

TRANCE AS A STATE, WITH PAIN TO STIMULATE AND DANCE TO CONTEMPLATE

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Transcendence / Trance and dance: Introduction

The understanding of what the human body is, what it can do, the intriguing psycho- somatic connections have always been the source of discussion in academics. In connection to performance studies, the body has been discussed sociologically, anthropologically, psychologically and kinesthetically. In order to understand the body in performance and dance, it is essential to have a clear understanding of the above perspectives.

This paper deals with the actions and the reactions during the ritual performances by the individuals and the whole community, during two festivals: Thai Pusam in Palaniⁱ town and the Ponguni Pongalⁱⁱ in the town of Virudhunagar. 'Palani' is a small town situated in the district of Dindukal in the state of Tamil Nadu with a hill in the center of it. Both these festivals have their own ways of preparation where the bodies of the individual and the community have to undergo certain transformative processes in order to perform the rituals. These rituals, which include bodily activities, are different from the physical activities of the day-to-day life. One of the major challenges includes walking more than hundred kilometers on the road for days and nights to reach Palani. Some of the devotees also carry decorated wooden props weighing around ten to fourteen kilograms throughout the journey of the pilgrimage from their respective homes towards the space of the ritual. Some of the devotees voluntarily undergo body and facial piercing as an act of penance. Carrying firepots during the rituals also requires a specific mind and bodily preparation. These acts of the individuals in particular and the community at large, of encountering, reacting and overcoming the

pain during the rituals are believed to be a result of the presence of specific deities inside them.

This transcendence through pain is known locally as 'saami-aduthal'(Trance) in Tamil. During the time of piercing the body with miniatures of the Vel (spear), the trembling movement of the body was considered as a sign of a trance state. This paper explores the moments of trance experienced by individual devotees. The research explores the reasons for such a state, its moments of initiation and end, and the actions and reactions of a body in trance. In order to understand the connections between the idea of penance and the body's reaction towards pain, the classic analogy of the 'Body-Mind dynamics' is taken as the theoretical framework.

The classic understanding of the mind-body split, as proposed by Rene Descartes (1596-1650), considers the body and mind as two separate isotopes. This complete split interacts with nature. Because of the body-mind interaction, the two isotopes were presumed to have occurred and accumulated with their own experiences. This resulted reaction of the body and mind was understood in many different ways and these ways were sought to learn the different distinct meanings in an individual's life. The observed and understood behaviors were visible in the festival spaces, which were introduced in this research. These observations could be analyzed from diverse viewpoints with the help of the ideas posited by differing theorists who delve into how the body relates and connects to the environment in which it lives.

Different kinds of representative bodies exist within a festival space in accordance to each individual's participation in the ritual performances. In this paper, the understanding of the body would be achieved by looking at the body and its related rituals in both Thai Pusam and Panguni Pongal festivals.

The Thai Pusam and the Panguni Pongal are two famous festivals in Tamil Nadu, a southern part of India related to the Hindu deities. Here most of the devotees end up performing many rituals during these festivals. In this case, the body is prepared to become holy, to create a sense of sacredness in order to invite or become the holy deity towards the end of the ritual. During the process, the devotee transforms temporarily, from being a normal person carrying out daily day activities, into an ascetic

for a limited period because undergoing of certain rituals. These transformatory rituals include processes in which the passive devotee becomes an active one by a proscribed set of activities. These activities include the following actions: changing his/her clothes, alterations in eating habits, bathing twice a day, not wearing any slippers or shoes, maintaining celibacy from the beginning to the end of the ritual.

The preparation for the ritual of the Thai Pusam festival happens during the time of mid-December to early January where the climate during this period would be cold in Tamil Nadu. The ritual penance would be a procession of devotees chanting “Aro-hara”, resting at particular geographical localities where there are sacred spaces were already there, as small temples provided with temporary sheds for the devotees to rest. The Panguni Pongal festival, on the other hand, is celebrated during the end of March to mid-April in the same locality and the devotees chant “Aaho – Aiyaho” during the rituals. After the Pongal’s ritual of *kaapu katuthal*(planting a long slender wood on a public place where the top of the wooden stick would be tied with neem leaves along with turmeric which acts as the marker or the sign of the initiation of the ritual), the devotees avoid leaving the locality till the festival comes to an end. Here the ritual would be performed in parts, starting from the “Thannioothu” (the water pouring ritual) and then the making of the Pongal and, lastly, the piercing and the carrying of firepots.

In the case of the Thai Pusam festival, there is a long-term preparation for the devotee, which would be assigned as the transformatory rituals that includes going barefoot, steering clear of having only vegetarian food, etc. Here, the rituals vary and start at different times for different devotees according to their sacred vow. Initially, the devotees start the procession from their hometown, with or without the Kavadi.

Idea of the sacred body

The training achieved by each individual in the name of ‘transformatory rituals’ (i.e.)the initial ritual activities starting from the wearing of the sacred marker, the ‘mala,’ and the following of other activities in which the individual transforms him/herself from a normal person to a devotee. These activities help the individuals to incorporate the needs of the body in order to perform the ritual during the festival. The body revisits

these necessities form the recent training along from the past, performs the rituals by invoking the memory of the past of the same ritual festivals from previous years. During this process of invoking the memory of the past with the help of the knowledge that the body has already acquired, the body becomes the 'site' where these past activities were brought into play and processed to create transformatory rituals.

Once these transformatory rituals were done and the body would be expected to be ready to undergo the ritual on the day of the festival, the body is expected to be bound by certain rules. The rules were followed again in two ways: as external embodiment and internal embodiment. The internal embodiment is the individual's body that invokes the inhabited memory from childhood. Along with the memory, there are the individual's perceptions of reacting to the situation and coping with the remembered and experienced pain during the ritual. The external embodiment is the adaptability of the individual's body to the external music played during the rituals. The whole community, including the devotee, has orientations towards the music from their rites of passage in life. The individuals perform a rhythm to the beats of the drums, driving them during and through the rituals. The external embodiment further involves the devotee's blood related kin, who help the devotee in performing the ritual. This collaboration between both the internal and the external embodiment factors causes the devotee to move between the memories and present experience of past and earlier festivals. These conclusions were achieved after understanding the interviews of the devotees from both the festivals from the years 2009 to 2014 along with the experience of watching these festivals from childhood days. The conclusion of the embodiment was a result of the article from different scholars starting from Pierre Bourdieu, Colleen ward, Thomas Scheff, etc.

The foundation of both rituals in this research is the experience of trance and the transference into the holy, the inhuman (the mala or the Kavadi), to the human and vice versa. However, how both rituals experience trance in the specific ritual processes needs to be analyzed from within the context of each. While trying to analyze the trance as described by the individuals who took part in the festival of Thai Pusam and Panguni Pongal, my intention here was to look at the movements generated while the

devotees were in a state of 'trance.' These non-random movements were seen as structured and codified, with a proper personification of the devotee's performance as a belief in the deity. This performance of belief is what this researcher calls trance movements.

Trance in the rituals of Thai Pusam and Panguni Pongal

A trance would be understood to happen through certain behavioral practices, which signify the altered state of consciousness to the people observing it. The trance movements were also community specific and could be understood by the way the performers start to move during the ritual in an erratic fashion along with high energy, through which the community accepts and understands as trance.

All through my fieldworkⁱⁱⁱ into the Thai Pusam festival in Palani and the Panguni Pongal festival in Virudhunagar, along with other ethnographic research I had conducted in the past, I intended to use certain key words, which are associated with the notion of trance. These words include religion, ritual, penance, memory and identity. These terms became intrinsically linked with the idea of 'Trance' through their associative importance when observed as emerging through shared time and space. In the following section, I would introduce the keywords in relation to the notion of 'Trance' in order to understand the socio-cultural performance that signify Trance. The festivals of Thai Pusam and Panguni Pongal were replete with beliefs and rituals that display the connection and balance between nature and humans while constantly aspiring to generate further cognateness within the community as shared in-group behavior.

However, in both the ritual festivals I observed, each of the ritual has its own set of 'ideal' sanctifying methods and concept of 'optimum rituality.'^{iv} Further, there is a point of readiness that is of great importance in the context of the start of a ritual, and even in the context of a trance. The point of readiness here in these rituals were, when the devotees were dressed and present at the ritual space and about to perform either carrying the Kavadi or the burning firepots, where they mentally prepare themselves. Colleen ward explains in her article (Ward, 1984) explained that the devotee starts moving or shiver during the Thai Pusam rituals, which might be due to fear of the pain

about to occur, this state of mind would be needed to overcome by the devotee during the rituals. This preparation of mind along with the community members would be assigned as the place where the individual starts or enters into Trance at an optimum point of readiness in support of the community. The trance in itself becomes communicated through the initial awareness of the body – of the alterations that the mind is going through. The registering of this awareness starts a series of behavioral particularities, and they lead, in turn, to a series of movements which are associated with the notion of trance. That moment of registration of the alteration of the mind might in itself and in its entire setting would be identified as the 'optimum rituality'.

A common belief about trance is that when the devotee/performer experiences trance, he or she was considered as the person within whom the deity resides temporarily. The trance was often further associated with a certain identifiable set of movements which signify the exact moment that a spirit has entered the body of a devotee, making that person (regardless of whether he/she was a dancer) perform or dance using those specific movements which he/she may have never learnt from anyone. The performers in trance were considered as the individuals within whom the deity resides. This trance-dance leads to the other devotees around him or her praying to the particular person who is in a state of trance. The trance, then, is a method by which the individual sets him/herself off as part of the ritual in order to prepare the body mentally to undergo the penance and then control the outcome of the penance. Therefore, trance acts, as a medium for the body to explore the limits of the individual's self in experiencing the pain and overcoming the pain. In order to understand the reasons for the necessity of the Trance the penance could be overlooked in the process of the ritual.

In the festival of Thai Pusam and the Panguni Pongal, as one observes the stages of a person going into trance and thereafter attaining a visible sense of calm, the fact that trance acts as the step to prepare the devotees to undergo penance gets established.

Penance was believed by the individuals who performed them, observed them as participants as in controlling them and also who observed them in both the festivals as

to be a fairly common way of cleansing during the rituals, either for any wrong doing or for making the body ready to receive the blessing from the deity. The act of penance when asked to those who performed them implies that they undergo them to show their faith and repay their sacred vow. Due to this act of penance, the individual who performs them states that after performing them, he/she gets blessed from their problems and continue to do it for their well-being of their family, and their community. In these two festivals, the penance observed was of various kinds, pertaining to the modes of self-mortification that the individuals walk miles to the temple, also inflict themselves with like sharp needles, cut themselves with the knives and carry burning firepots.

The acts of penance and the associated body movements/dance observed in Thai Pusam festival.

There are several stages of ritual penance observed during the Thai Pusam festival, which were performed during the beginning by the individual after him/her having a bath and reaching the entrance hall of the Thiru Avinankudi temple near the Palani hill. Either their relatives or community members would accompany the performer during the entire process. In addition to them, there were hired drummers who would start to play their drums in a rhythm. This rhythm would have a choice of playing either their own or according to the individual's or the communities' request, to which the individual start to move his/her body. While observing these movements during my fieldwork most of the devotees were always jumping in a sequence in accordance to the beats of the drums. The female devotees would hold their fingers by the palms facing upwards, towards the sky and shake their whole body in rhythm. While some of the male, devotees were observed to be, following a similar pattern or just shake their body and swing their hands in rhythm with the drumbeats while facing their bodies at a crossed angle and leaning backwards. As the researcher, I saw these movement activities of both male and female that was observed and understood as the individuals were in the state of trance. The movement here was of moving their hands up and down

from their wrists. Their community members would always hold the trance devotee in support either by their hands or by tying a towel to the individual's waist and holding the towel while the community members constantly yell the term 'Aro-Hara' to the devotees' ears. The performing devotees will also place and give his/her weight on the people who are holding them. Because of this act, the devotee and the people who were falling out of balance would be held and brought back straight by those who were holding them. Likewise, the movements were repeated in rhythm according to the beats. During this entire time, the devotee in trance behaves with their body as either keeping their faces towards the sky or just shaking the head rapidly, which looked to this researcher as if the person was being forced to perform along with the cruciating pain occurred due to the penance or any mental trauma.

Within some ten to fifteen minutes, the devotee slows down his/her movements and gets ready to for the ritual of piercing. The elders in the community who accompany the devotees during the Patha yatra would perform the piercing. The piercing objects are checked for their sharpness, and if they are not sharp enough, they were manually sharpened with a sharpening stone or the sharpener blades. Further, a minuscule Vel was placed down on a banana leaf where there would be some fruits and a coconut along with some vibuthi (holy ash). The minuscule was kept for a small prayer along with a short chant. This is the process where the idea of holiness was brought to the minuscule through the prayer and to match the holiness of the current situation of the devotee, as he/she is in trance, yet another version of holy possession by the god. The Piercing would be then performed with the help of a senior member or the experienced piercer who would prepare the individual. The preparation would initially start by applying some butter on the devotee's cheek and a little amount on the length of the minuscule. The piercer checks the devotee's cheeks for the place where there were no nerves, which might cause some serious bleeding on the devotee's cheeks. Once the devotee opens his/her mouth the process of piercing would start from either sides of the cheek. The cheek would then be pierced through from one side to the other side on the parts marked with butter. The butter would be applied on the sides of the cheeks to arrest the bleeding. Meanwhile, the other devotees and the fellow community members

were constantly yelling the term 'Aro-Hara', so that the devotee performs the ritual without any fear. The devotee takes a huge and deep breath as he/she could prepare him/herself to undergo the pain. Once the piercing was done, the devotee was asked to bite the minuscule so that the mouth remains closed in order to avoid the stretching of the skin and bleeding. After the process of piercing, the senior devotee or the Guru removes his hand from the devotee's head.

Once the devotee was let free after the piercing he/she would start to jump and hold their fingers together and start to move on their sides and try to fall off the balance. The leaps will be according to the beats of the drums and there will be nodding and shaking of the head which is again in according to the beats. During this time, the community will be constantly holding the devotee from falling but the devotee will constantly be jumping and making some noise. As these movements looks the same as earlier but after the piercing, the movements seem to be the outcome of withholding or overcoming the pain occurred due to piercing. The devotee will be constantly jumping and falling off the balance while trying to endure the pain. This goes for about ten to fifteen minutes and during this time, again there will be constantly yelling of Aro-Hara by the other devotees. Once the circling of the Palani hill was done, the penance of piercing ritual comes to an ends. The pierced 'Vel' would be removed slowly; a banana would be given to eat along with some water to the devotee. Then the punctures on the cheek would be covered with holy ash in order to arrest the bleeding.

Body movements/dance associated with the act of penance in Panguni Pongal

There are differences in the performances of the Penance involved in the Panguni Pongal festival. Here, the transformatory rituals are very similar to the Thai Pusam festival, but this festival happens during summer and is adapted to the climate and geography in order to fit the needs of the individual during the festival. The rituals were performed in the locality named Virudhunagar, the head quarters of the Virudhunagar District in Tamil Nadu. In this place, there were exclusive rights and two different communities followed claim of ownership over the prime deity and to perform

their rituals in Maariamman temple. The main emphasis of the analysis and the explanation I undertake as researcher would be done with reference to one particular community where the mythology or the oral tradition claims to belong to the main temple deity. The Chatti (firepot) is prepared in front of the devotee who will then carry it. While the fire pot was prepared, the devotees prepare themselves for the piercing on the cheek and on the back of the body, as per the individual's sacred vow. The preparation of the devotee involves help from the drummers, who are usually the Thavil^v and the Urmi Melam^{vi}, as well as a wind instrument at times. The drummers start to play and the devotee would slowly start to move his or her body with jumps and pushes. At this point, there would either be a community member present or the devotee him/herself will be performing the trance alone. The individual devotee usually jumps by loosening the upper limbs and rolls them up in circles in front of the body gets coordinated to the music of the drum. The head was also rotated along with the hands, with no bend on the knees. The individual spreads his/her feet firmly on the ground in order to have a balance of the whole body. The male members usually wear comfortable attire with dhoti in the ritual process, whereas the women had to manage with their traditional yellow colored sari.

The community members help the individuals keep control and stay in balance. The devotee performs the trance for a while until reaching the Maariamman (female deity) temple for the piercing of the miniature 'Alahu'. The 'Alahu' involved in the panguni Pongal festival would have the shape of a trident with long staff and the prong on the bottom side of the trident staff through which the piercing would be done to the devotee. These tridents would be made of either silver or steel. After performing for a while, the Devotee is in trance while holding the Thambalam (a large plate that would not usually used for eating but for the ritual purposes for keeping fruits, beetle leaves sweets etc.) and reaches towards the temple following the musicians. These musicians were always hired from the local temple vicinity during the Panguni Pongal.

Once the devotee reaches the temple space, which is extremely crowded, s/he moves towards the place of the piercing and waits for a turn while yelling the term Aaho-Aiyaho in support of the other fellow devotees. Once the turn of the devotee comes, a

fellow community member or a relative holds his /her head. The priest finds the spot on the cheek and constantly asks the devotee to open the mouth in order to start piercing the Alahu, with the minuscule entering through one side of the cheek and coming out through the other. Meanwhile, the relatives of the piercing devotee and the community members constantly yell 'Aaho Aiyaho' in the face and ears of the devotee in order to support the devotee's ability to bear the pain. Once the cheeks are pierced, a spot on the tongue is found where there is minimum nerve damage and the piercing was again done. The devotee, along with the piercer and the community members, comes out of the crowded temple and starts running towards home for the next penance of carrying the Chatti, the burning fire pots.

The devotee runs all the way to his or her home, jumps and rolls as though signifying that they are in trance. But after watching series of trance performers during the field work, the devotees enter into trance before getting pierced. During the piercing the body of these researchers would be shivering or shaking, even though there would be a constant support from the community members. Once these devotees had their piercing done, they would again enter into trance. During this time of the trance, there would be a noticeable sprightliness of the devotee's body. In order to understand this shift of the devotee's body in trance, along with the interviews of the devotee's and with the help of the Colleen ward's arguments one could conceptualize that the devotee tries to overcome the occurred pain of the piercing. While the devotee is still in trance, the Chatti or fire pot would be made ready to be carried. The devotee with full energy, or suppressing pain, moves vigorously towards the burning fire pot, Chatti. Before receiving the Chatti, the devotee again performs the trance while being held by the waist and, in pain, the devotee moves both hands in rhythmic circles or semi-circles while bending the body towards the knees. This action was constantly performed along with the music of the drummers in an elaborate way. The devotee would carry the Chatti along with his/her piercings of the body, the devotee encounter's pain. The entire concept of the deity entering within devotee was believed in order to succumb the pain involved in the process. The local community members' advice the performing devotee not to mention that they are in pain or else the belief of the deity within the devotee

would be proved wrong. Due to this reason, most of the devotee's never mention to their neighbors about their pain during their rituals but they use their trance performance of as a viable option to relieve the pain and proceed with the ritual.

The performance continues thus - once the Chatti was received by the devotee and the piercing of both the cheeks and tongue were done, the movement of the devotee becomes subtle with the holding of the firepot. The devotee would be seen as holy as he/she would be holding the firepot and the piercings from the temple. The devotee along with the Chatti and the piercing walk on the ritual route, that is a specific route within the town starting from the temple and moves around the streets of the town and ends in the temple. During this entire period, the drummers and the wind instruments would accompany the devotees. It was observed that there is a huge difference of the movement during the walk by different devotees in the festival. Some were subtle and slow but few devotees moved fast by taking long and fast steps and completed the ritual faster. This fast movement of the devotee around the ritual route would be because of the incompetence of withholding the pain occurred during the ritual, but some walk very slowly accompanied with the community members and their penance.

The Trance as a movement pattern and performance.

The trance involved in the rituals of Thai Pusam and Panguni Pongal is associated with the belief of the deity possessing the devotee for a particular period. Once I interviewed some of the devotees who performed trance during my fieldwork, they explain that they do not remember what happened to them during the time of trance. They explain as they lose themselves for a second and they believe that, that was the moment of the deity entering their body. The individual who performs trance might or might not hold the ritual prop-the Kavadi, were pierced, or hold the burning fire pots-Chatti during the festival; this trance performance could happen to anyone who had already seen or experienced it in the past. There were certain Kavadi performers who perform the trance while they were also dancing with

the Kavadi, in accompaniment of the Pambai drums. Similarly, in Panguni Pongal the Chatti holders perform trance before and after holding the Chatti during the piercings. During the festival of Thai Pusam and Panguni Pongal, the trance signifies an altered state of mind of the devotee, as it was believed that the deity controls the mind during the rituals of Chatti and the piercing. During the rituals, if the devotee performs trance, he or she would be left alone to experience the trance for a while and then the community member aid to help them. There were rare cases, that some elderly devotees deliver oracles and their words were believed to be the words of the deity. The rest of the community members try to follow the advice of the oracle deliverer. Once the trance performers are in a much-uncontrolled situation where they were into a state of frenzy their actions would be controlled by their friends, family, and people of the community help control them. The chief or the veteran old devotee who was considered as Guru or the leader of the community reach to the devotee and holds the individual's head and applies some Thiruneeru (holy ash). After the holy ash was applied the trance performer comes out of trance. The performers who come out of trance act very tired and possessed. As the body undergoes many social and psychological complexities and creates the trance movements during the ritual, similar to many other communities, the ritual performance plays a central part in worship in Thai Pusam and Panguni Pongal festivals.

The term 'Ritual' is explained and observed in different forms and different situations, however, most rituals emerge from a few common ideologies, specifically in terms of creating social cohesion. This cohesion was accomplished through the activity, which was done in a group with certain codified movements governed by the community seniors. Most of the rituals were performed for the well being of the individual and the society. The ritual emerges in a ceremony or in a festival, which has specific members within the same community governing the activities of the individuals in performing the rituals. Performing the ritual consists of certain taboos and constructed ways of performing; they create certain codes for the particular community to follow and pass on to the present and upcoming generations. Hence, the ritual would stay alive and perpetuate its normative principals and the belief

system would be passed on from one generation to the next. The term “ritual performance,” therefore, stands for the prescribed procedure for conducting religious or non-religious ceremonies while employing knowledge acquired earlier, either by being a part of the ritual as an audience or as the active or passive performer.

The notion of the word “performance” in trance performance was linked with the ritual process involved in the festival of both Thai Pusam and Panguni Pongal. This emphasizes the repetitive behaviors and normative understandings of the community in successive generations. The movements were learned and imbibed as a part of the socialization process and as part of becoming a member of the community by taking part in the ritual, (i.e. by “performing” the role of a devotee or an informed audience who is able to read the cultural connotations embedded in the process of the ritual). In this instance, the idea of “performance” also focuses exclusively on the movement pattern and the systematic music played which becomes an inseparable part of the piercing rituals in both the festivals discussed in this paper. Hence, it is evident that here the journey to the destination of the rituals, the preparation of the penance, the movements that signify either the trance or the devotional state, or even various stages of the ritual participation in process, are the moments of actual “performance” accepted and acclaimed by the community members. The principal element of the performance, thus, was that the body undergoes the changes and acts both as a site and as a tool. As a result, the body moves according to the rhythm, in a pattered movement that is learned, not as a dance form taught by some expert master, but as member of the community having seen and lived through years of similar festivals.

End notes

ⁱ The festival of Thai Pusam happens in the time of the Tamil month of ‘Thai’ (mid January) and Pusam means the time of the auspicious fulfillment. This festival happens on the full moon day of the Thai month and as this place has the connection to the Myth, it is celebrated by the gathering of numerous pilgrims. The festival of Panguni Pongal is also widely celebrated

ⁱⁱ The term Panguni is the name of the Tamil month ‘Panguni’ and ‘Pongal’ means the sweet dish prepared with rice and jaggery. This Pongal is the usual offering in the Hindu festival to the deity. This festival is a cyclic ritual festival happening on the post harvest session, thanking the deity for the good harvest of the year, this happens during the Tamil month of Panguni which comes in-between the end of March to mid April.

ⁱⁱⁱ Field work done by author: Thai Pusam in the town of Palani, Tamil Nadu from the year 2010-13 and Panguni Pongal in the town of Virudhunagar, Tamil Nadu from the year 2012-13

^{iv} Dr Urmimala Sarkar explains during a discussion about the rituals and the act of readiness in response to the trance and ritual performances

^v A double sided musical drum with one side bigger than the other and it's played by hand on side and a small stick on the other

^{vi} A double sided musical drum in a shape of a time clock, with both equal sides where it's played by hand on side and a small stick which is not struck but rapidly dragged on the other which produces a different music on the ritual spaces.

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