially disastrous for individuals and possibly the community as a whole. No one can know with certainty the consequences of non-performance, only the gods. However, everyone knows the rites should be performed. It is up to the Chitties to undertake the task, as they are the only ones who know what is required and who are prepared to do it.

From the moment when the kodiēttram is completed and the normal puja sequence to the deities has been performed, focus shifts to the books of the Mahabharata which receive a special arāthi. The book is given to one man who commences his marathon task of reading a Tamil version of the Mahabharatam from beginning to end, before the double festival is complete. This exercise is reported to be a recent innovation and is conceived of as an act of devotion which brings not only merit to the man who reads, but also to the temple and organisers as a whole. It would be insufficient to see this as merely another example of the 'sanskritisation' process of seeking legitimacy and enhancing status for an upwardly mobile or status-threatened group. Nevertheless, it does mark an attempt by the Ceylonese Tamils who have successfully wrested control of the temple from others in recent years, to extend their control over the meaning of the actual ritual practices which take place in the course of the festival. This is important to their maintenance of status associated with class and caste positions in the local community. It is also important for the status of the Melaka Ceylon Tamil community with respect to the Ceylon Tamil communities in other centres of Malaysia. This latter aspect is particularly crucial for success in the marriage negotiations whose 'conservative' nature and expensive implications distinguish this largely endogamous group.

In many respects, the Ceylonese are the most educated and religiously conservative sub-category of Indians, as has been mentioned earlier. It is they who are most knowledgeable about Saiva Siddantha, and it was they who ensured the performance of a special puja to mark the astrological anniversary of a major 'Tamil Saint' and composer of religious verses, Sundaramurthi Nayanar, which fell on the eighth day of the 1976

celebrations. Later in the same sequence, an obayam was made to mark the Kataragama festival day at the major Subramaniam pilgrimage centre in southern Sri Lanka (Ceylon). Throughout the festivals, whenever a Ceylonese Tamil was prominent in the offering group, or the obayam was made on behalf of the temple itself, the organisers ensured that one or more Ceylon Tamils who were able sang appropriate verses from the classic Tamil 'hymns' composed by the 'saints' in the Saivite tradition.

Though there is a pervasive and continuing concern with orthodox Tamil Saivism shown throughout the ritual performances at the temple, the annual celebration of Krishna Jayanthi fell during both festival sequences which I was able to observe and was lavishly undertaken on behalf of Malayāli (Kerala) plantation managers. It included discourses on Krishna by prominent Ceylonese devotees. This is one of two pujas offered specifically for Krishna, at this time, the other being performed on behalf of the Government Medical Department. This latter rite celebrates the role of Krishna as the messenger for peace, seeking to mediate between the warring parties of the Mahabharatam, the first celebrates his advent to this earth and the victories he is ultimately responsible for.

The point is that while there is symbolic opposition between the two emphases on Krishna and Siva, these are subordinated in the performances, and the dominant theme of the rites at this stage is the need to know and correctly understand the theology of Hinduism. This is a repeated middle class concern and is closely related to their growing efforts to control the meaning of Hindu ritual in such a way as to reflect a concept of its 'ancient rationality' and 'eternal truths' as being most

appropriate for 'modern' life. Control of symbolic acts is possible through the control of the priest, an employee of the Ceylonese-dominated committee, and through the selective interpretation of appropriate action in the light of textual evidence. This is facilitated when the offering is being made by another middle class group, especially where multiplex ties already exist between the parties concerned, but it is never an entirely successful ploy, as we shall see.

The major problem for the Ceylonese lies in the fact that they must incorporate other Indians into the ritual action, in order to cover the financial burden, and to enhance their status. In terms of the festival as an event, its prestige depends on a direct comparison with the festivals of two other major Subramaniam temples run by different South Indian Tamil groups, and with the festival of the Chitty Māriamman temple and another smaller Ganesha temple. In Ceylon the problem of how the standing of a temple and its ritual are made more prestigious is easily solved by relating the structure of the temple and the form of its ritual to the Saiva Agamas (see Pfaffenberger 1977, for example). In Melaka, there is neither the land nor the wealth to create a completely new Agamic temple exclusively for the Ceylon Tamils. Moreover, since the relations between the essentially high caste Ceylonese and the other Indians is either in the context of a working situation where both are employed, the Ceylonese usually being bureaucratic superiors, or alternatively on a contract basis whereby a barber, for example, cuts hair in a salon or a dhoby collects and delivers laundry on a regular payment basis, no Ceylonese is able to assume or demand automatic respect, subordination or even acquiescence. Many Ceylonese will have no direct knowledge of Indians who will attend the temple, but they will



seek out specialists they require for temple and domestic duties, from among their number.

Given that the Ceylonese community was forced to seek control of a temple already in existence, there is another problem for them in the pre-existing form of that temple. The temple they have control of now is said to have originally been one of the many in the area, which were erected by the Melaka Chitty community in the days when their numbers and influence in the town were much greater. As I have said elsewhere, the Chitties trace their origins back to the foundation of Melaka, but they have continually accepted new migrants into their community. Many of these appear to have come from the north of the old Madras state of South India, in the Telegu-speaking area which is now part of Andhra Pradesh. Amongst their number are some of the Southern Vaishnavites, traces of whom may still be found in the names and death rites of individual families still in the community. It may be that the Draupathi temple had its origins in one such family. In any case, the oral tradition has it that the original shrine was a thatched affair to Draupathi, and that it became a centre for worship for later migrants, South Indian railway workers and others, who developed the temple and erected images to the favourite South Indian deity Subramaniam and his brother Ganesh. It is now impossible to know whether the Krishna shrine preceded these, but it has been present for as long as any informant was able to recall, though the actual present image was erected by a Ceylonese who is respected in that community and who has had long association with other Indians.

It is inconceivable to the Hindus of Melaka that they should allow any deliberate removal or destruction of the shrine or image of any Hindu deity, where this can possibly be avoided. For a group seeking status, therefore, it is incumbent upon them that they do not neglect the original deities of any shrine of which they gain possession. Furthermore, in this case, the change of control of the temple committee did not alter patterns of festival worship which had existed prior to this change. Records of the performance of Timithi go back to early in this century. Consolidation of Ceylonese control of the temple appears to have taken place only after the second world war. It is only in the intervening period that the male images have been elevated to their present importance in the overall structure of the temple complex.

Thus, the contemporary grandeur, comparatively speaking, of the Ceylonese-dominated temple is largely a product of the effort that community has put into enhancing the Subramaniam Kovil, initially with the incorporation of the middle class South Indians, and latterly mostly alone. The Amman Kovil is historically and contemporarily associated with the Melaka Chitty community. It is not inappropriate that the Chitties should be associated in this manner with the active female aspect of the divine. As the 'engaged' side of the all-encompassing universal spirit Siva, Sakti as the female principle is vital to the continued well-being of the human world. Her personality is manifold and she incorporates all the active traits in her innumerable forms. She embodies the universal contradictory features of infinite love and implacable hostility, of total care and total disdain for mortals. Her pleasure is achieved by correct propitiation, her wrath by neglect. She is the ultimate arbitrator of human destiny, given Siva's characteristic

disengagement from such matters except under very unusual circumstances. Her will may at times appear capricious, and certainly the Hindus of working class backgrounds were ambivalent in their mixture of respect tending to fear and love tending to adoration of the different forms of Sakti. Yet, for all this, one of the major Chitty pusaris was adamant that his own relationship to Amman, especially in the form of Māriamman, was so intimate that the normal rules of interaction could be suspended and he could assume a privileged access to her beneficence.

For Chitties, as for some other lower caste Indians, the mundane social world is a place of precarious relations with apparently capricious and powerful others who dominate their existence. These powerful mundane forces, embodied in human bureaucratic form, also require constant placation in order to ensure stability. Stability, that is, to the extent that they are able to minimise the structurally inbuilt tendency towards degradation which working class and middle class Indians alike deem to be their present fate. Chitties seek to placate or cajole the female principle of the divine in order to gain her positive intervention in, or her passive acquiescence to their existence in such a way as to ensure security of income and residence in a rapidly altering employment situation, and in an urban context where they continually experience the pervasive intervention of the State. For the Melaka Chitties, and indeed, for many other Indians, there is a perceived direct relationship between their success in supra-mundane relations and their success in mundane social relations. In both cases, it is taken for granted that relations are precarious and based on the acknowledged dominance of others. In both cases too, it is assumed that success breeds success. Melaka Chitties and other working class Indians believe

that wealth facilitates the promotion of one's cause by the capacity it provides for lavishing suitable gifts. Middle class Ceylonese and Indians mostly recognise that they should give according to their capacity, if they wish to reproduce the conditions for their wealth; though this is not to say that they all treat their relationship with the deities as one involving purely instrumental giving in the form of bribery. It is more the case that life is seen as an uneven progression of episodes and crises which may occasionally be smoothed in advance, or else somewhat alleviated when they occur. What is certain is that long-term success is only conceivable for most Indians if Amman is on your side.

The opening sequence of the festival highlights the extent to which the Chitties identify with the female principle of the divine. This identification extends, in fact, to the point of being literally taken over by her in trance, the conditions for which they voluntarily produce. This is arguably the ultimate form of subjugation to a dominant force. However, it is precisely this embodiment of the divine form which had questionable legitimacy and which renders subsequent practices problematic for the secularly-dominant Ceylonese and the normally ritually-dominant Brahman. To deny the Chitties entrance to the temple's inner sanctum would be to risk not only their personal alienation and potential loss of cooperation in future contexts where their labour would be virtually irreplaceable, but would also entail entering a potentially overwhelming debate over the status of the entranced man and the possibility of investing the human form with divine presence. Besides, few Ceylonese were certain they could tell a true possession from a false, and they would therefore also be risking open defiance of the deity herself.

Nevertheless, the Ceylonese generally talk of possession in sceptical tones, implying if not stating that it is a phenomenon mostly apparent amongst low caste and ignorant people. Meanwhile, the Chitties perform these rites conscious that they would probably not be in a position to do so if they were bound castes, as David (1972) calls them, i.e. tied by jajmani relations. Moreover, they use their role in this and other festivals in a manner precisely aimed at displaying resistance to being placed in the position of jajmani-bound castes with all the low status connotations that would carry. Chitties are prepared to permit symbolic statements of interdependence with Ceylonese but avoid any situation which would suggest permanent symbolic subordination.

In the evening two days before the main Timithi rite itself, a ceremony known as akkani kapparai kandalai is a major part of the worship. In this, the same Chitty actors involved in the karagam rite again play the central figures. The name of the rite connects it clearly with Agni, the god of fire who receives the oblation in the homa puja at the opening of the festival. The answer I got when I asked what this ceremony meant, however, always referred to it as a custom which is "always done for Amman" if the respondent was a Chitty, or that it was something "these Chitties do" if the respondent was a Ceylonese. Occasionally, a Ceylonese would elaborate upon the symbolic significance of fire as the purifier, and as the supreme image of the divine, with its evident light and energy but lack of form and substance.

The rite itself follows a changing of the karagams (now two as there had been a kodiēttram for Kammachi Amman six days earlier) in a repetition of the rite described earlier. Once again, when the Brahman has

performed arāthi to welcome the karagam, he has to stand back while the Chitties take control. A pot is brought out from the shrine and washed. Betel leaf and limes are placed in it and then pieces of chopped wood. Each piece of wood is given by older Chitties to the devotees who press forward to take it, hold it in front of them and chant a short mantra to Amman. They then hand the wood back to the Chitty who places it in the pot. Ghi and camphor are placed on it as all the devotees, men and women, Ceylonese and Indian, who have given wood watch in silence. The priest garlands the pot and then performs a small puja. When he has made arāthi, to the pot and the images of both Ammans, he takes a small piece of burning camphor from the lamp and places it on the wood in the fire pot.

On this occasion, the central Chitty bathes in the tank at the front of this temple itself. He does so after meditation upon the fire gathering force in the pot and after limes have been cut and tossed into the air in the temple forecourt to appease any interfering spirits (pēy). Having bathed, he dons red and black head and waist cloths. Again, a trance comes and the man moves back to the temple in a rapid march. Here, he picks up the now fiercely burning pot and raises it to his head. He circles the temple once in a clockwise direction (i.e. keeping it on his right hand) and stops briefly before the Subramaniam entrance before moving off down the lane leading to the main road. Here he turns and makes his way back to the front of the Amman temple<sup>1</sup> where he sits with

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<sup>1</sup>It is said that in past years, before police restrictions were imposed, the akkini carrier would have left the temple precincts entirely to carry his burden around the neighbourhood streets. Such encompassing of mundane space by ritual practice takes place at other climactic moments in this and other Hindu festivals, when the deity is deemed to be surveying her domain and giving the gift of her divine presence to

the fire pot on his lap on a chair facing Amman. A tray of ash (vibhutti) is brought to him and he distributes this to the devotees who press forward. Individuals strive to lean close to his ear or have an intermediary convey a problem they are suffering to him. A barely intelligible response may be forthcoming in Tamil, or a devotee may just be given ash or have it placed on his forehead. There is much disorder and pushing as the men crush forward. Ceylonese are among those at the fore, but they must take their chance like all others. The women wait until the men have finished or until summoned by 'Amman'. The men move away and an only slightly less chaotic few minutes ensue as the women seek reassurance or advice. Eventually, the carrier puts the pot down on the floor before Amman, and collapses. He is carried into the Subramaniam shrine to be brought round, while the devotees rush forward to 'take the flame' by wafting their hands over it and themselves in what is seen as the receipt of the divine blessing.

Two important things occurred when the fire pot was placed on the ground in the 1976 festival. The first was the immediate move to the Ganesha shrine by the Brahman priest, ringing his hand bell and forcing the sounding of the large bell which stands outside the temple and which sounds at the beginning of all major pujas. The second was the differing answers I got to the question "Who possessed him?". By the Ceylonese temple secretary, I was told he was possessed by Draupathi; by a young Chitty, I was told it was Katovarayan.

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(continued) those who cannot visit the temple, or to those who wish her to honour their homes. Since the riots of 1969, police permits for public processions of this type have been harder to obtain and most religious festivals are restricted to one procession in the course of the events. The aim is to reduce the inter-ethnic tension which such highly charged symbolic acts are thought to generate

The Brahman's concern was clearly to bring the ritual back under his control as soon as possible and to order the rites according to Agamic principles. For the temple secretary, the involvement of the Ceylonese in the chaotic behaviour surrounding the possession was only non-degrading if the deity present was a form of the divine, given the sanction of the 'high' sanskritic texts. To the Chitty, what mattered was the power of the god and its ability to affect the order of the lives of the devotees, or at least foretell what that order might be.

So far in this account of Timithi, the theme of control has been a dominant aspect of the analysis. Here, I should point out that the concern with control permeates not only local understandings of temple practice, but also understandings of the progress in spiritual development of individual Hindus, both in this world and beyond. The problem for the analyst becomes one of how to account for the relationship between a supposed single ideology which contains major internal contradictions and the diverse social behaviour of those who label themselves in terms of that ideology "Hindu", and sometimes make that synonymous with being Indian. Ceylonese, well educated Hindus, often argued that the path of Jnana, the Hindu path of spiritual progress whereby ultimately one may seek self-realisation through "knowledge", was the best approach to God. This type of knowledge requires self-discipline and study. Thus, the best relationship with the deities according to people of this persuasion is one which emphasises studious contemplation and rigorous self-examination.

By contrast, Chitties and other working class Indians frequently engage in worship which conforms more closely with one of the other major paths



to realisation of God, which is also laid down in the classical Hindu literature and which is known as Bhakti (see Chapter 6). Here, the emphasis is on abandoning oneself totally to the divine in adoration of her chosen form, one may ultimately realise her through love. Even where middle class Hindus readily accept the idea of Bhakti, their approach to what constitutes 'love' or worship of the divine and what abandonment means is more restrained. Though many working class Indians do not feel the need to intellectualise their practices, or render them legitimate by reference to literary discourses on methods of approaching divinity, the fact that such texts do exist and may be cited does create a difficulty for many Ceylonese who feel antipathy towards working class religious practices such as those here described.

A major example of the problem occurs in a specific practice such as animal sacrifice where many Ceylonese and South Indian middle class Tamils now unequivocally condemn the slaughter as being contrary to the notions of ahimsa and vegetarianism which are canonically correct in their interpretations of the texts. However, it is not so easy to deny the legitimacy of a trance possession which is taken by others to be a deity manifesting itself and which produces an apparently divine command for sacrifice. No sacrifice was being demanded at the Ceylonese temple at the time of my fieldwork, and none had been offered for many years, almost certainly from the time when the Ceylonese had gained effective control over the temple. In another temple where some Chitty and some lower middle class South Indian involvement was beginning to become apparent (though the temple was originally founded by and for low caste labourers), there was such a confrontation. Sacrifice persisted because it was demanded in trance possession, but with resistance. Indications

were that in time a process of situational redefinition would see middle class domination turn divine inspiration into spirit possession by a malevolent misleader. In the case of the practices of the Chitties in the Ceylonese temple, there was not yet sufficient political dominance to enable the less radical but nonetheless disturbing practices of the Chitties to be eradicated. Moreover, Ceylonese discourse on the problem did not match their own practices when confronted by possession and the 'unorthodox' consequences in their temple.

The notions of bodily control and self entailed in the Ceylonese evaluation of trance and possession as dangerous or misleading relates directly to the ideas of the relation of sacred and bodily space dealt with in earlier chapters. As I indicated in that discussion, the human/divine body is a model for the form of the temple and individuals refer to their bodies as their personal temples. As such, the body should be maintained like a temple, pure, clean, free from engagement in the worldly distractions, and as an ever-open reception centre into which the divine will readily enter. By educated Hindus in Melaka, this is deemed to require great self-control, self-examination and self-correction. A person must be ever-watchful for unwarranted invasion. That invasion might be of a physical or an ethereal nature, it may even be as insubstantial as an impure, distracting or tempting thought which makes one lose sight of one's goal. To high caste Ceylonese, the actions of low caste and, from their perspective, ignorant people are almost bound to lead to distraction and invasion by evil spirits (pēy). One Ceylonese informant was able to say categorically that 95 percent of the possessions one saw were cases of evil spirits imitating deities for their own nefarious ends. Thus, it can be seen that there exists a

tension if not a complete schism between the conceptions of order inherent in Ceylonese understandings of religious advancement and the superficially chaotic abandonment to the force of divine presence which pervades many of the most dramatic working class religious performances. This differentiated pattern comes to the fore once again in the sequence of rites which follows some days further on than those which we have so far examined.

On the day following the akkini rite, another event occurs over which Ceylonese control is tenuous. It amounts to a symbolic re-enactment of an episode of the Mahabharata in which Arjuna, Krishna's devotee and Draupathi's husband, climbs to a high place (a tree in some versions, a mountain in others) where he practises ascetic self-denial and meditation in order to achieve wisdom and God's grace that he might better defeat his enemies. Here, the same Chitty actor takes the central role, this time unequivocally as Arjuna, but the control of the priest and the temple organisers is more apparent as the Mahabharatam reader chants the appropriate verses from the Mahabharata and the priest controls the timing and form of worship offered to 'Arjuna'. However, Arjuna dominates as he climbs the specially erected pole in front of the temple to a platform where he makes a puja with the use of the lamp and other necessary accoutrements he has carried up in a bag. When the puja is complete, he showers all below with flowers taken up on a tray he carried as he ascended. His last act is to drop some lighted camphor to start a fire which has been laid at the base of the pole. He then descends to pass through this fire and to meet Krishna who examines him on what he has learnt during his meditation. Some informants claimed that it was not Krishna but Siva, the arch ascetic who met Arjuna on his

return and who gave him the second bow, the one which will ensure his victory. In the second enactment I saw, there was a mock battle after Arjuna's descent which took place round the post. In each case, the main idea as expressed by all the participants was of the ultimate victory of good over evil, right over wrong, in the ensuing battle between Arjuna and his enemies the Kauravas.

It was a constant complaint of the Ceylonese at both performances of this rite I observed, and on other occasions, that the fact that they had to rely on the Chitties meant that things did not run to time and things were often not done "properly". There was never the suggestion that the rites should not be performed, however,

On all occasions of this type there is generated a level of tension internal to the ethnic category whose festival it is. The temple authorities and the priest, for example, start processions in a formal manner, and they seek to retain control of the progress for as long as possible. However, there is here a very public display of the interdependence of the different sets of Hindus. Not only do ritual experts control a lot of the ongoing ritual, but the ritual artifacts, especially the ornately carved chariots, mostly belong to the Chitties. It is quite clear in observing such events that the Ceylonese are constrained by the nature of the relationship to acknowledge a degree of mutual dependence very different to that the older ones remember as being the norm in the context of Ceylon. Classically, this is minimised by a simple policy of avoidance or, at the very least, restriction of interaction, thereby evading the necessity to engage on more or less equivalent terms with those who are conceptually their ritual inferiors. Such a

policy is not possible in the festival context to anywhere near the same degree as in other circumstances. Although some people remain aloof from the Chitties and working class Indian Tamils, throughout their lives, except possibly to employ an Indian servant, prominent men who are important to the temple must, of necessity, work quite closely with such people to ensure the success of the festival. On the whole, however, the Ceylonese still tend to give verbal directions and then stand back while others perform their tasks, often allowing the others to get on with their work in their own way even when the comments of the onlookers suggest that they do not approve of the details of the procedure. Indeed, Ceylonese comments that they are unable to control the Chitties and South Indians are a frequently observed part of these events. They are usually made in a tone which suggests some regret and frustration.

These observations make it all the more strange to note the extent to which the Ceylonese appear to capitulate to a loss of their own self-control in the possession sequence I outlined above. At the climax of the fire-carrying ceremony, the Ceylonese jostle and are jostled in the seething press of men and women from all castes and backgrounds who are surging forward to gain help from the deity. Paradoxically, it is the concern for establishing, maintaining or re-establishing a pattern, an order, on their lives which is said by devotees to be motivation and cause for the seeming chaos and disorder. The lower caste Indians state that they are seeking to impose an order on what they see as their unpredictable lives, while the higher caste informants wished to ensure that their personal and collective notions of order and integrity, both physical and spiritual, were maintained or regained.

The symbolic elevation of the Chitty, who through the community's history of intermarriage would technically be outcaste according to strict Hindu orthodoxy, to the status of at least a semi-divine companion to the deities has its recognised irony, of course. The rushing forward of many of the Ceylonese legitimates the elevation to a large extent, though many others remain largely passive throughout the whole sequence, thereby seeking to render their status invulnerable by showing themselves to be above all this. Nonetheless, another ritual inversion has taken place in the social order contained within the spatial parameters of the temple. The lowly have become high, albeit briefly. The literal sense of this, in Arjuna's mounting of the pole, is a violation of normal spatial relations on the vertical plane, entailing the physical subordination of the higher castes for that small time. This is only acceptable if it is rendered legitimate by 'correct' textual recitations, at least for the Ceylonese.

The constant tension and divisiveness of temple practice is apparent for the whole duration of this and other similar festivals. Up to the climax day of Timithi itself, attendance at the major pujas depended on a number of factors. It was clear that even when a major rite was taking place, such as the symbolic marriage of Arjuna and Draupathi, the fact that the obayam was in the hands of a low caste group ensured that very few Ceylonese would come to worship that evening. On the other hand, whenever the responsible party was a Ceylonese or other prominent person of high status, a good turnout was guaranteed. This considerably affected the elaborateness and care with which the priest performed the rites, a fact which caused much unfavourable comment amongst the working class, lower caste population. To a lesser extent, the converse was also

true in that whenever a high status party was offering the obayam and the rite did not involve a spectacle controlled by the Chitties, the number of lower caste Hindus present was often small. Many expressly stated that this was because they felt uncomfortable because the "big shots" would "treat them like dirt". A telling metaphor amongst Hindus.

On the day of the festival climax, all the themes which appear in a piecemeal fashion in the course of the preceding days and in this analysis become manifest in the one time and space. I shall now consider this climax briefly in order to prepare for the summation of the more crucial aspects of my analysis. In many ways, the festival's climax might appear as the time when the focus of collective attention is so clear and so fundamentally shared that the divisions in the Hindu community might have been expected to have become submerged, if not eradicated. Indeed, the atmosphere and the spectacle are very evocative of what observers from many cultures would undoubtedly recognise as peculiarly Indian scenes, and superficial examination would lead one to believe that the time was ripe for a massive display or 'communitas' (Turner 1967). However, it will emerge in the account which follows that any apparent unity of purpose, energy and understanding is illusory.

As regards the day's events themselves, many are elaborate versions of relatively commonplace Hindu rites, but some others, such as the fire-walking, are unique to this occasion in Melaka's calendar of practices. Significantly, this 'unique' event, which is a major feature of this 'Ceylonese' temple is run ostensibly for and by non-Ceylonese. It is this occasion which most unequivocally demonstrates the disjunction between the modes of religious practice engaged in by the different sets

of Hindus worshipping in Melaka. Moreover, it is this series of events which does show where each separate set of Hindus comes closest to achieving *communitas*. At least, they engage in a shared and sharp focusing of ritual attention which has the potential for '*communitas*' in Turner's terms. I shall argue that the schism in regard to approach to religion which becomes clear here highlights and reinforces the process of the reproduction of a whole series of divisions which appear to run parallel to those defined as class- or class-produced divisions but which are in fact interpenetrated by them at all levels. The logical consequence of this, it will be further argued, is the constant replication of contexts and situations which subvert the realisation of a common identity or purpose behind the categorical notion "Indian".

A fairly detailed account of the day's events will enable the analysis to demonstrate the close relationship between performance and understandings of social context, as perceived by varieties of Indians. It will also facilitate closer examination of the process by which symbolic events of such performances are rendered meaningful to the different sections of a population whose assumed sharing of a single symbolic system will thereby be seen to be problematic.

### Timithi

As a single day's events, the thirunal (holy day) of Timithi rates as one of the major spectacles of the Melaka calendar. With respect to the political situation of Indians in Malaysia, this is, of course, no accident. However, leaving aside this aspect of the festival's meaning for the moment, the climax of the festival has a prior meaning which must be seen in terms of the cultural logic of the whole performance.



It will be remembered that the required sequence of an annual celebration for a temple deity culminates in the performance of a major puja on the day when the astrological conditions determine that that deity becomes the sole focus of attention. In this case, the second kodiēttram took place without the festival day for Draupathi having already taken place. Thus, the day of Timithi has to be for her and for Kammachi, whose flag was the second to be raised.

As regards the culmination of the Draupathi aspect of the festival, the day of Timithi celebrates the victory of the Pandavas, the family of Draupathi's husband, over their enemies the Kauravas. This it does by the acting out of another small episode of the Mahabharata in which the distraught Draupathi looks on the fallen Pandavas and the corpse of the arch enemy Duryodhana. In this representation, the younger uncle (MB) of the fire carrier acts out the role of the sariied Draupathi claiming vengeance on Duryodhana, who like the four fallen Pandavas is symbolised in figures made of sand set on the ground beside the temple. Under a sheet, she "drinks his blood", "rips out his entrails" and makes a necklace of them and "fashions a comb from his bones". She emerges looking very like the iconographic representations of the Kāli form of Sakti who is depicted as a fierce, tongue-lolling, blood-drooling and very frightening deity.

While all this is going on, relatively few spectators are around, and other organisers are engaged in preparatory activities for the rest of the day. However, of the spectators present not all were by any means sure of the significance of the rites which were taking place. One informant, a Chitty, assured me that it was Kammachi Amman who "walked

on the fire" in the ceremony to follow and that they were getting all "the business of Draupathi" out of the way in order to get on with Kammachi's rites. However, it is only when Draupathi has taken her vengeance and two flags, one of which had been already raised for the purpose on a special pole in front of the temple, are exchanged (to represent victory of the Pandavas and the defeat of the evil Duryodhana, the Kaurava leader) that the portable images of Draupathi and Arjuna are able to be installed in a temporary shrine outdoors at the head of a fire pit which is being prepared by other South Indians and Chitties.

The Brahman now performs another homa ceremony, purifies the temple and surrounding area of the fire pit. This was said specifically to be in order to prevent any spirits from entering. The priest then lights the stacks of wood which will form the coals for the firewalking which is to follow, with light from the homa fire.

There follows a sequence of rites such as would be seen at this stage of any of the major temple festivals in the town. A ritual bathing of the images of the deities and their anointing in a number of auspicious liquids (abishegam), a major puja and an elaborate meal (annathanam) taken in the temple hall by all devotees present. Finally, late in the afternoon, after all those making or fulfilling a vow have received a saffron thread tied round their wrists by the Chitty carrier, a procession moves off to a river some distance away where they bathe and prepare any ritual burdens (kavadi) they intend to carry as a vow. A puja is made, and the vow-makers, dressed in saffron yellow cloths, take holy ash, pick up their burden or, in a few cases, have a Chitty specialist pierce their cheeks with a vēl, the symbolic spear of Subramaniam, and then walk back

to the temple in a formal procession accompanied by loud music of South Indian drum and clarinet.

Contrasts are once more apparent in some aspects of this small sequence of events, contrasts which serve to reproduce both the social divisions and the differentiated understandings of religious practice amongst different sets of the Hindu population. The temple is well attended at the time of the puja by Ceylonese, Chitties and South Indians alike, though many of the latter category were busily involved in preparations for what was to follow and paid little heed to the puja. The procession to the river, the preparation of ritual burdens and the piercing of devotees' flesh were each marked by the absence of Ceylonese with the exception of two men whose contact with other Indians was recognised as being unusual. These two men were also involved only to the limited extent of overseeing the organisation and timing of the events, a relatively passive role designed essentially to ensure that matters did not get out of hand and that the procession returned to the temple in good time.

A key to understanding the absence of most Ceylonese is to be found in the way in which devotees went into trance on taking up their ritual burdens. In both festivals I witnessed, this was done to the accompaniment of persistent rhythmic drumming, which continued in an only marginally subdued form for the procession's duration. Some of the devotees remained in trance throughout the procession and for much of the subsequent ritual. The concern with understandings of the body and with its adornment which has already been hinted at earlier in this account here comes to the fore. Ceylonese treat as alien the 'invasion'

of bodily space which a trance implies and conceive of its violation by piercing in a similar manner. Moreover, the public display of the body and of one's loss of control of it which are part of being dressed in small saffron cloths and carrying a kavadi through the streets in trance overturns a previous form of understanding about such matters. In Ceylon, especially at the time of the migration of many of the older members of the population, there existed a complex hierarchy of bodily adornment and lack of it, which was associated with caste rank. As high caste Vellalars, or as Koviars, Ceylonese perceive public displays of uncovered torsos as a mark of low caste people acknowledging subordination. Disputes over rights to wear upper garments were reported in the Jaffna peninsula until relatively recently. The only exception to this pattern is in the specific context of the high caste male worshipping in the confines of the temple itself, when he should remove his shift and prostrate himself before the deity as a mark of his humility. For the Ceylonese in Melaka, this custom is now rarely practised and would certainly not extend beyond the strict boundaries of temple space.

A further correlation of bodily display and low status occurs in contemporary Melaka in the essentially class-based ranking of occupations. Men in clerical occupations or in the professions are extremely careful in the style and cleanliness of their dress. Their smart European-style slacks and shirts contrast with the dress of manual workers who often dress practically in shorts and a singlet to do such tasks as road maintenance, electricity cable-laying, Telecom wiring and other similar highly visible work. Since many of the labourers engaged in these occupations are South Indian Tamils, frequently of lower caste origins, it becomes increasingly important to middle class Tamils to symbolically

differentiate themselves through dress. The preoccupation with smart appearance extends beyond the mundane contexts into the temple where men either adopt very smart Western-style clothing or, like their wives, wear superb versions of the Tamil national dress which show their expensiveness in the quality of the material. Expensive jewelry often complements the luscious saris of the women and the shirt and veshti of the men. Working class people too dress smartly for temple if they are able to afford it, though the poorer must always wear clothes which indicate their class location and imply its associated caste status to those who are concerned with such matters. Thus, though it is in principle fine for men to strip themselves before God, it is not appropriate to do so before other men. While the temple, as a representation of the divine body, is an appropriate place to mark the symbolic unity of the divine and the human form, as they are conceptually integrated through imagery, it is inappropriate in other contexts. Even in temple, the emphasis now appears to be on middle class conceptual assimilation to the finery with which the images of the deity are temporarily adorned, rather than any concern to demonstrate the essential unity of all men with the divine form.

By the time the party returns to the temple, the fire pit has been prepared and the hot coals are spread before the portable images of Ganesha, Draupathi and Arjuna placed on a raised outdoor shrine. A pumpkin is set before the other end of the pit and violently quartered and smeared with scarlet kunkuman paste. Informants, especially Chitties, recognise this to be a substitute for the sacrifice of a hen, a practice which was reported as being performed in the 1930's in the contemporary press and possibly continued later. A young, unmarried Chitty man runs

round the pit at top speed, three times, clockwise carrying the 'bloodied' pumpkin. The first devotee, also a Chitty, carrying the karagam which has been made up at the river, and who is always the first to cross the fire, runs to the Amman shrine, through the fire and then a smaller pit of milk and water which has been blessed by a puja. Many other men, but no women, follow across the fire. Most are in at least a light trance which was induced at the river or on entering the temple compound. Men carry small children in their arms and on their shoulders. In theory, to do this, men must have been vegetarian throughout the festival and have refrained from sex, at least for the last three nights. It is recognised that the rules are not always followed and that some men get away with it, but it is thought to be taking a big risk and the price may be severe burns and failure of the vow.

Throughout the whole process of the firewalking ceremony, the Ceylonese take a very low-key role, standing in the background for the most part and attempting to ensure that unauthorised people do not get into the fire pit area which is roped off from a huge crowd of spectators. No Ceylonese ever walks on the fire, I was told, and few middle class people of any background will do so. By contrast, many of the Ceylonese followed the procession which always follows the firewalking. In this procession, three decorated chariots carry the three portable images of Draupathi, Arjuna and Ganesh around the town area. The Ceylonese take great pride in the fact that their temple is the only one to have three chariots go in procession. They complain about the cost of hiring the chariots from the Chitties and of the problems of organisation involved in employing the Chitties to carry the extra lights, banners and large puppet-like figures which precede the procession in order "to catch the

evil eye". Nevertheless, the procession, which takes in all the major areas in which Hindus are to be found, and to which Hindus on route will make offerings, is thought of as a major statement of the status of the Ceylonese community. That status derives from their wealth in part, but is only acknowledged finally because the wealth is held by a high caste group which uses it for religious purposes.

The temple festival procession or oorvalum, which is the culmination of most of the major festivals, is an exceedingly sociologically complex event, not least because of its high symbolic loading. Here, I am able to provide only a partial account designed to develop some of the themes I have explored so far. The periodic excursion of the sanctified image of the deity in its portable form, complete with Brahman in attendance, has to be seen as the symbolic extension of temple spatial relations, both as a set of organising principles and as a set of conceptual relations, into the normally mundane domain of the streets. As I have already hinted, the dominant cultural notions of what is happening as they are expressed locally, usually refer to the god being shown his or her domain, or being both shown and shown to the Hindu population conceptually in her/his charge. This latter aspect is thought to be especially important for those Hindus who are not in a position to attend the temple themselves, for any of a wide variety of reasons. The most frequently drawn analogy is of a royal procession in which a rajah would tour his kingdom, embodying in his person the living reality of power and exacting due homage from his subjects in the process.

As a social phenomenon, the event is a context in which Ceylonese and other Indians alike may show their devotion in a public and accepted

manner by following the chariot along its entire course. In this way they witness and more or less effectively participate in a series of small pujas as the chariot stops before the homes of Hindus. Alternatively, they may choose to be one of those households making an offering, in which case the emphasis is shifted to the idea of the privilege it is to receive the deity as a guest before one's home. In both these ways, the procession clearly marks out almost the entire Hindu population of a major part of the town in the context of a spectacular celebration. As such, processions of this type, of which there were five major examples annually, provide the major symbolic referent of "Indianness" for members of other ethnic groups, especially the Chinese and the Malay observers. It has to be noted, however, that within the analytical framework of the meaning of religious practice in the context of the Indian population itself, this procession has to be understood specifically in relation to those of the temple dominated by other sets of Indians. Thus this cultural event has, like all such performances, a range of meanings at the level of symbolic import, which are emergent from the specific context, in terms of an ongoing dialectic with the historically prior cultural forms and their underlying structures.

It is an important characteristic of the day's events, and indeed those of the whole festival sequence, that they mark out the Ceylonese temple festival as distinctive, and from the Ceylonese point of view, superior to other similar festivals which take place. As there is no single field of activity except for Hinduism as religious practice, in which Indians are engaged collectively in any great proportion to their numbers in the town, there is little scope otherwise for the negotiation of the statuses each set of people aspires to. Far more is going on here though than mere status negotiations.



It should be noticeable, even in the truncated version of the events here described, that there is a strong emphasis in the activities on the female form of the divine, and, in particular, a singular demotion of Subramaniam to a secondary role. Part of Subramaniam's lesser importance in the festival is within the logic of the festival as a celebration of the Mahabharata in which there is no place for Subramaniam. Subramaniam's major festival day is Thaipusam, for Tamils, when the South Indian-dominated temple, which was set up as a direct alternative to the Ceylonese domination of the Draupathi/Subramaniam temple, makes a major effort to outshine the performances of the other temples in the enthusiasm and care with which it performs the rites.

What is apparent throughout the description I have given is the tension between the two major traditions within literary Hinduism. However, the recognition that the Saivite theology usually said to be the religion of the Tamils, is subordinated to the Vaishnavite themes of the Mahabharata must not preclude the highlighting of a parallel process. This is the practical identification for most of the actors present of both female principles (Ammans) with the Sakti of the Saivite tradition. For the non-literary Indians present, it did not matter whether it was Māriamman, Kāliamman, Kammachiamman, or Draupathiamman, she was still the representation of all that is the forceful energy of the divine in action. As a "mother" figure, she may show tender love and indulgence, or she may wrathfully punish wrongdoing. There is no problem for such people then. One makes a vow, walks on fire or carries kavadi to seek comfort and aid in times of trouble and one worships at other times in order to ensure that she has no reason to be angry with you.

For the Ceylonese, it is not so easy. They too are concerned to create order out of apparent or potential disorder. For them though, this must be done by ordering their lives according to the correct understanding of the textual base of their religion. Seeking direct reward or recompense from the god is acting 'selfishly' and marks attachment to the illusory world of maya. This must lead to inevitable continuation of suffering in the long term, through rebirths which may be even worse starting points for achieving the ultimate release and unity with the divine. Thus, the worship of Amman in this ostentatious manner leads inevitably to degradation.

The schism I have described goes beyond the simple division between a transcendental and a pragmatic approach as Mandelbaum (1964, 1969), for example, identified it. It must be acknowledged that this precise distinction is one which is continually echoed in the comments of middle class Indians and is reproduced in their ideology. However, I must point out that the systematic ideological suppression of the validity of the pragmatic approach by middle class Indians is continually undercut by the actions of those among them who attend festivals such as this one and participate in such events as the akkini rite. Also, those who have immediate problems of health, marriage, child-bearing, other familial relations, or of progress in their careers are likely to approach the deities for pragmatic aid. For example, many Ceylonese resort to strategic offerings to Saniswaran, the planetary deity of the nine such deities (navagraham) who is thought to operate the processes of suffering the consequences of past accumulated karma by giving them specific form. This usually occurs after an astrological consultation which has disclosed adverse cosmic alignments, thought to be the source

of one's problems, which are the product of one's karma determining one's birth time. It is not here a case of a distinction which could accurately be termed one which reflects fundamentally different belief systems. It is more a problem of the contextually appropriate form of approach and choice of deity when seeking specific divine intervention for certain types of difficulties being contrasted with an ideological position which ultimately renders all such approaches worthless for middle class Indians unless they are accompanied by a longer-term acknowledgement of ultimate responsibility for one's own fate residing in one's self and one's conduct.

#### The Mahabharata and Melaka

The Mahabharata epic myth centres on a battle of cosmic proportions. It is a battle which itself could be interpreted as a ritual event. Ostensibly the battle is about a dispute between two cousin clans — equal in status as Kshatriyas — arguing over the legitimate control of land bordering the Ganges. I wish to suggest that it constitutes a singularly apt extended metaphor for the human condition of Indians in Melaka. In the symbolic acts which I have shown in performance, and in the process which that performance has become, many of the themes of struggle for control have become apparent; but that notion of control has cosmic implications, ordering not only correct relations between man and man, but also seeking to witness and reproduce the correct relationship between man and God, in this case in the form of Krishna.

Set in the mundane context of apparently chaotic political relations — from an Indian perspective — in which the distribution of political power and economic resources have become problems related to ethnic

categorisation, the social structure and its reproduction appear to have escaped cultural logic. Caste, or even the Hindu religious system as a whole seems incapable of accounting for the social order experienced by contemporary Hindus in Melaka. Order and ranking of human beings in society is self-evidently based on principles other than purity/impurity oppositions, or indeed, any such principles embedded in the historical evolution of Indian culture. Such a conclusion may not be entirely surprising to the social analyst, but is very disturbing to many Malaysian Hindus. The radical disjunction or lack of fit between the dominant cultural system of those Hindus and the governing principles of their wider social lives, raises numerous logical problems for the actors as well as analytical problems for the commentator seeking to explain the relation of a particular belief system and set of religious practices.

More importantly, for Indians at least, it creates situations where contradictions generated by that disjunction become manifest and must be resolved — however incompletely — in the course of social life. It is my contention that ritual action such as that described is a major mode of seeking to resolve these contradictory problems. However, ritual action is not confined to the resolution of problems which are somehow external to itself. Ritual action, as I have shown here, is the location of the generation of problems arising from contradictions which interpenetrate those problems which appear to be generated outside of it. Transformations in the economic and political structures which serve the interests of dominant others are not merely reflected in ritual action, they are made meaningful in it, which is to say that this is the context where they are produced, understood and reproduced from the perspective of Indians.

What has been described in the foregoing pages amounts to the generation of a new and more fundamental opposition in the focal region of ritual's concerns than even purity/pollution. This, I shall heuristically assert, is the opposition of 'Chaos' and 'Culture'. That is to say, for Indians and for the social analyst, the complexities of the urban Malaysian situation make the discovery of a single or even dominant set of structuring principles for the social life of its Indian population extremely difficult. Nevertheless, in seeking to come to terms with the complexity and rapid flow of their social relations, Indians begin, as do we all, with the learned codes they have had passed to them. The rites discussed here may legitimately be seen, therefore, as an attempt to reaffirm a comprehensible order or to re-enculturate chaos.

The Mahabharata epic, the tale of the battle between the forces of disorder and depravity (embodied in the Kauravas) and those of order and integrity (embodied in the Pandavas), is a classic metaphor in this context in that it presents the setting in which many of the problems of contemporary Indian social life appear mirrored in myth, symbolised in the ancient people and events: the world is ruled by others who do not share the value system and the taken-for-granted understandings of the world which either middle class or, least of all, working class Indians demonstrate and reproduce in their religious practice. The principles by which the wider society appears to be structured are beyond the constraints of culture as Indians have created it, yet have to be understood in terms of its evolving form, if Indians are to come to terms with them. Chaos reigns and Indians seek to understand it, mitigate its effects, and ultimately overcome it, through ritual designed to invoke ordered intervention of the deities, or by seeking knowledge and

self-awareness through contemplation on the nature of the wider universe of which their society is but a part, and on the divine forces which order that universe.

In the Mahabharata story and in its re-enactment, both paths are acknowledged and rendered legitimate. Arjuna and his kinsmen collectively employ both approaches and each gains strength from the other. They ultimately succeed in re-establishing a stable order through correct practice of the dharma or duty which they come to understand to be theirs. However, I am not concerned simply to refine the parallels in order to produce elegant structural homologies. Metaphors are important, especially when they move towards metonym, inasmuch as they enable actor and analyst of social life better to understand and reflect upon the lives of those we study. In this case, though, we are not talking of a removed literary device, but of highly engaging action. What I am in fact arguing is that while ritual action certainly reflects social tension and acts in terms of existing cultural logics, it is also the context for the reflection upon and generation of cultural meanings by collectivities of actors in a way which both helps to resolve contradictions produced in social life (including culture) and yet necessarily produces new contradictions which affect the constitution of the reality of the social world beyond its spatial and temporal boundaries.

Specifically, I suggest that the meanings on which this particular ritual focuses attention are entailed in those symbols whose primary referent in this context are the ideas of life as a struggle of the unrighteously oppressed against the people and structural relations which they come to know as the cause of their oppression. The

Mahabharata as metaphor marks processes towards the reconfirmation of order, but it is a transformed order within the social world. Principles of dharma as duty and summoning of direct divine help, in this case Krishna, are rendered superior to ascetic Saivism for producing and reproducing some sense of logic to explain and modify that order. What emerges is an apt conceptualisation of Ceylonese relations with a State which seeks to undermine the established security of class relations on the basis of a categorical distinction of ethnicity, itself founded in part on religious and cultural distinctions.

Indians in Malaysia are a 10 percent minority, only 66 percent of whom are Hindus originating from South India or Ceylon. Diverse in that origin — both in terms of region and caste — and located in the colonialist and neo-colonialist economies in differing positions, these people have never generated an overseas 'caste system' in Dumont's (1970) sense. Yet interdependencies exist and continual attempts are made by higher castes to assert status differentials. They fail, singularly, because imposed problems of ethnic identity in the wider Malaysian society create four encompassing status groups which, partly based on religious conceptions, are constituted locally as 'races'. This promotes larger oppositions of Hinduism: Islam, Hinduism: Chinese Religion, Chinese Religion: Islam, Islam: Christianity, and so on, which diminish the social force of splits within any one religious system.

In the rites which I have considered here, the battle between Hinduism/Indians and the usurping social and cultural system of Islam/Malay is symbolised, as it is symbolised and acted out in the battle for productive resources which is itself conceptually predicated on the power of

divine sources. Thus, the Ceylonese temple ritual as an enactment of the Mahabharata myth becomes a commentary upon and a vehicle for conceptualising Ceylonese social decline or immanent potential decline, in the face of Malay encroachment upon the established territory in the bureaucratic state structure, and upon disproportionate degrees of access to vital resources such as education which the Ceylonese possessed until recently. It can, therefore, be interpreted as a representation of the struggle of two class fractions defined by their ethnicity. Besides representing this struggle, however, it is also a context in which the performance becomes one of a reducing number of settings for confirming and reproducing a high status on all members of the Ceylonese community. This is possible in Melaka only insofar as their class position enables them to mobilise wealth.

Equally, the performance itself enacts the battle between aloof, ascetic Siva as a symbol of Ceylonese self-presentation and both the more immanent Krishna and the active principle of Sakti in the form of Draupathi. Draupathi and Krishna win out because the Ceylonese are forced here, as elsewhere, to incorporate others (largely on their own terms) in order to seek any status to be gained from demonstrating ability to produce the best attended and most potentially transformative festival. But she also wins out because Indians of traditionally low or equivocal status — such as Chitties — may employ their specialist knowledge of specific rituals to negotiate a new identity in this context as Indians essentially of equal worth to those Ceylonese who "talk but can't do".



The battle image in this light becomes the metaphor for the class struggle within the category "Indian" as a Hindu community. However, this is no ordinary class struggle even in a relatively autonomous ideological or political form. Class here is continually overlain by concomitant notions of caste ranking. Chitties and other working class Indians recognise that their struggle is one which strikes at the fundamental basis of Ceylonese conceptions of social order. The ritual is such a powerful metaphor precisely because of the ambiguity of meaning or the ideas enacted, or rather because of its multivalent capacities. Depending upon the focus of the analysis, that is, upon the position of the actors at the present centre, a number of interpretations are available yet all are co-present. Emphasis has to be upon a meaning which is dominant by virtue of the control of the process being exerted by subsets of the population in specific situations. The shifting patterns of control and the changing role of the Brahman priest amply highlight the precarious nature of the dominance anyone is able to exert even momentarily and should warn us of the dangers of seeking a single unified meaning to the symbolic activity observed.

Draupathi and Arjuna's battle is everybody's battle then, because Indian culture as code and practice has to be shown to be equivalent to if not superior to Islamic culture if Indians are to survive in Malaysia.

However, the very nature of Hinduism or an Indian culture is problematic as we have seen. It is in performances such as this Timithi festival that the ongoing process of constructing the dominant notions of what constitutes that culture are mainly achieved. The process is one of creating conflicting practices and interpretations and then seeking to resolve the contradictions they manifest and generate. Conflicts are

necessarily generated too in the course of the working out of such contradictions which are inherent in the very structure of the belief systems engaged here. It is these conflicts as social actions which being resolved may create new structural relations as an emergent property. Certainly, the principles of Indians' social life, customarily glossed as caste, are in a state of flux and the religious underpinnings of previous definitions of correct orders of social relations are being brought into question as the power to enforce them disappears.

Religious ideology does change then better to match the 'objective interests' of Indians as an enforced category engaged in survival, but this change is necessarily incomplete and the new match always imperfect. Religious ideology is never in a one-to-one relationship with 'objective relations' however these are identified and objectivity is always a symbolised projection. Symbolic oppositions and manipulations represent and recreate the social order but also provide the contexts and means for altering social relations, as they themselves become transformed as carriers of meaning by their social context. The transformative potential of ritual performance is not self-contained but always dialectically related to context.

In the oscillations of control of the festival and the movements from inside the temple — the area of most formal cultural expression — to outside where less formal, less predictable events occur, we see the dialectic of the attempts of the core, central culture and the people who seek to control it, having to react and creatively respond to outside forces which affect their own dominance. The conceit of Hindus "taking to the streets" is not over-stretched perhaps here. The vulnerability

of isolated, tightly bounded pockets of Hinduism has become apparent to many Hindus. New forms of self-reproduction seem to be required and they involve a high risk. The integrity of the Ceylonese community has been shattered by its recent exposure to the naked forces of power. Control of one's fate appears to have slipped from the grasp of the Ceylonese individually and collectively, or at least appears to be about to slip irrevocably. For the Ceylonese this new state is a completely novel experience. Not so for the working class Indians, of course, who have long been forced by powerful social forces beyond their ken.

The decade of the sixties saw the by then wealthy Ceylonese consolidate their dominance of this temple and increasingly control the ritual performances by the engagement of a Brahman priest. Yet, by the end of the decade it was all too apparent that isolation of this small minority from the wider Indian community was doomed to result in the eventual loss of any autonomy as their social position was eroded. The problem then became one of how to maintain status and the ideological dominance for their value system in the context of this necessary rapprochement with the other Indians. In 1976 and 1977 I observed this process still very much in progress.

Finally, it can be seen that the transmission of culture to the following generations through symbolic representations such as religious festivals is not unproblematic here. It depends upon negotiating the accepted contextual meaning in terms of historical integrations of possible practical meanings and of literary meanings which may be the same or different. Power relations do not of themselves permit the total overthrow or total manipulation of the system, though we must recognise

differential abilities to select interpretively. In the context of Indians and Hinduism in Melaka, ideology must be seen neither to simply reflect infrastructural relations nor to provide the simple basis for the form of practices. It must refract such practices and be distorted by them. There is anyway, I would argue, no single cultural logic, structure or ideology inherent in Hinduism, as it is practised by Hindus. The oppositions apparent to the analyst reflect different relations of power and economic locations, and differential access to knowledge of aspects of Hindu practice and its codification, which confront each other in the process of a festival performance.

The working out or accommodation of contradictory features is a small part of the ongoing dialectic of Indian social life as a whole. It is the festival which marks and engages in this dialectic, and which relates Indians to their world in relations both with other Indians and with non-Indians, with the powerful and the not-so powerful. It is not merely the working out of the abstract logic of social relations, or empirically observable negotiations about internal categorical status, though it is both these things. It is also the process of creating an ideology, an ideology which is never achieved as an absolute, but which must be achieved as an object in order to confront the object which is the conceived meaning of the dominant ideology of the ruling Malays, and which is perceived as a threat to all Indians, especially to the Hindus.

It is also potentially the creation of another object, the identity "Indian" as a cultural phenomenon, in response to the categorical assumption of its own prior existence or, at least, to its incorporation into policy-making "as if" it already existed as 'fact'. It is perhaps in

this transformative potential that the greatest strength of the Timithi performance lies.

## CHAPTER 8

### DO 'INDIANS' EXIST?

#### THE POLITICS AND CULTURE OF ETHNICITY

##### Preliminary remarks

The preceding chapters of this thesis have discussed the political economy of the emergent nation-state of Malaysia and the historical location of Indians in that process. The argument progressed through an account of the social relations of Indians in contemporary urban Melaka to a consideration of the role and meaning of Hindu religious beliefs and practices in the production and reproduction of the identities encompassed by the label "Indian". This culminated in the immediately preceding chapter in which a particular religious festival was shown to capture many of the themes of the social world of Melaka's Indian population in its symbolic form and in the ritual acts performed. In this, the final ethnographic chapter, I shall consider that field of Indian social relations which is most specifically and overtly concerned with the location of Indians in contemporary Malaysia and with the generation of a socially meaningful content to the political label or category "Indian"; that is, the field of party politics. In this discussion, I shall show how local understandings, conflicts and precarious unities achieved in other contexts provide selective and uncertain possibilities for relations in this political field.

##### Introduction: analytical perspectives

The question in the title of this chapter is deliberately provocative. It is meant to highlight the central concern of this discussion, which

is the nature of the relationship between an imposed political category and the social lives of those so categorised. Other analysts (e.g. Nagata 1974) have pointed to the problematic nature of assuming a simple relationship between an ethnic category and the situationally selected ethnic identity with which people operate in different contexts in a multi-ethnic or 'plural' society such as that of Malaysia. This chapter seeks to carry the discussion further and examines the structural principles of political categorisation and organisation in the light of an analysis of the ordering principles of the social life of the population labeled 'Indian' in the 1970 Census. The context is the urban area of Melaka. It will be argued that a number of contradictions appear in the complex situation of Melaka which have their origin in the historical emergence of the urban form from a long colonial past, and which have become embedded in processes which constitute the contemporary social order. One area in which these contradictions become manifest is that of party politics. Thus, the discussion examines the extent to which, and the manner in which the imposed category "Indian" is rendered meaningful to Indians in the course of their engagement in formal political practice.

The argument of this chapter is informed by a very particular reading of the work of Nicos Poulantzas (especially 1978 but also 1975) on the relation of the State to any given "concrete social formation", seen as the actual conjunction of two or more modes of production in which one such mode may be dominant. Poulantzas' notions are not without substantial problems, but his use of the concept of "class fractions" in relation to the systematic reproduction of structurally-based divisions within classes (as defined by orthodox Marxists) is useful in discussing

Malaysia. The State's role in the Malaysian social formation is the pervasive insertion of ideologically based criteria for the reordering of relations of production, distribution and exchange. These insertions render the political struggle a different phenomenon to that of Western, non-plural, capitalist societies. The realisation of any class consciousness which transcends the limits of localised economic struggle is structurally subverted by the relations of the political formation.

The problem of identifying the 'objective interests' of any class or part thereof is notoriously difficult. However, it is clear from the Malaysian data that insofar as they can be identified, the interests of those categorised as Indians are contradictory in the extreme. At one and the same time, they are set both against those of other ethnic categories by virtue of the State's role in the re-ordering of relations of production and thereby also the form of reproduction of capital, and simultaneously divided within the category by the existing colonially-derived relations of production and distribution in which self-identifying sets are differentially located. In this account, we shall make these oppositions apparent and show that the economic, political and ideological struggles, in Poulantzas' terms, are — as they probably always are — interdependent through a dialectic in which the operation of the capitalistic forces for economic reproduction are modified by the operation of categorically based distinctions inherent in the structure of political and ideological relations.

Now, both political and ideological relations are penetrated by cultural understandings which themselves stand in a complex relation to class and caste locations of the sets of Indians within that category. This is



because cultural understandings are both part of these relations and simultaneously relatively independent of them. This is true inasmuch as, particularly in this case, cultural understandings have a substantial part of their base in logically prior systems.

I shall argue that social relations at the local level often stand in contradiction to the aimed-for political relations of the national level and that the resultant dialectic constrains the possibilities for successful political action in both areas. More specifically, I shall demonstrate that the structural properties of the practical relations of those labeled 'Indian' in Melaka stand in direct contradiction to the structuring principles of a national polity fundamentally organised around constitutionally inscribed ethnicity.

However, the argument contained here is also in some measure a response to Mitchell's (1974) appeal for a phenomenological approach designed to overcome the false dichotomy between grand sociological theory with its style of analysis and the more usual anthropological micro-perspective. Thus, in this case, the analysis also follows Mitchell (1974, 1970) in its concern to give adequate consideration to both structural and cognitive aspects of ethnicity. It will be argued, therefore, that the meaning of the ethnic label "Indian" in Melaka may not be understood as residing solely in the social structure or in the affect-laden perceptions of 'self' engaged by social actors, but in the dialectic entailed in confronting contradictions between the logic of the political and socio-economic structures of Malaysia and the cultural logic of perceived differences of the population who recognise themselves to be labeled 'Indian'.

In the course of the discussion, I shall invoke the notion of a hierarchy of social identities — in the sense of a set of increasingly encompassing categories — which are mobilised in response to people and contexts where the control Indians may exert over the social situation ranges from considerable to minimal. Within this broader hierarchy, I shall portray another which is more equivocal and tendentious, and which is a source of continual uncertainty and negotiation in terms of culturally specific notions symbolised in culturally specific ways. Thus, the contemporary world of Indians will be shown to be constructed from the complex process of the interaction of practices derived from the transformations of a symbolic system controlled by various powerful others and those derived from actors' understandings of, and location within a symbolic system over which they have ultimate control and of which they represent the only source of reproduction. Both symbolic systems and the practices which derive from them are deemed to be part of a much larger structure sometimes called the world economy and are, therefore, seen as affected by changes in that structure. The dynamics of the processes identified will be seen to be located in the developing contradictions which Godelier (1978) labeled "intrasystemic" and "intersystemic" and their interrelationship. The resolutions of these contradictions are never final and the consequence is a continually evolving social process.

Politics and ethnicity have been inextricably linked in the works of many writers on 'plural societies'. Even where the analytical emphasis has been placed on the cultural or symbolic content of ethnic categories, as in the work of Geertz (1963), ethnicity is salient in some degree because of the political context in which people identified by an ethnic

category are to be found. However, the precise relationships between a given social structure, the political and ideological struggles which take place within that structure and the meaningful employment of ethnic categorisations has rarely if ever been achieved. For Marxists, the concept of ethnicity is highly problematic as its status with regard to the reproduction of any social formation dominated by a Capitalist Mode of Production must be based on an assessment of whether ethnicity is a purely superstructural phenomenon, or whether it is to be accorded a role in the organisation of the social relations of production which makes it more fundamental. For example, Stenson (1980) says that he had to abandon his idea of studying the Indian community because the very notion begged too many questions of both a cultural and political nature. In his subsequent discussion of the role of Indians in the structure and functioning of the colonial and neo-colonial order, a continual tension is manifested in the attempts to consider the development of a class consciousness in a social formation where it is clear that class considerations are continually subverted by consciousness of alternative identities assumed by actors, and by consciousness of categories imposed from outside which must be taken into account by those actors.

Thus, the problem which is most clearly missing from the account given by Stenson (1980) and for that matter from that by Nagata (1979) is an adequate consideration of the relationship of the State to the constitutional legal structure, the economic structure and the reproduction of ethnic categories which order social relations within the social formation. Contrary to Poulantzas (1975:44) it is not simply the case in Malaysia that "the State has the particular function of constituting the factor of cohesion between the levels of a social formation". At

various times in Malaysia this is a major function of the State but the emphasis is wrong. Since independence in 1957 and more particularly since 1969 when the major so-called "race riots" took place, the State in Malaysia has intervened in the social formation specifically and pervasively to attempt to reorder the relationship between its various elements in such a way as to radically alter the balance between the domination of foreign capital in most sectors of the economy and the creation and reproduction of local capital in the remaining sectors, largely through the entrepreneurial efforts of those categorised as Chinese.

Thus, though Poulantzas is here (1975) continually referring to the Capitalist Mode of Production rather than to any concrete social formation, the usefulness of an approach such as his, which emphasises the "characteristic autonomy of the economic and the political" (1975:29) is reduced since the political process in Malaysia is the practice of the continual denial of that autonomy. Of course, Malaysia is not a pure example of the Capitalist Mode of Production, though the latter is undeniably dominant in the social formation. Nonetheless, the importance of Poulantzas to the present discussion lies in his attempt to examine the role of the State and the reproduction of the structures constituting the social formation through consideration of the former's role as cohesive agent.

In the historical development of Malaysia, as I have shown in Chapter 1, the penetration of colonial and neo-colonial capital has taken a specific historical form in which ethnicity enters the field of economic relations and therefore the economic struggle in Poulantzas' terms, via the field of political relations in which the State is integrally involved. It is

a state bureaucracy operating a political philosophy for economic purposes, as set down in the "Second Malaysia Plan", which acts to fuse the political and economic principles which organise the forms of new capitalist development. Therefore, many earlier approaches to understanding ethnic relations are inappropriate for contemporary urban Malaysia because they fail to take sufficient cognisance of the historical development of the structuring principles of Malaysian political and economic relations.

I have also shown elsewhere (see Chapter 1) that the major political divisions in Malaysia at the time of Independence in 1957 were the product of the particular requirements of the colonialist and capitalist expansion of a plantation economy, with its concomitant division of labour. This division of labour was produced and reproduced largely through the ideologies of the colonialists. It would obviously be insufficient, however, to seek to explain contemporary patterns of interaction, let alone patterns of ideological construction or inter-subjective understanding, in the social world of Malaysians, by reference to history alone. Nevertheless, in the course of the present analysis, it will be shown that the colonial past continues to play an important part in that social world, and not only at the levels of economic and social structure. History, or rather, particular versions of it, are a major factor in the Indian actors' own constructions of their world and its meaning, and in the unfolding of their present- and future-orientated actions.

The meaning and content of ethnic relations between Indians and others, and amongst Indians themselves, must be seen to be matters under

continual negotiation, but the functions and structural meaning of ethnic divisions in the political economy of contemporary Malaysia will be shown in many important respects to be remarkably similar to those of the colonial era. It is in the nexus of the relation of the political economy of Malaysia as a whole, and the local-level expressions of ethnic identity, both ideological or 'cultural' and practical, that the heart of the problem lies.

Political fields: national contradictions

From the analytical perspective of those in the town of Melaka, there are three increasingly encompassing fields of political action in which Indians are engaged: the most dense for most Indians is the metropolitan field. Encompassing this, strikingly in this case, is the political field of the State of Melaka, which is, in turn, encompassed by the nation-state of Malaysia, viewed as a single political and social field. The nation of Malaysia is, of course, encompassed itself by the political fields of Southeast Asia, ASEAN, and, ultimately, beyond by the rest of the world. However, and this is worthy of note, Indians as an ethnic category, or individually, no longer figure significantly in these supra-national fields. The separation of these fields is, however, merely a useful heuristic device for the purposes of analysis, for they interpenetrate inevitably in practice. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this interpenetration is to be found in the extent to which the constitution of the nation of Mal<sup>y</sup>asia influences the daily lives, and in particular, the political lives of its citizens.

I am not going to attempt here to follow through all the implications of the constitution of Malaysia for its Indian citizens. It will be

necessary though to summarise some of the major effects it has in political and ethnic relations, since it is in the relation of this major statement of the dominant ideology with the operation of national political practices that the most encompassing, structurally based ethnic identities are manifest.

It is in Article 153 of the constitution that the notion of the necessity of protecting the 'special position' of the Malays, or 'bumiputras', is elaborated and given the force of legal sanction. Amongst other things, Article 153 provides for a quota system of opportunities in three main areas: the public service, the general economic field, and in education. The object is to advance Malays to the levels supposedly enjoyed by other ethnic categories, locally referred to as 'races'.

It is this Article above all others which requires for its application the identification of each citizen's 'race', and results in that race — Malay, Chinese, Indian or Other — being a permanent feature of one's identity, through the medium of the identity card which all citizens and residents over twelve must carry.

The point is that it must be recognised that in the Malaysian context the political structure of the nation by its institutionalisation of a principle of 'racial' categorisation first employed by the British colonialists, necessarily predetermined to a large extent the nature of the political activity in the country. I am not, of course, suggesting that the patterns of political activity which have taken place in peninsular Malaysia since 1957 were inevitable in detail or timing. What I am suggesting is that the dominant cleavage of Malaysian society, lying as it does in the division of that society into Malays and

non-Malays, by being given the force of law, severely limits the extent to which politics can be divorced from questions of ethnicity, in any sense. Moreover, such a cleavage imposes an ethnic identity which is in important aspects negative, on all 'non-Malays' or non-Bumiputras, regardless of their own evaluation of themselves in cultural terms.

Several authors (e.g. Epstein 1978) have pointed out the paradox that it is in the process of attempting to create a nation that ethnic labels or categories become translated into collectivities of people forced to act and interact on the basis of that ethnicity, especially in post-colonial situations (see also Freedman 1960, Geertz 1963, and Wallerstein 1960). The position adopted by the British and the Malay aristocratic leaders was, of course, a response to the perceived threat of the economic dominance of an immigrant group (in this case, the Chinese) being transformed into political dominance.

In Chapter 1 of this thesis I argue that the second world war provides the watershed for the emergence of pan-Malayan ethnic awareness, primarily through the effects of the Japanese occupation (see also Stenson 1980). Prior to this, interaction undoubtedly took place between individuals and groups of non-European descent on the basis of ethnic criteria. It is only in the post-war codification of ethnic categories in the legal system that ethnicity becomes systematically required to be the basis of interaction and intersubjective understanding of identity in many contexts.



Indian party politics

The Malayan, later Malaysian Indian Congress (M.I.C.), the contemporary political voice of the Indians, arose from the ashes of the Indian National Army and the Indian Independence League which were encouraged by the Japanese on a Malaya-wide scale. With the coming of Indian independence and the increased precariousness of the position of Indians in Malaya in the post-war period, the M.I.C. switched its focus to the specific situation within Malaya. There was still considerable equivocation over the course to take however. Simultaneously, the problems encountered by all concerned in the rebuilding of the plantation economy helped to diminish wider Indian concern with pan-Malayan Indian ethnic identity and issues, in favour of more immediate problems of citizenship and employment.

Forming just over 10 percent of the population, Indians are, and have long been, primarily employed in terms of numbers, in the wage labour sector of rural plantations and urban public service. In proportion to population, Indian traders and entrepreneurs are few in number by comparison with the Chinese, for example. Moreover, many of the Indian traders who do operate in Malaysia are from Northern Indian areas as opposed to the numerically dominant South Indian Tamils. Even the South Indian traders and entrepreneurs, such as the Nattukottai Chettiars, are frequently still oriented to India and make regular visits there in many cases. Nattukottai Chettiars, as a caste-based group of petty financiers, and North Indian traders, represent two examples whereby essentially cultural categorical distinctions can be seen to coincide with different class locations of subsets of the Indian population. In the views of many local Indians caste and regional differences are, in

these cases, inextricably bound up with class locations, such that the people so classified are deemed to be different and to have differing interests from the majority of working class Indians. Though their numbers are small, their wealth renders them important to the dynamics of Indian political life taken as a separate given area of Malaysian political concerns. Nevertheless, in national terms, they remain but a small proportion of a relatively small population.

Thus, neither the economic strength nor the numbers of Indians could be seen by others as a significant threat, nor could they be used by the Indians themselves to create a power base which could be translated into noticeable political weight. It is true that many Ceylonese Tamils were in positions of bureaucratic power and patronage by virtue of their near-monopoly of certain levels of some government organisations such as the Health Department and the railways, during colonial and immediately post-colonial times. Again, small numbers and lack of bargaining power in the face of Malay and British determination to open the public service more to Malays gave the Ceylonese little room for manoeuvre. I return to the position of the Ceylonese later in the chapter.

It was the question of citizenship which was to dominate Indian political activity in Malaysia for many years. In some respects the very fact of the enforced mobilisation of ethnic independence created the milieu in which Indians were able to pursue political careers in the national arena. By succeeding in claiming representation commensurate with the size of the community, something Indian politicians were able to do in the light of Chinese successes in this area, the way became open for competition amongst individual Indians to be the representatives of the "community"

as a whole. Representation enabled the exercise of a limited degree of influence, which in turn produced a setting for patronage, prestige and status. Obtaining or facilitating the obtaining of citizenship became a major means of achieving all three of these and was to become a primary concern of Indian politicians from local branch to national executive level within the M.I.C. It was soon clear that such influence could only be achieved by cooperating with the United Malays National Organisation (U.M.N.O.) and the Malaysian Chinese Association (M.C.A.). The M.I.C. accordingly joined this governing alliance in 1955 and by so doing effectively acknowledged that ethnicity was for the Indians, as for others, the paramount political principle, and that Indians would never be in a position to demand, but could only accept what others were prepared to give. Such has been the position of the Indians in national politics ever since.

Nowhere has Indian reliance on others been more apparent than in the distribution of parliamentary seats. Since the lower house of the Malaysian parliament (the Dewan Rakyat) is a wholly elected body, selection for candidature becomes crucial in a national politician's career. Since no constituency in Malaysia has a clear majority of Indians, Indian politicians appealing to Indians alone would never be elected to parliament. Indians must seek the support of other ethnic groups both in the selection and the election process, therefore. Logically, this could be obtained in an opposition grouping as well as in an alliance with U.M.N.O. and the M.C.A.; pragmatically, the alliance clearly had the upper hand and the already dependent Indians would have their position weakened still further by aligning themselves with a grouping doomed not to achieve power.

At the national level then, the institutionalisation of ethnicity as a primary political factor condemns marginal categories such as the Indians in Malaysia to act as an ethnic group, and to act in a subordinate but cooperative manner, or suffer the risk that individuals ascribed that ethnic identity be swamped by the more powerful groups. Conversely, there is no guarantee that cooperation and the formation of a political ethnic group will bring the rewards expected or sought either by the group or the individuals involved.

At the national level, my analysis so far might appear to have broadly followed the view of those who suggest that ethnic groups are first and foremost interest groups. However, this is an insufficient picture of ethnicity, even in the broad national view. I have suggested that Indian ethnic identity in Malaysia derived initially from a Japanese encouragement of an identification which many in Malaya already had with the cause of Indian independence from British colonial rule. Such common causes have historically been a frequent source of unity, but as the partition of India itself demonstrates, that unity may be fragile and founded on a slim base. Common interest provides the cause, but the creation of an identity which lasts beyond that cause is often doubtful. Indian politics in Malaysia as a whole is, and long has been, concerned to generate just such a lasting identity, yet finds problematic the question of how to do so and who to include in the process.

As Epstein (1978) points out, "the salience of ethnicity is in its combination of interest with an affective tie". That is to say that while it is true that all ethnic groups have common interests at one level at least, not all interest groups are ethnic groups. From the

actor's perspective, ethnicity is the cognitive and affective acceptance of an identity which relates him or her to other individuals in terms of cultural and social factors other than interest alone. Such factors may include place of origin, language, religion, customary practices in such areas as marriage, kinship, laws of inheritance and succession, etc., perceived physical or even genetic similarities, notions of shared history. The greater the number of such factors which are perceived to be held in common, the stronger the identity and affective ties are likely to be. Yet, none of these factors are immutable, nor are the relationships between them. Structural and contingent changes may alter their social relevance.

The M.I.C. from its inception has been plagued with the problem of translating the ascribed identity "Indian" which was, after all, the product of colonialism, into a subjective identity for its members, given the fact that those labeled 'Indian' subscribed to a number of different religions or variations of Hinduism, spoke several different languages, had different customary practices in a large range of areas, perceived themselves to be physically different (e.g. black = Tamils and low castes; fair = Northerners and high castes), and had long histories which were as different as they were similar. It was, of course, by emphasising modern Indian history and contemporary interest, by playing up common cultural traits and playing down differences, that the initial leaders hoped to achieve their aim.

A major intrasystemic contradiction is now apparent in the political system of the nation-state of Malaysia. The national political structure is built on a set of contrasted categories which seek to emphasise

differences. However, the same system requires those differences to be suppressed at the level of organisation below the most encompassing categorical contrasts of Malays, Chinese, Indians and Others if it is itself to reproduce itself. This is especially true of the category "Malay" — since the political consequences of an overt recognition of differing sets of people, defined by differing sets of interests, within the category would threaten total subversion of the legitimacy of the current political order. Though less significant for the nation as a whole, the basic problem still exists for Indians. Within the national political context a process of contrastive identity formation appears demanded by the structuring principles of the State's organisation, but those contrastive processes must cease at the category "Indian" or the very stability of the structure becomes threatened.

In practice, as has already been noted in Chapter 1, the M.I.C. moved from a leadership of middle class<sup>1</sup> Indians from urban centres who were of diverse identities within the Indian population — Sikh, Christian, Tamil, Malayāli, and so on — towards an increasing political dominance by the numerically-dominant Tamil Hindus of Southern Indian origin with their roots in the working class and middle and lower ranking castes. The inevitability of such a development is twofold: firstly, any group purporting to represent Indians could not leave out the largest category of the population or it would soon lose its credibility; secondly, the Tamil workers could not afford to be unrepresented in the body which was officially recognised as being responsible for their interests.

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<sup>1</sup>Here "middle class" is used to describe those engaged in petit bourgeois, 'professional' and managerial occupations.

With the shift to dominance by working class Tamils based largely in the plantations, the M.I.C. became increasingly a Tamil organisation and failed to motivate the more urban traders and middle classes of Gujerati, Sikh and Ceylonese origins to join. Moreover, there was great suspicion amongst much of the membership of the wealthier and better educated non-Tamils, and a policy of informal exclusion was undoubtedly practiced (see Sri Tharan 1976, for support of this view). Between 1955 and 1969, the M.I.C., having gained legitimation as the only true representative of the Indians, became what it was structurally compelled to be, the largely acquiescent third party of the alliance, relying on its good relations with the leaders of the senior parties to ensure minimal concessions. It was in the elections of 1969, with the subsequent bloody riots that the complacency of the alliance and the M.I.C. was shattered when the opposition parties gained significantly, and paraded their discontent with the current government through the streets of Kuala Lumpur. Though the horrifying clashes which followed are usually characterised in terms of Chinese versus Malay, Indians were also caught up in the hatred and as much polarisation on the basis of 'race' seems to have resulted for them as for the other ethnic groups. Furthermore, a significant number of Indians were amongst the successful opposition candidates, more than was the case for the alliance.

With the myth of racial harmony shot away, dissatisfaction with the leadership of the M.I.C. became open as the Malays in the government pushed for the 'New Economic Policy' designed to "totally restructure society". It was thought by a section of the party that the president, V.T. Sambanthan, was not active enough and too closely associated with the Malay leaders. It was in fact the first leader of the independent

Malays, Tunku Abdul Rahman, who was called on to mediate the dispute, and who eventually had to succumb to the pressures to remove the president and replace him with the then deputy president, V. Manickavasagam. Meanwhile, the structural weakness of the M.I.C. had not been altered, though some of the peripheral Indians and Ceylonese, frightened by the greater militancy of the Malays and finding their aloofness had not protected them against the erosion of their positions, began to identify themselves more explicitly with the Indian ethnic category. Thus, Ceylonese sought, successfully, to have themselves incorporated in the 1970 Census as 'Indians' rather than as 'Others' as they had been at Independence in 1957.

The oscillations of affiliation, which categorically defined subpopulations like the Ceylonese manifest, both reflect and help to reproduce the structural divisions of the Indian population as a whole. It is not simply that their moves towards unity are resisted or subverted by others. Nor is it simply that their 'objective class interests' are fundamentally opposed to those of the others and must in some deterministic manner prevent unity. Nor, further, is it simply that caste or other features internal to Indian cultural and social organisation prevent development of a single identity. It is at once all these things and yet no one of them alone which are required to provide an adequate explanation of the contemporary social meaning and status of the label "Indian". Thus, ethnic divisions between Ceylonese and Indian Tamils, marked by slight cultural differences in manner of ritual and social organisation, dialect of Tamil, perceived differences in caste ranking for the bulk of the two populations, differing educational backgrounds, and, perhaps above all, class positions in the colonial economy (see Mearns 1982),



initially made cooperation difficult and joint political action unachievable. The Ceylonese did not see their interests lying in close ties with the general Indian population. Rather, they sought to maintain their advantages by means which did not enter the arena of formal politics: Ceylonese Tamils were brought to Malaya to fill posts in a developing economic context in which there was a shortage of local people with suitable educational qualifications. Informants described how in recent years they have switched their attention from ensuring a good, general, basic education for their children to a growing concern to achieve qualifications in the professions where locals have increasingly been required to take over from expatriate Europeans, and which are qualifications which ultimately have international currency. This is an explicit attempt to reproduce themselves as members of privileged classes engaged in socially preferred occupations. It marks a major difference of interest between them and most other Indians.

Ceylonese political history in Malaysia is very limited. The main political party, the Ceylon Congress, formed to counterbalance the M.I.C., has never enjoyed the support that the local Ceylonese associations have achieved, and has long been dominated by older and more conservative men. A splinter group, the Ceylon Federation, formed in more recent years by younger and more radical professional men, has had little more success in inspiring party political awareness amongst the population, and has, of course, dissipated still further the political force of this tiny minority. Many Ceylonese voice scepticism about politics generally, and some say that the only course is to become totally identified with the Indians, while all seem to recognise that this is practically unlikely because the Indians fear Ceylonese

domination in the M.I.C. party hierarchy and many Ceylonese are unwilling to subordinate themselves to Indians whom they deem below them in class and caste status; and over whom in many cases, they may have actually exercised bureaucratic control.

A second contradiction emerged, therefore, in the historical process of self-incorporation which the Ceylonese undertook with regard to the category "Indian". At the national level this amounted in many ways to an elaboration of contradictions inherent in the formation of the M.I.C. Fundamental class interests of the majority of Indians were at odds with the interests of a significant minority. The Ceylonese in 'becoming' Indian have exacerbated the divisions within that category which stem from the pursuit of their own class interests by those more wealthy Indians who are not of the manual working class and who therefore were already at odds with them. With the incorporation of the Ceylonese, the gradual process of the identification of the label "Indian" with a largely rural, plantation proletariat is finally assured of failure. In seeking to be the representative of the interests of all Indians, the M.I.C. is doomed to represent none entirely satisfactorily, given this diversity of membership.

#### State politics: the rural and urban oppositions

The clearest illustration of the basic process of Indian politics occurs in the machinations of state branches of the M.I.C. In the case of Melaka state, the contemporary situation (1976/78) demonstrates a number of the structural features of M.I.C. organisation which both reflect and feed back on political action and Indian population distribution. A basic dichotomy exists between the rural and urban sections of the party,

or, to be more explicit, between those politically active in the Melaka town area and those whose base lies on the plantations.

As with U.M.N.O., the M.I.C. attracts and works through teachers in many of its rural branches. The reasons for this are self-evident, teachers are both literate and articulate in Tamil, frequently have command of Malay and English, often come from families engaged in wage employment on the estates, and are, by virtue of their education, more politically aware than many of the rural Indians they serve. Enjoying a high status locally, a status they share with few save perhaps a small number of management-level Indians on the estates (many of whom are anyway Malayāli or Ceylonese rather than Indian Tamil), teachers also usually possess considerable local knowledge and influence. All this makes them admirable brokers and mediators within the local political scene and they are employed as such by the M.I.C.

In the town, on the other hand, teachers compete for status with local businessmen and government officials, and those employed in positions of responsibility in the private sector, besides those engaged in higher status professions, such as doctors and lawyers. It is not usually the latter, whose personal prestige is already high, however, who stand for office in the local branches of the M.I.C., but rather those of the second rank whose prestige can be significantly enhanced by becoming a local political figure.

Nevertheless, in a recent Melaka election for the officers of the state branch, a lawyer was the opposition candidate to the incumbent president, a returned teacher with his base in the estates. This was somewhat

unusual but the lawyer was himself a former teacher who had studied law later. He was also the younger brother of one of the two prominent town-based M.I.C. leaders who had direct connections with the national leadership by virtue of their secondment to the Central Working Committee as state representatives, at different times, and their role on the Melaka Constituency Liaison Committee, along with the state president. The elder brother was himself the managing director of the family's several jewelry businesses, and devoted much time and effort to his M.I.C. activities.

Local informants agreed that there were two main factors behind the challenge put up by the lawyer and his brother. The one was said to be pressure from a certain section of the national party organisation, who were attempting to replace older, more conservative leaders by younger, more dynamic and forward-looking leaders who could be brought into the national scene and together effect a new power block. The second was said to be a local issue relating to the co-opted representation of the M.I.C. on the Municipal Council where the state president had been given the nomination in favour of the president of the local town branch, the same elder brother of the lawyer.

The incumbent president had his own support from national figures and had the advantage of long experience, good contacts and the taint of the charge of nepotism on the part of his opponent. The battle was intense and highlighted the degree to which personalities often dominate issues in the M.I.C. Neither candidate offered radical new politics, and campaigning centred around the value of a change to a younger, better educated and more wealthy candidate, as opposed to the concept of

remaining loyal to a man who had lost rather than gained by his political activities and was therefore assumed to have the genuine welfare of the Indians at heart.

It was reported that a great deal of effort and money went into the campaigning, with both candidates rushing all over the state in order to generate support. Rumours flew round the town of the buying of votes, or the attempts to do so, though in the end the challenger was defeated by a single vote. He saw this as a moral victory given his recent arrival on the political scene and his lack of time to organise the canvassing. He remained hopeful of a change in the next election.

The "success" of the incumbent president albeit extremely precarious, is partially explained by the distribution of Indians in the state and the consequent placing of branches. Of the twenty-two branches of the M.I.C., only three were in the immediate area of the metropolitan centre of Melaka town, reflecting the 33 percent urban to 67 percent rural distribution of the Indian population. The challenger's personal network did not extend as effectively beyond the town as did those of the incumbent. The class structure of the rural Indians shows an overwhelming bias towards low-paid manual workers and many of their representatives are ultimately drawn from their ranks. The challenger's background was essentially middle class and his interests were easily perceived as being different to those of the majority of members, by many informants. The fact that the challenger was able to do so well, on the other hand, is a function of the frequently expressed frustration many Indians feel with the inability, as they see it, of the M.I.C. and its leaders adequately to safeguard their interests in the face of a strongly Malay-dominated state government.

A strong feature of the election was the degree to which non-Tamil Indians and Ceylonese were generally excluded from the process and proved largely irrelevant to its outcome. The few non-Tamils in the M.I.C. are either Telegu estate workers or middle class townsmen. Other non-Tamils are, for the most part, not active in the M.I.C., though at state, as at national level, the M.I.C. remains the only effective representation for Indians in what is still a communal policy.

In the context of the state of Melaka, the meaning of the label "Indian" in the arena of party politics is still very much dominated by the combination of demographic and class distribution. I have already shown that divisions within the category "Indian" are socially reproduced not only in or through class location in the relations of production. Parallel, overlapping and interpenetrating such class divisions are distinctions based on contradictory principles of religious practice. To be urban middle class Indian is not only to have particular economic interests. In Melaka, it is also to have a distinctive pattern of worship and to espouse a broadly distinctive set of understandings of the nature of the relationship of men and women to the supramundane world. Thus, tensions which might appear to be generated from different class locations in the structure of the social formation are, in fact, more complex in their genesis. The world of pragmatic and mundane politics is one in which religious differences are increasingly pertinent as markers of distinctiveness. This is as true within ethnic categories as between them. To be Malay is by constitutional definition to be Muslim. To be Indian is not necessarily to be Hindu, though most are; and even where it is, varieties of Hinduism are legion. With no single deity or prophet to provide a symbolic rallying point, Indian mobilisation of

religion as a mode of unity is minimal, beyond the temporary moment and above the local level.

Once again, the political problem generated by the reproduction of social divisions based on class interests, religious practice and subethnic identities is primarily that of legitimating representative leadership. The state election described here not only reflects schisms such as urban:rural, working class:middle class, educated:uneducated, wealthy:poor, but actually serves to reproduce them as meaningful categories in the context of state politics.

It should be remarked here that Melaka town is one of the relatively few parliamentary seats to return an opposition member of the Dewan Rakyat in the last three general elections. The member is the leader of the Democratic Action Party (D.A.P.), which took over the mantle of Lee Kuan Yew's People's Action Party when Singapore quit Malaysia in 1965. The D.A.P. leader was elected in a massive Chinese swing against the incumbent M.C.A./Alliance member in the eventful 1969 elections. He is Chinese, and while it is impossible to be sure of the extent of the sentiment, it would appear from informants' statements that his stand of a "Malaysian Malaysia" appealed to many Indians as well as Chinese, with its promise of equal rights for all citizens, regardless of race.

However, in the state as a whole, and indeed, within the town, the opposition's scope for action is still severely limited by the dominance of the communally based parties. Of the twenty state legislature seats in the 1969 election, only five were captured by non-National Front (Expanded Alliance) candidates, and while this was a significant advance,

the practical result was not the actual advancement of non-communal policies, but rather the reverse, as the alliance closed ranks in face of the threat. The M.I.C. response was to seek more actively to recruit members in the next few years and to work hard at the next election, in order to help the alliance regain its total control of the state, which it failed to do, losing four of the twenty seats to the D.A.P.

The outcome of the recent political activity in Melaka state is that the M.I.C. has been proved basically correct in its assumption that there is little to be gained by being in opposition to the National Front (Barisan Nasional). However, as a result, the M.I.C. found itself actively supporting and campaigning for a state government towards which many Indians felt suspicious or at least ambivalent. Indeed, many ordinary members of the M.I.C. when interviewed in the course of my research, expressed cynicism towards the value of membership and said that they never saw the M.I.C. except at elections. The view that the M.I.C. did not generally do much for the Indians and that the politicians were in it for personal rewards in the form of prestige, opportunities to make money, or simply to get awards from the government so that they could put letters after their name, was commonly expressed whenever the subject of politics was brought up. This view was especially strong amongst a Malay-speaking Hindu community, the Melaka Chitties. Another frequently offered opinion was that the Malays had all the power and that there was little Indians could do about it.

What the M.I.C. could and did do, in the face of the basically accurate assessment of the power they held, was largely a policing job, based on informal networks. Occasionally a branch official would write or



personally confront a government officer in order to have some grievance redressed; for example, this was done when recruitment of labour to the hospital repeatedly favoured Malays to an extent beyond what was felt to be legitimately acceptable to the Indians, given understandings between the alliance partners. More often, M.I.C. leaders acted in an unofficial capacity in settling problems over citizenship, immigration, access to other government services, and, above all, in questions of employment for Indians. The usual form was for the leader to make an informal visit to an alliance colleague in a position to solve the difficulty, and 'discuss' the matter with him.

At a more abstract level, the influence of the M.I.C. in the state lies in the extent to which it is perceived to be able to deliver the Indian vote to the governing alliance. In this respect, it is not different to the national scene, though the effects are more tangible and immediate for individual Indians in Melaka. Since there is no Indian who has recently been elected to the State Legislative Assembly (the three Chinese and one Eurasian members of the D.A.P. included), this aspect of the relationship to the ruling parties is especially important. The problematic feature, however, as the election shows, is that structural disjunctions prevent any single leader from successfully emerging as the unequivocal representative of those he is structurally compelled to seek as a constituency.

#### Town politics: class and cultural contradictions

Most of what has been said about the Indian position in the state applies to the institutional politics of the town since the governing body of the town has ceased to be an elected council since 1966 when the Chief

Minister of Melaka State appointed a Chinese Commissioner to manage municipal affairs in the aftermath of a major financial crisis and scandal.<sup>1</sup> In appointing a leader of the M.C.A. the Chief Minister was recognising the reality of the overwhelming predominance of Chinese in the town. Again, Indians are represented by the grace of the Malay-dominated state hierarchy which appointed a nominee as part of a general policy of being seen to be maintaining a fair balance according to "racial" proportions of the population.

Within the town then, the politics of Indians is mainly a matter of inter- and intra-M.I.C. branch rivalries. There is currently (1976/78) almost no Indian participation in active politics outside the M.I.C. Inside the M.I.C. a familiar pattern emerges with South Indian Tamils providing the bulk of the membership, and seeking to dominate the three branches. The town centre branch is led by the lawyer's brother referred to above and has a number of traders mainly of South Indian origins active under his leadership. The largest of the three branches is that essentially centred on the General Hospital where for many years a Ceylonese was the president.

The Ceylonese leader was highly exceptional in his history of involvement with Indians, especially through the hospital where he was an administrator; and in his commitment to the M.I.C. He was also active in many other associations and organisations, sporting and social. He played down his Ceylonese identity and never stood as aloof from other Indians as many Ceylonese were said to have done. Nevertheless, in the course of my fieldwork, he was forced to relinquish his, by then, tenuous hold on the branch through ill health and age and, said some of his

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<sup>1</sup>Council was suspended on 21st September 1966. The Commissioner was appointed on 31st October 1967.

opponents, the recognition that he would not be re-elected. In the event his daughter stood and was initially declared to have won, but eventually lost after a recount demanded by the opposing candidate who had long been her father's deputy. The opposing faction had been very active in recruiting and bringing along new members in order to boost their strength, and claimed that they would have wrested power long before, but for restrictive membership recruitment.

After the election, informants expressed satisfaction with the new leader in terms of the expectations they had now that a man more like 'one of us' had been elected. The new president was a Tamil clerk who had achieved his power base through the mobilisation of network connections into the working class population of the area. His rhetoric, as passed on by close supporters, was in terms of getting rid of 'those big shots' who do nothing for the poor, and of making the M.I.C. an active force to be reckoned with.

The point is that while ethnic identity was not the overt issue of the campaign, class affiliations and imputed interests were. Moreover, it is commonly said amongst Tamils of South Indian origin in the town that all Ceylonese think of themselves and act like 'big shots'. This phrase describes not only supposed wealth and good connections, but also relates to a perceived air of superiority and condescension. Besides the usual class-based prejudices inferred by many working class Indians, there is also an often unstated but nonetheless potent caste factor to this. Manifested in a lack of social interaction outside the temple, in particular in interdining and invitations to visit, Ceylonese aloofness as perceived by many South Indians seems to reflect a belief in caste

superiority. Ceylonese Tamils are frequently seen by Indian Tamils as especially conservative in matters of caste. 'We Indians', as Tamils will often refer to themselves, are said to have 'forgotten all that' by contrast.<sup>1</sup>

While the outgoing M.I.C. branch president had not previously been cast in the same light as other Ceylonese, his failure to continue to deliver the goods and to be seen to be close to the 'Indians', began to be responded to in terms of his becoming more like the stereotypical Ceylonese, once his supposed self-interest had been served and he had achieved recognition in the form of awards and decorations for his services from the government.

The position of the leader of the town centre branch is in some ways less and some ways more equivocal. Though a South Indian Tamil of a recognised middle-ranking caste, his business interests and the fact that, given his constituency, he must take account of the aspirations of other, non-Tamil businessmen, makes his identification with the working class base of the town somewhat precarious. The fact that it was the opposition D.A.P. which won the four town area seats in the state legislature in 1974 did not help his political career as the alliance cannot pretend to speak for the town population as a whole, and the M.I.C.'s claim to do so for the Indians is put into doubt. The peripheral metropolitan area with the largest M.I.C. branch did not return a National Front (Expanded Alliance) member, however. This fact

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<sup>1</sup>Indian Tamils have not, of course, 'forgotten' caste which remains a strong principle of interactional organisation but this complex problem requires fuller treatment in another context.

helped confirm the prestige of that branch's president and leaders, of course, since they had done what was expected of them in delivering the Indian vote.

Inter-branch rivalry lies then in the competition to be seen as being most able to mobilise Indians as Indians, in the context of a national and state political system which requires that this should be so.

Internal branch politics is primarily concerned with the ability of leaders to recruit supporters on the basis not only of an identity of interests, but also an identity of social and cultural aspirations and attitudes, which in turn is voiced in terms of class, caste, and sub-ethnic group identities.

The question of how identities are themselves to be identified now becomes crucial to my analysis of politics amongst Indians in Melaka. Ethnic identity, it is supposed by some writers, can be objectively described in terms of a combination of shared interests and shared aspects of social and cultural constructs such as 'race', religion, language, etc. An ethnic group then becomes a collection of people sharing all these characteristics and acting collectively on that basis. The inadequacy of such a view has been discussed by many writers, notably Barth (1969) and it has been pointed out that patterns of interaction are better definers of ethnic groups and boundaries. In particular, it is said by writers such as Hannerz and Cohen (1974) that it is in the interaction of interests that the patterns of identity emerge. Self-definition in terms of ethnic labels then derives from the recognition of the shared interests with others who may choose to operate the same labels. Cohen states specifically (1974:Introduction)

that where class interests cut across ethnic boundaries we can expect to find the diminishing of ethnic identity.

Clearly, in the case of people ascribed the ethnic identity "Indian" by Malaysian government policy, an 'identity' operates in the political domain in one sense regardless of the self-definition of those so designated, in that it orders aspects of their access to national and local resources. Lower-order identities (i.e. less encompassing categories), self-defined or ascribed, have to take account of this fact, whether or not an affective commitment to such a broader identity exists.<sup>1</sup>

Constrained by the institutionalised power structure there would appear to be a more inclusive set of interests that prevail at the structural level over those of class or even caste for Indians in Malaysia. The Ceylonese late incorporation into the category "Indian" would seem to confirm such a view. Given this apparent necessity to unite, if not to gain power then to attain and maintain certain rights and privileges, one might reasonably expect the emergence of an Indian ethnic identity with clear manifestations of individuals' increasing self-definition in these terms and affective commitment to the encompassing identity.

However, political activity within the Indian population, and inside the M.I.C. in particular, shows all the evidence to the contrary. Loyalties are primarily expressed in support for those who can be identified at a lower order of definition. Caste and class perceptions do still play a strong part and individuals are able to situationally select from a wide

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<sup>1</sup>It is to collectivities identified by these less encompassing categorical labels that most Indians in Melaka declare an affective commitment in terms of ideas such as "they are people like us".

range of possible identities when choosing to act politically. Identities, or rather the inclusiveness of the boundaries of identity, may be re-defined and oscillate as situations and perceptions of those situations alter. Thus, at moments of crisis an individual may adopt an 'Indian' identity. On another occasion, such as the branch election spoken of earlier, emotional commitment and political action may be in terms of a sub-ethnic identity such as Indian Tamil or perceived membership of the working class.

M.I.C. leaders are in a somewhat intercalary position, akin to that of African chiefs in the colonial period (Gluckman 1968). They are at once the supposed protectors of the rights of the people they represent, in a communal or racialist polity, but they are also agents of the creators and sustainers of that policy, as members of the governing alliance (now the National Front). The leaders like the party itself are in a structural position which is fraught with ambiguities and ambivalence. Periodic frustration at the impotence of the leaders and the party is not surprising therefore. However, it is these ambiguities, coupled with those of the structure of the Indian population and the internal organisation of the M.I.C., which provide a degree of negotiability and flexibility, through the efforts to mobilise varying group identities, for example, that allows adept politicians to survive and succeed.

Political action in Melaka amongst Indians is then dependent upon concepts of identity, including ethnic identity, which are emergent situationally from a process involving perceptions of interests, notions of shared cultural and social backgrounds, and external ascription. At any given time, any one or combination of these factors may dominate, but all are to some degree present.

It is because of the undeniable importance of ethnic identity in understanding the political process in Malaysia, and because ethnic groups and ethnic group solidarity are problematic and achieved and defined both informally and formally, that I disagree with Cohen when he says (1960:200) that formal recognition of ethnic groupings means we are no longer dealing with ethnicity but with national politics. In Malaysia, as in Melaka itself, politics is ethnicity, writ large, but it is more than one form of ethnicity. The formally recognised ethnic categories — Malay, Chinese, Indian and Other — comprise a hierarchy in that order, not only from the perspective of the dominant group, the Malays, but from within the institutionalised structure of the national political system, where to be non-Bumiputra is to be less privileged, and to be non-Bumiputra and non-Chinese is to lack almost all power. Similarly, within the ascribed identity "Indian" a structural requirement orders and ranks subcategories on the basis of their numerical strength and consequent voting power. Cultural values are subordinated in political practice to the point where the dominant category can habitually usurp the title "Indian" as their own. Thus, in this context, to be non-South Indian Tamil is to be subordinate politically.

Therefore, in the largely ascribed encompassing identity "Indian" imposed by significant others in positions of superior power, identity appears mainly passive and relatively static. There is little capacity for inter-subjective negotiation on the meaning of the categorisation and it takes on an absolute or given status in the structure of Malaysian political life. By contrast, within the ascribed and encompassed domain an alternative hierarchy exists, much closer to what we might have expected to find amongst Indians, given the Dumontian developments in



examining Hindu societies. In this form there is more scope for the achievement of different statuses for the alternative ethnic identities which exist, such as "Ceylonese", and individuals can more easily engage in intersubjective negotiation over the meaning of being placed in a particular category. Indeed, they can seek to achieve acceptance in different categories and attempt, at least, to exercise choice.

In the smaller political and social field of the town of Melaka, then, the association of lower-order ethnic categories with caste clusters, and caste clusters with predominant class positions allows religious and cultural values to become the basis of a hierarchy which is perhaps a structural transformation of the hierarchical structure of Indian sub-continent societies. It emerges and stands in contradistinction to the ranked order of political ethnic identities in the structure of broader Malaysian political life. Affect is strong in these sets as people negotiate their ethnic category's status in the hierarchy. It is in this process of negotiation and in the dialectical working out of the contradictions of the two hierarchies that the dynamics of ethnicity are to be found as individuals decide which of the identities they encompass is appropriate to the situation by which they are confronted.

However, to claim, as does Strauch (1981:236), that "Ethnicity...is ultimately based in distinctions of 'we' from 'they'" is to risk falling back to the reductionist view of ethnicity, as simply interactional categorisation. In the case of Malaysia, ethnicity is incorporated into structural features of political and economic organisation such that 'we' and 'they' become fixed in certain contexts as principles of the reproduction and transformation of the social formation. As such, their

status as notional bases for negotiated identity is in continual dialogue with the structural features of a social formation (dominated by the Capitalist Mode of Production). In other words, though we might all agree that there is no unequivocal content of the 'we' which constitutes Malays, Chinese or Indians; and individuals or groups may opt for or be excluded from these categories situationally; there does remain a sense in which Malayness, Chineseness, or Indianness as potentially encompassing categories have a meaning beyond the control of the individuals or groups who elect to employ the labels to themselves or to others.

Enstructured ethnicity, therefore, is important precisely because its role in ordering the form and reproduction of the social relations of production, distribution and exchange imposes categories which in important senses are beyond the control of any identifiable sets of people and their immediate perceived interests as relatively autonomous sets of constraints on their social behaviour. In Malaysia, there exists a "racial" category on everyone's identity card, one which once established becomes difficult to alter and paramount in some contexts for social interaction. For the analyst it is, therefore, crucial to establish clearly the structural parameters of ethnicity and differentiate these from the contextually determined strategic choices or self-conceptualisation made by individuals or groups in situations which are negotiable. Put simply, there are occasions when an individual's personal "identity" or "self-conceptualisation" may be irrelevant to understanding the constraints upon his behaviour. Enstructured categories are not immutable socially but they often appear so to individuals or groups, and location within one or other such category may have nothing to do with personal orientations or emergent group formation yet

remain vital to an understanding of social relations and the reproduction of a social formation.

Strauch provides some valuable insights into the relationship of sub-ethnic identities and an encompassing identity in the case of those labeled 'Chinese'. Specifically (1981:256) she says, "the inclusive category in the Chinese model can never be contrasted against one of its sub-categories in any context". She recognises that this situation does not prevail amongst Malays (see Nagata 1974 and 1979) and I would add that it does not for urban Indians. There are occasions when, as we have seen, being 'Ceylonese' as opposed to 'Indian' may be very important. Moreover, South Indians often label themselves 'Indian' in contrast to North Indians whom they label 'Bengalis'; and on one memorable occasion I was informed by one married lady, "We are not Indian; we are from Bombay". So, any assumptions about what people understand in labeling themselves or others is necessarily difficult to establish even where the context provides significant data for a reasonable guess. Amongst Indians as a category an extremely complex set of processes is involved in mobilising or seeking to mobilise a set of people as a group for any purpose. As the numerically smallest and politically weakest of the three major "races" the Indians are often locked into a structure as the largely passive respondents to imposed relevancies and parameters where the degree to which they are able to choose or even influence the choice of ground on which a political struggle takes place is negligible. In this situation, the conditions are ripe for impotence which is structurally reproduced to become the focus of functional divisions, where categorically differentiated sets of people identify other such categories as the source of their problems.

In the case of the Indians, resources vital to the amelioration of the lot of the Indians generally are controlled by non-Indians and are in short supply as a result of the conscious reallocation of opportunities in the national bureaucratic power structure. Education, government jobs, business licences, and many other resources previously allocated by a variety of procedures in such a way as to make Indians, at least as locally perceived, not significantly disadvantaged are now allocated by quotas based on ethnic or locally, "racial" categories. The result is that Indians as a category are now painfully aware that those areas in which they were formally employed, out of all proportion to their numbers in the population, are increasingly becoming reorganised to ensure a more equitable representation by ethnic category while new jobs or educational places are not appearing quickly enough to absorb those whose expectations have been radically altered. The few places within the previously preferred occupational areas which are available to Indians under these new quotas, for example, become increasingly highly valued and competition more fierce for patronage and access to them.

As I have stated, South Indian Tamils in Melaka frequently complained that Ceylonese moves to include themselves in the 1970 Census as 'Indians' was an overt attempt to counter the erosion of their privileged class position in the bureaucratic structures, educational institutions, and distribution of wealth in Malaysian society. Some Ceylonese will freely admit that they fear that remaining outside the 'Indian' category would lead to their annihilation as a community able to reproduce its standards of material and moral life. However, as an identifiable, indeed, exclusive and self-identifying set of people, the Ceylon Tamils as 'Indians' become potential usurpers of leadership of the political

struggle of those labeled 'Indian', by virtue of their greater educational resources and their wealth. South Indian Tamils frequently see this as the reproduction of a privileged economic status which is a product of the congruence of the political struggle and the economic struggle as they see it. In other words, politics is primarily viewed as the direct engagement of Indians in the process of protecting scarce economic resources but there is not a consequent unity of group but rather the opposite as sub-ethnic and class factors may be shown to order political action, or become the reasons for abstaining from political action. A contradiction appears in the perceived need to 'unite' in order to reproduce the very conditions for the reproduction of current status divisions.

#### Conclusion

If 'Indians' exist, then they exist largely as a set of people who temporarily suspend differences in order to engage in a political and economic struggle whose form is largely determined by the structures of the Malaysian nation-state. Thus, the meaning with which people so labeled invest the label "Indian" is primarily limited to the understandings they have of their position in a political and economic order rather than their location within a shared symbolic or cultural order. This is not to deny that particular sets of people who identify themselves by cultural or symbolic criteria outside the politico-economic domains may succeed in appropriating the title "Indian" to themselves but they are always likely to meet other sets, similarly defined, who will seek to deny the validity of this.

The ethnographic data presented in this argument demonstrate the extent to which the penetration of the State in Malaysia sets the conditions for the development of political practice in terms of ethnic criteria. However, they also demonstrate the limits of such penetration. Indians in Melaka are dominated by a capitalist world system in which class relations are determined by criteria ultimately beyond the control of even the Malaysian government, yet that government succeeds in inserting ethnicity into the process of the reproduction of its social formation. It remains true, nevertheless, that location within the wider class structure in combination with refined notions of one's own social identity continually subvert any emergence of a symbolic system which would render the category "Indian" meaningful in such a way as to reproduce at the cognitive and affective level an identity to match the structural aspect of what it means to be Indians in Malaysia today.

## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSION:

#### RITUAL AND CONTEXT; DIALECTICS AND STRUCTURE

Not since Geertz wrote his famous account of the Javanese funeral (Geertz 1959), almost a quarter of a century ago, should it have been possible for writers on ritual to assume its simple functional role as a context for the maintenance of social solidarity or the 'status quo'. Yet, having acknowledged that ritual events may demonstrate situations of social disharmony as readily as those of solidarity, many writers recently publishing on symbolic activity continue to search, with great conviction, for an assumed high degree of cultural systematicity underlying widely diverse social consequences (see Dumont 1970 on caste, Geertz 1980 on politics, and Ortner 1979 on identity and ritual). All too frequently, this search for a systematic base at the level of ideas and/or belief systems has been the result of a predisposition to demonstrate 'universals' in human life. This tends to deny diversity in the search for equality, and often leads to the reduction of observed phenomena to the level of assumed mental processes common to all people (see, for example, Hammel 1972, Wieting 1972, and Scholte 1973 for illuminating discussions of the approach of Levi-Strauss). Alternatively, many writers assume that elevating meaning and people's search for it to the centre of the analytical stage necessitates as a first step the display of a culturally based meaning system which is a logically integrated and transmissible whole (see Beidelman 1966 in response to Gluckman).

The Hindu system is not such an unproblematically consistent whole, unless one reduces it to binary oppositions which render all manifestations of it essentially indistinguishable. This is not to say that there exist no logical relations for sets of symbols made manifest in ritual practice. It is, rather, to say that such relations are not immutable in the long term, and that sets of symbols invoked in particular religious moments need not always stand in a fixed and analytically consistent relationship one to another. This latter lesson we learnt from Evans-Pritchard's seminal work on Azande witchcraft (Evans-Pritchard 1937) but it still seems inimical to some writers to suggest that people should generate systems of belief and ritual practice which occasionally throw up contradictions both in terms of their internal logic and in terms of their interaction with other areas of social life. These contradictions may or may not be attended to by local actors, and as Evans-Pritchard indicated, there are usually ways of resolving them which do not challenge the basis of the beliefs themselves.

In this thesis, it has been argued that at least two major distinctions need to be made in the belief systems of Indians who class themselves as Hindu, and that these distinctions are apparent in the form of different approaches to ritual. These distinctions are contradictory and entail distinctions of class and caste location with regard to which, they stand in a complex relationship. That is to say, returning to Geertz (1959) for a moment, that it is now necessary to recognise that ritual events observed, especially in situations of rapid social transformation, can in no sense be adequately represented as mere reflections of the social structure in which they are embedded. At the



same time, it was argued in Chapter 5 that cultural and social systems cannot be viewed as completely autonomous entities but may be seen as relatively autonomous sets in interaction. The distinction is not a trivial one. It implies that simple cultural lag theories, and those which tend to reify culture, both suffer from an illusory understanding of the reflective capacities of people located within a given culture, and from a tendency to avoid a direct confrontation of the problem of the processes in which and by which cultural transformations may occur.

Bharati (1976:335) is able to state "On the east African scene, traditional Hindu beliefs and rituals, mediated by the Hindu Renaissance, continue to satisfy cognitive, substantive, and expressive needs". His view of religious belief and practice accords with that of Melford Spiro, and as with Spiro's general position, it is wrong, at least for the Malaysian context, precisely because psychological needs cannot be shown to be satisfied through ritual. As has been discussed, ritual amongst Hindus in Malaysia constitutes a setting in which dissonance and conflict are continually manifested and constituted in the course of performances such as those considered in Chapter 7. What Bharati lacks in his analysis is any discussion of class- and caste-based differentiation in attitude and participation. Moreover, there is little sense of the role of the State and State-approved religions such as Islam as important social forces shaping and constraining the meaning of Hinduism in this particular context.

To take one case where the broader social context provides the potential for transformations in the dominant cultural understandings, let us look again at the problem of caste. In a situation where the structure

of the social formation is such that the interests of Indian proletarians are subordinated both to the interests of international capital and to the State, and where their interdependency with higher caste Indians and Ceylonese is reduced even in their occupational relations, the possibilities for changes in caste ideology are obvious (see Barnett 1975 and 1977 for one view on this process). In Melaka, as Chapter 7 showed, new forms, or rather, suppressed forms of relationship have become tenable which incorporate the cosmic order into social life in a way which was not readily available under supposed 'traditional' arrangements. In caste theory of the Dumontian type, low caste pollution is seen to render high castes free to seek proximity to the gods. The practice of low caste 'embodiment' of deities through possession circumvents this process and denies the privileged position of the high castes. The low caste population does not even require a high-caste-like, assumed freedom from impurity in order to achieve unity with the god. No interdependency is implied or reproduced since it is not required. Low castes become able to manage without high castes, even without the mediation of a Brahmin priest. Fundamentally, the question becomes one of pursuing the path of love, bhakti — commitment or total identification — unmediated by 'superior' castes. On the other hand, this new problem magnifies old problems for the high castes, who are unable any longer to use other forms of interdependency so successfully in order to create contexts for ritual interdependency. High castes still require that necessary polluting tasks be performed and most believe that their own status and religious potential would be severely harmed if they were to undertake these tasks themselves. As a result, they must either reduce their expectations in both the mundane and the ritual contexts, or they must resort to expensive contract

arrangements which require a different order of negotiation to that entailed between interdependent castes, in a non-contract situation. In fact, as we have seen, both strategies are adopted.

Changes in ritual status are not confined to interpersonal or inter-caste relations. Ritual as a problematic context for the reproduction of authority and hierarchy is extended to understandings and relations between the Hindu population and their deities. Given the performative identification of the deity with a king (see Appadurai and Appadurai Breckenridge 1976, and Appadurai 1981, for detailed consideration of these points) and recent suggestions that the king was himself a sacred figure (see Pfaffenberger 1980:203), it is possible to argue that the role of the temple and temple practice becomes crucial to an understanding of how Indians come to terms with and seek to negotiate a new authority structure. It is neither the authority of the sovereign deity nor the authority of elected Indians which is perceived to order the form Indian social and cultural life must take in its wider form. Just as with caste, these cultural principles are systematically subordinated in many contexts to principles of ethnic or 'race' relations and the forces of modern international capitalism. This creates a dominant ritual contradiction, of course, which we have seen in the "social dramas" (Turner 1974) examined in Chapters 7 and 8. These social dramas provide contexts of conflict which enable, indeed, promote reflection on problems of the constitution of the rites, of social identity and on the meaning of the new social location of Hindus. This is not to say that all processes engaged in are rendered accessible to the consciousnesses of the actors, or that all consequences are intentionally produced.

For example, my evidence suggests a denial of the relatively simple model of change in caste ideology identified by Barnett (1977). In his thesis, transactional bases of caste were being replaced by a process of substantialisation in which castes were becoming like ethnic groups. In urban Malaysia, the situation is made more complex by the existence of caste within a dominant ideological concern with 'race' or ethnicity which already implies notions of substance and origin, and in which, Indians are categorised as one. Moreover, transactional bases remain fundamental to most high caste Vellalar understandings of their need to engage in social interaction with low caste individuals, even if the areas of life in which this is true are becoming fewer and more limited.

We are confronted here with an old problem in social theory which Barnett himself is addressing. That is, how are we to understand the relationship between ideology and culture and its implication for social action in an increasingly complex urban situation. Barnett seeks to isolate a series of narrow "ideologies" within an "ideological field" and suggest that people remain interior to one in seeking to give meaning to action; or rather, they must be so in order to be able to act meaningfully. My own experience suggests that ideologies are not narrow or bounded, even as 'fields'. Rather, the notion of a caste ideology, an ethnic ideology and so forth requires a recognition that people are forever constructing and reconstructing the boundaries of their beliefs and 'understandings of the world' in such a way as to negate attempts to define where one commences and the other ends. Caste ideology is like every other ideology in that it is continually informed and penetrated by ideological themes beyond its previous scope.

It is also continually informed and penetrated by the actions of other actors in the Indians' social universe. These actors are the ideologues over whom they may have no control, but who remain extremely 'significant' to them, for all that. Thus, being 'interior' to an ideology may be impossible. It is certainly the case that 'ideology', its shared range, and its relevance for the particular context of Malaysia are precisely the problems of social life for Indians.

It has been argued then that essentially cultural phenomena such as religious practice operate to reproduce fundamental distinctions which have as one consequence the fracturing of classes, while, at the same time, categorical distinctions based in part on such criteria become objectified categories within the social formation. These operate to reproduce class fractions, so determined, as fundamental to the reproduction and transformation of local social relations of production, exchange and distribution.

The importance of these observations and arguments lies in the implications they have for the study of urban processes in general. In much of the debate which follows Castells (1975), the problems of how to approach the "urban question" have been centred on the economism of those who wish to regard cities as mere products of processes of production, consumption, exchange or distribution. This thesis argues a position which would place the relationship between the economic base and 'ideology' which a vulgar Marxist might wish to see as a super-structural epiphenomenon in a more truly dialectical relation. It is not a question of seeking ultimate determinants and coming down on the side of material base relations "in the last instance". Nor is it any

alternative to suggest that the form the infrastructure takes is itself a result of the ideas people have about appropriate or 'natural' relations between humans engaged in social life. The question is, rather, how do religious concepts inform (i.e. give form to) the understandings of a population with regard to the transition to a new economic context. How do these understandings in turn come to alter or modify the working out of the new economic situation and give it shape and potential in a particular social formation. The argument offered here suggests that the ideological possibilities which are realised depend in part on the capacity of a culture or cultural complex like Hinduism to become an almost inexhaustible source of symbolic reworking. Emphasising and selecting textual sources which seem most appropriate from within the canon, or developing and elaborating particular types of practice, these are alternative strategies for meeting new contexts. These transformations are not crudely determined by the economic processes of the new urban complexities, but they are vital to understanding the form and reproductive potential of that urban context. In the social relations of the town and the city, as much as in the jungle village, the reproduction of the cosmos is fundamental to the reproduction of the society. Actors, by striving to make sense of their own actions, the actions of others and the apparently anarchic structure of their social world, produce the conditions for the continuation of that world in the form of the city through their social actions. The sense they make of it depends on the cultural tradition they are embedded in, in the very construction and meaning of their social space, as much as it does upon the abstract logic of the development of a Capitalist Mode of Production.

Seeking to know and establish who you are in Melaka is a process of dealing with the problems that are generated in the new political/economic situation because one already lives in culture. Without the cultural context of their emergence, they would not be problems. That culture and the value system it entails are both crucial to understanding the process of creating a social identity. In the form of ethnicity, that creative process of identity construction is not entirely a matter of situational selection or 'circumstances', nor does it reside primarily in "primordial" sentiments (Geertz 1963; Keyes 1979). The cultural basis of Hindu Indian identity inheres in the understandings of built structures, of social space and in ritual practice and in the 'structuring properties' of these three domains. The social meaning of that identity is in a continual state of indeterminacy as the cultural base and the material base meet in the lives of acting, meaning — creating Indians. These Indians constantly strive to make their lives, and to make them cosmically sensible.

Thus, for Indians, one cultural problem lies in the inability of the sovereign deity to 'protect' its followers against the influence of the State (from which it is now fundamentally separated) in these processes of social transformation. A cultural disjunction appears as the normally all-encompassing spiritual sovereign stands in an apparently inverted relationship to mundane social structure, where the Malay-dominated State continually asserts in word and deed its dominance over the realm of the deity and his subject worshippers. The position taken in the argument is that ritual provides a major context for attention to and attempted resolution of social and cultural contradictions made manifest in the course of interaction, itself in part the outcome of the transformation towards a new State order.

My position in this discussion has amounted to a concern with praxis and symbolic action in which, like Dolgin et al. (1977:36-7) I see that while a symbol's "use is limited by the symbol's place in the structures which pre-exist the particular situation, these structures are themselves recast as they are used", and it was to this end that Giddens' ideas were employed in examining the processes in which Indians were engaged. This view of ritual and the relation between cultural systems and social systems differs markedly from that of both Geertz and Bloch (1977) in that it necessitates the recognition of a closer interaction between the everyday, mundane world and the world of religion and ritual. Ritual is not mere ideology, mystically separated from everyday knowledge, nor is it a part of culture which does not give form to and in turn receive form from its interaction with social action. The tension which Geertz (1959) perceptively notes to be always present is always in the process of being resolved, though never successfully. Ritual stands in relation to mundane practice as culture does to social structure in general. That is, they are inextricably linked in an ever-developing dialectic.

Urban ethnographers who seek to understand religion must attend then to the conditions of its development. They must not assume a static system — religious ideology — which is peripheral to the broader processes of social life in a town. Neither must they assume a religious system which will somehow transform itself to reflect more completely the requirements of a dominant economic system, one which appears almost sentient in its capacity to mould individuals to fulfill its needs. Rather, we must seek to analyse how human conceptions of the world and the universe give shape to the world and are given shape by it in the process of seeking to transcend its mundane limits.



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