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'It's Enough That the Goddess Knows': About Vows and Spectacular Offerings in Popular South Indian Hinduism

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Abstract: Votive offerings are one of the most common devotional practices in Hindu temples of Kerala and are today resorted to by an ever-growing number of worshippers seeking divine help in times of need. As this article will show, these offerings are deeply embedded in the logics of the hyper-personalized and unmediated devotion that characterizes popular Hinduism in this part of India. They are also markers of the recent opening of religion to individual contribution and intervention, as well as active tools for the intimate worshipper–deity relationship. Ritual arts conducted as votive offerings allow us to dive even deeper into these considerations and open up new alleys of analysis, for they connect public and private worlds in specific ways and introduce unique aesthetic and transactional dimensions. This article draws on extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the south Indian state of Kerala, with particular focus on the ritual performing art *muṭiyēṯṯu'*, which is mainly conducted as a votive offering in high-caste temples devoted to the goddess Bhadrakāḷi. It pulls together anthropology, performance, and religious studies to analyze the current grassroot-level realities of lived popular religion through the prism of votive offerings in general and of ritual performing arts conducted as votive offerings in particular.

Keywords: votive offerings; popular Hinduism; *muṭiyēṯṯu'*; Kerala; South India; Hindu goddess; ritual performing art; ethnography

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1. Introduction

Votive offerings are one of the most common devotional practices in Hindu temples of Kerala and are today resorted to by an ever-growing number of worshippers to contribute to lived religion and seek divine help in times of need. What exactly is a votive offering in my context of study? A worshipper pledges to offer a designated item or to accomplish (or to pay for the accomplishment of) a designated religious action if a chosen deity grants him or her a mentally uttered wish in return. In this article, the following matters will be analyzed, using real-life examples collected from my field[1]: (a) how the wish is formulated, (b) how the offering is selected and then conducted, (c) who the participants in this transaction are and what their involvement is, and (d) how the process functions from the perspective of the goddess. A byproduct of this overwhelming interest in votive offerings is their gradual establishment as a main source of income for temples, particularly the smaller ones that are still in the hands of high-caste families. This current state of affairs is a direct development, not only of the progressive restructuration of the Malayali society under the impetus of economic and socio-religious changes, but also of the creeping collapse of the matrilineal joint family and the agrarian reforms undertaken by the communist government in the 1950s–1970s (Nossiter 1982; Jeffrey [1992] 2001; Nair 1992; Arunima 2003). These deep-reaching developments deprived the large landowners, who were also

those owning, managing, and financing many temples in the area under study, of their main source of income, as well as of the means to uphold the feudal-styled system that saw them flourishing for centuries. During the decade that followed the land reforms, many shrines were forced to reduce their activity to a minimum—lighting an oil lamp at dusk was the baseline—and some completely closed their doors. The current landscape of temple management in central Kerala is a reflection of this trial-and-error phase involving experimentation with alternative strategies and more or less enlightened choices (Pasty 2010, chap. 8). The general tendency was to bank on the tremendous potential of an already existing, but until then largely unexploited, source of income for temples: individual devotion, of which the votive offering is one of the active tool. As such, the solution resorted to by most temples was called 'valorisation' of votive offerings. In the temples I visited, the concrete procedure was to multiply the possible offerings by making each portion of worship, from the largest to the smallest ritual acts through to the tiniest utensils and accessories used for these acts, individually 'sponsorisable' (Tarabout 1997). Choices adapted to all budgets were thereby provided. This atomization of devotional patronage is a perfect illustration of the democratization and personalization of religion, with the votive offering at its core, characterizing not only grassroot practices today but also the relationship between worshippers and some of their deities. The Kidangoor Sree Subramanya Swamy Temple (Kottayam district) is a good example of the successful implementation of this plan: it saw the proportion of its total income derived from votive offerings fire up from 15.6% in 1925 to 76.5% in 1985 (Nair 1992, p. 136), and chances are it is close to 90% today. In the goddess temple on the Panambukad island off Kochi (Ernakulam district), devotional activities, as well as the salaries of priests and temple workers, are currently almost exclusively financed by votive offerings. So, today, it is undoubtedly the worshippers who ensure the survival of the temples through their votive offerings (as well as donations). This also entails that the logic underpinning votive offerings currently accounts for a large part of how worshippers attend to their devotional routine and view their role and interaction with the deities.

Considering this, I propose to look at the meaning and functioning of votive offerings in my particular context of study: popular medium-caste worship in the Bhadrakāḷi[2] temples of central Kerala. As such, this article deals with popular Hinduism in the sense carved out by Christopher Fuller as 'the beliefs and practices that constitute the living, "practical" religion of ordinary Hindus' (Fuller 1992, p. 5). The majority of my informants were ritual performers, temple workers employed in Brahmin temples, and worshippers praying at those temples. Most of them were members of the intermediary *ampalavāsi* castes—*mārār* and *kuṟuppu'*—who are traditionally employed as temple musicians and drawers in Brahmin temples, as well as *nāyars* of similar status. All of them deal with Brahmin priests for their religious functions. *Mārār* and *kuṟuppu'* routinely work with Brahmins; they are vegetarians, they have priest-like functions in some well-delineated contexts (Tarabout 1993; Pasty 2010), and *mārār* women used to have marriage-like unions with *nampūtiris* (the highest Brahmin caste in Kerala).[3] There is therefore a customary physical and social proximity between them and the Brahmins and their highly textual and ritualistic Sanskrit worship. I also witnessed exchanges between informants and Brahmins that mirrored the probably long-lasting intellectual exchanges and mutual influence between those groups. And yet, when it comes to discourse, the distance between them was conspicuous: ritual functions, religious hierarchies, the personality of the goddess, etc., were all explained in different terms. The few Brahmins I spoke with had a clear tendency towards abstraction and connection with pan-Indian speculations, and often referred to Sanskrit treatises to answer my questions.[4] When I asked my informants (*ampalavāsis* and *nāyars*) whether they knew the *Devī Māhātmyam* or the *Liṅga Purāṇa*, which are always

quoted as referential for goddess worship all over India, most of them said 'no'. Also, none of them knew Sanskrit. The 'stories' that form the religious referential of my informants are the vernacular narratives that are part of their daily lives: the *Adḍyātma Rāmāyaṇa* of Tunchattu Ezhutachan, the myth of *dārikavadham* that dominates the local cult of goddess Bhadrakāḷi, and stories connected with deities of local temples (esp. Thirumandamkunnu, Kodungallur, Chottanikkara, and Sabarimala). That does not mean that Sanskrit texts and theories play no role at their level. As Fuller wrote, '[t]he sacred texts of Hinduism—and the concepts, ideas, and speculations contained in them—are often vitally important to popular religion' (Fuller 1992, p. 6). But the 'inner world' of the people I dealt with, the one that came through via the many interviews and informal discussions I had with them, was mainly filled with the ordinary, day-to-day, non-textual religious realities linked with contemporary down-to-earth matters and grassroots-level happenings. And these are the spheres I have been turning my attention to using anthropological and ethnographic tools for the past 20-ish years,[5] to study them for themselves in all their depth and complexity.

The purpose of this article will then be to underscore the difference made by votive offerings for the relationship that individual worshippers entertain and nourish with some of their deities on the one hand, and for the active role these deities are allowed to play in the lives of their worshippers on the other hand. The twist given to this outlook on votive offerings will come from my special field of interest: the ritual performing arts conducted as part of worship in the goddess temples of central Kerala. The proposed analysis and conclusions are therefore embedded in an interdisciplinary approach at the juncture between social and cultural anthropology, performance studies, religious studies, and Indian studies. I will first look at the multiple meanings that are clustered in the Malayali terms used to denote votive offerings. I will then proceed to describe a real-life experience illustrating the interpersonal intricacies and negotiations of the vow-uttering process when linked with a ritual performing art, as well as the peripheral socio-economic components that intervene on an ever-growing basis today. The article will conclude with the examination of a rather rare situation when a performing art, offered as votive offering, is reduced to that 'simple' function.

2. *Vaḻipāṭu'* and *Nērcca*: Concepts and Logics

In the framework of popular Hinduism in central Kerala, the two terms that are commonly used to refer to votive offerings are *nērcca* and *vaḻipāṭu'*. Both are endowed with multilayered meanings that inform about how vows are conceptualized and the type of relationship they establish and/or nurture between the worshipper and the concerned deity. Constructed on the Dravidian root *nēr-* meaning 'truthfulness, straightness, rectitude' (MP: 621), as well as 'justice' (G: 582),[6] the word *nērcca*, with the attached verb *nēruka* ('to vow'), specifically refers to a deliberate commitment made to a deity, equivalent to swearing an oath, that is carried out in a straightforward, unmediated manner, usually in the secrecy of prayer. The commitment is made with a truthful and just intention with regard to what is asked of her and what is promised in return. The object or action that constitutes the counterpart or the reward for the deity is also included in the very word *nērcca*, as it also means 'what is offered to a deity' (MP: 621).[7] The fact that the action following the oath is always fixed from the onset and is clearly identified during the oath-making process also stresses the quintessential connection between the oath and that action. The action in question is frequently an offering conducted with the participation of priests in the temple of the concerned deity, such as a sum of money with or without a fixed purpose of expenditure, an object (gold chains, flower garland, food items, etc.), an object representing a part of the human body, an animal, one's own weight in rice, coconut, or bananas, or a ritual action ranging from a small-scale rite such as *guruti*[8] to a larger one

such as performances of ritual dances or theatres (Freeman 1991). It can also be a votive action performed by the oath-uttering worshipper such as a pilgrimage, a particular rite (Reiniche 1979, pp. 162–66), a mortification (Hiltebeitel 1991; Tarabout 2005), austerities, or playing a particular role, such as incarnating the goddess in a ritual context (Meyer 1986; Ramanathan 2000). As such, what is offered to a deity is already imbricated in the very meaning of the word *nērcca*, not just from a linguistic (MP: 621) perspective, but also a conceptual one.

While '*nērcca*' is commonly used all over India and more specifically in Kerala by Hindus, Muslims[9] (Dale and Menon 1978), and Christians (Dempsey 2001) alike, the word *vaḻipāṭu'* seems to rather be the preserve of Malayali Hindus. Meaning literally 'in line with the path, means, action' (Tarabout 1986, p. 323), the definition of the word *vaḻipāṭu'* also includes 'obedience', 'race', 'lineage', as well as 'offerings of rice, fruits, etc. of which the greater part returns to the donor' (G: 926). The term is composed of the words *vaḻi*, meaning 'way, manner, mode of conduct' and *pāṭu'*, meaning 'order, obligation, suffering' and 'mortgage admitting of overhead of rights' (MP: 950, 681). So, as for *nērcca*, the concept *vaḻipāṭu'* linguistically and conceptually includes both the oath and the action that follows; here again, the word's multiple meanings open a whole world of signification, showing the deep implications of votive offerings in day-to-day religion.

To start with, the linguistic richness of both the terms *nērcca* and *vaḻipāṭu'* coincides with the different dimensions of the votive offering as displayed in popular Hindu worship in this part of India. First, both *nērcca* and *vaḻipāṭu'* entail a 'straight relationship' with the deity, namely a relationship 'founded on rectitude', emphasizing the need to honour the contract once the wish (*āgraham*) and the attached vow are expressed (Tarabout 1986, p. 323). The concept of *vaḻipāṭu'* further indicates that the vow-uttering devotee assumes a debtor position with regard to the deity and that misfortune lingers over his head should he deviate from this 'rectitude', by forgetting to ensure his part of the contract or by deliberately failing to honour it.[10] The straight relationship also implies a 'direct relationship' (ibid.); that is, the absence of any intermediary between the devotee, who formulates the vow, and the deity to whom it is addressed. While this unmediated connection lies at the core of *bhakti* that predominantly shapes popular Hinduism today, it takes on a specific connotation when looked at from the point of view of votive offerings. Here, the vow is formulated in the secrecy of prayer (*manassil prārtthiccha*) and is only made public when the promised action enters its concrete organization and performance phase. According to my informants, this procedure ensures that the vow is placed in front of the goddess alone, and that its realization is set within the sole framework of devotion. Other motivations, such as the search for prestige, are thereby eliminated—but we will see that this type of catalyzer is accentuated in the active phase of performance of religious offerings. Furthermore, the secrecy of prayer inside which the vow is formulated is considered a powerful frame, ensuring the authority of the vow, the determination of the devotee's commitment to the deity, and the level of obligation towards the deity. In my informants' words, the declaration of intent made in front of the temple authorities at a later stage has less importance and is less binding compared to the vow made in the holy space of a worshipper's mental devotion.[11] Moreover, I was repeatedly told that the quality of the benefits that are expected to result from the fulfilled wish depends on the discretion and intimacy with which the vow was emitted and with which the connected deity–worshipper bond was sealed.[12] As Ann Gold wrote based on her Rajasthani data, what matters is that it is performed 'without advertisement, without care for appearances' (1988, p. 8). Finally, the straight relationship implies a 'full relationship', entailing that the devotee is engaged both physically and mentally in the contract with the divinity. Here, the focus is on the honest and unequivocal intention and the need to conduct the promised action with only

devotion in mind. Therefore, the expected benefits not only derive from the efficiency of the vow formulation and performance of the offering once the wish has been fulfilled, but also from the attitude of the devotee, her mental disposition, inner clarity, and purity, which the goddess values more than the proper execution of the offering itself, as I was told (see also Erndl 1993, p. 65).

Finally, the multilayered definitions of the word *nērcca* evoke the necessary 'appropriateness' of the votive offering. This fundamental dimension implies that the promised offering needs to match with the identity, nature, and special tastes of its divine recipient, as well as with the expected benefit. In that sense, the effectiveness of the votive offering also derives from the attention to what is appropriate as a means of '[directing] the divine help (. . .) to a specified purpose' (Diehl 1956, p. 259). In some cases, the goddess herself announces via a possessed intermediary which offering she wishes to receive and how it should be implemented (see Choondal 1978, p. 80). But the most frequent pattern is when a worshipper freely chooses from available offerings listed on a board inside the temple of his choice. An important parameter here is that these offerings have *ideally* been carefully selected by the astrologer–*tantri* duo in the framework of the deity's initial installation, in due consideration of the special features, expectations, and 'needs' of her incarnation in the given place. I emphasize 'ideally' because the data I collected from the field rather indicate that the decision of which object or which ritual action to promise in return for a granted wish is not only oriented by the ideal adequation between the deity's incarnation and the proposed offerings, but also by very earthly social and economic considerations of worshippers, especially when large spectacular offerings are concerned (see Pasty-Abdul Wahid 2017). Therefore, ideally, an offering is considered appropriate when it responds to an identified expectation from the part of the deity—and by expectation, I mean a longing for, an inherent need for, and even a craving (!) that is known to worshippers. In the truly reciprocal relationship that is established during a *nērcca* or a *vaḻipāṭu'*, the deity responds to a silently uttered need of the devotee, in exchange of what the devotee responds to the perceived or clearly expressed need of the deity. The question of the deities' needs is fairly controversial among scholars of Hinduism, especially because it implies that the deities share certain characteristics with humans, including vulnerability (Dempsey 2001, p. 103; Wadley 1975, pp. 81–82). For Christopher Fuller, this idea is a misinterpretation, for the deities 'never are dirty, ugly, hungry, or unable to see in the dark'. In his words, worship focuses on 'honor[ing] deities and show[ing] devotion by serving them *as if* they had such needs (1992, p. 70). Fuller thus sees devotional action 'primarily [as] a respectful act to honor' the deity, that derives its efficiency from the fact that the gods are satisfied to 'see human beings behaving correctly as their servants' (Fuller 1979, p. 470). Ann Gold nuances that the major Hindu gods indeed have no needs, meaning that entering into such a bargain-like contract with them is inconceivable and useless, but states that inferior deities are definitely responsive to material offerings and are known to act in favour of worshippers in exchange for promised returns (1988a, p. 187).

The data I collected during my South Indian field trip cluster all these considerations into a single meaningful vision. When talking about performances of the ritual theatre *muṭiyēṯṯu*[13] (Figure 1), which are annually offered as individual *vaḻipāṭu'* to goddess Bhadrakāḷi, one of the most important deities in the local high-caste pantheon, my informants clearly expressed that this offering has a number of functions. Firstly, it regenerates and maintains the *śakti* (active power) and *caitanyam* (presence, vitality) of the goddess.

> A temple owner: *Muṭiyēṯṯu'* is a kind of revitalisation, because it is supposed to renew the *śakti* of the goddess. In *muṭiyēṯṯu'* they replay the story of the Goddess and this is supposed to bring back her power, and when she gains power the worshippers get her blessing.[14]

Secondly, it satisfies her desire to see the killing of her *asura* enemy being reactualized in front of her, for it gives her the feeling of reiterating the foundational mythical act—killing the *asura* Dārikan—that established her status as powerful protectress. Thirdly, it meets her *need* for attention, recognition and praise from her worshippers.

> A temple worker: *Bhadrakāḷi* needs *muṭiyēṯṯu'*, because it will spread her story. Bhadrakāḷi will be there only if her stories, her *mantras*, her abilities, her capacities are in the mind of the people. By *muṭiyēṯṯu'* the importance of *Bhadrakāḷi* is spread among the people from generation to generation.[15]

And fourthly, it responds to the enduring craving—even addiction—for the performance she is said to develop after seeing it for the first time[16] (see Pasty 2010, chaps. 4 & 6). *Muṭiyēṯṯu'* is therefore indeed offered to meet her (perceived) needs as well as to worship and honour her. This combination of effects makes it a tremendously powerful bargaining chip for securing the goddess' intervention in fulfilling worshippers' wishes. The many testimonials I gathered about wishes having been fulfilled after promising to sponsor a *muṭiyēṯṯu'* as *vaḷipāṭu'* serve as remarkable proofs of the successful functioning of this mode of interaction with the goddess and of the appropriate appraisal of her personality, her needs, and expectations in this framework.

Figure 1. Goddess Bhadrakāḷi in *muṭiyēṯṯu'*; Pazhoor family (photo by Srī Pazhoor Kunjan Marar Mudiyēttu Kalakēndra).

Another important dimension of the *vaḻipāṭu'* that pervades discussions with worshippers of goddess Bhadrakāḷi is the mutual inclusiveness of the wish that is emitted and the response from the deity: she always answers, I was told, whether positively or negatively. Laurent Aubert interprets this as a form of non-negotiable obligation of response deriving from the intrinsic power of the ritual when it is properly accomplished: 'As soon as she is solicited, the Goddess is no longer free, she is involved in this exchange relationship, from which she has no possibility of escaping; (. . .) otherwise she would not be the Goddess!' (Aubert 2004, p. 173).[17] In his words, the rite 'has the power to bend her will' and to force her to manifest. And yet, as we have seen, the goddess grants the wish, i.e., answers the worshipper's pledge, before he has even finished accomplishing the rite in its totality (utter the wish in a quiet and honest devotion and accomplish the promised act). Freeman explains, 'gods are not paid in advance for fulfilled vows. They are only (. . .) paid for successfully delivered goods' (1991, p. 280). I have indeed never heard of a *vaḻipāṭu' muṭiyēṯṯu'* being performed before the goddess has answered the wish.[18] Another aspect to consider in the context of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* is that the negotiation between the sponsor, the temple committee, and the *muṭiyēṯṯukars* (performers of *muṭiyēṯṯu'*) over the price and scale of performances (e.g., the number of characters/musicians, optional items such as fireworks, decorations, etc.) only takes place shortly before the chosen date, i.e., long after the initial vow was made during prayer. This implies that the exact form of the offering is known neither to the worshipper nor to the goddess at the moment the vow is emitted, meaning that the contract is sealed on unclear terms, or rather on another basis. Therefore, it is hard to imagine that the promised offering serves as sole incentive for the goddess to act in favour of her devotee. Conversations with worshippers, temple workers, and performers of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* underscored that the key ingredient in a votive offering is rather the unmediated, intimate, authentic relationship between the deity and her devotee on which the offering builds. This relationship, as long as it is alive and unbroken, allows for plenty of liberties such as postponing the performance of the promised offering (for justified reasons) even after the wish was granted (see below). It also allows for liberties on the side of the goddess, since she does not always grant 100 % of the wish[19] and can also delay the materialization of her intervention over many years, as I was told.[20] When she does take her time to grant a wish, it does not undermine the worshipper's belief in her power and willingness to intervene; in much the same way, she does not lose faith in her worshipper when he has trouble meeting his end of the contract. That is why informants insisted on making me understand that the direct, profound, and trustful connection between the worshipper and the deity lies at the heart of her cult and, by extension, at the core of the *vaḻipāṭu'* process.

In any case, the performance of the promised act is always viewed as an official declaration that the goddess responded positively, and also as 'announcement that the method was successful' (Diehl 1956, p. 249)—that is, that the worshipper uttered his vow in a proper way. An informant told me with much pride that the high amount of *vaḻipāṭu' muṭiyēṯṯu'* performed in his native village temple clearly demonstrates the intensity and quality of the devotion of his peers, since the goddess only responds positively to pledges when they are set within the right frame. The actual performance of the promised act is also viewed as an act of gratitude through which the worshipper holds up his end of the deal, which is tremendously important for purposes of avoiding divine retribution. Moreover, it publicly acknowledges that his son's new job, or his daughter's pregnancy, or the recovered health of his wife, is the work of the goddess alone.

Another important component of the votive offering to look at is the proportion between the wish to be fulfilled and the offering promised in exchange. Marie-Louise Reiniche complained about the disproportion 'beyond any economic rationality' between the cost of offerings and expected results (1979, p. 149–50). My informants claimed that

the more you invest in *vaḻipāṭu'*, the more benefits you will receive from them, and there is definitely a notion that the bigger the wish, the larger the offering you should select. The votive offerings that a devotee can give in a temple are always listed, along with their respective prices, on a large board hanging near the administrative buildings (Figure 2). When offerings are scheduled during temple festivals, then the exact amount invested in *vaḻipāṭu'* is also printed along the person's name on the leaflets distributed during these major events. This entails that there is no secret surrounding the sums spent on wishes, which is of course an open door to ostentation (see below). When it comes to non-regular offerings, such as spectacular performances, the question of the price is a bit more blurred, since their prices are not usually mentioned on the boards and are most of the time negotiated with the performers from year to year, shortly before the performance. Parallel to this, informants assured me that the goddess is aware of the means of each individual among her flock, especially those suffering from hardship, and that she measures each sacrifice at its fair value.[21] In that sense, if the smallest offering is the biggest one can give, then it is the greatest one for this just and understanding deity.

Figure 2. *Vaḻipāṭu'* board listing all available votive offerings, temple of Perumbilli (Photo by author).

Finally, we may wonder to what extent there is a correlation between the nature of the offering that is promised when uttering a vow and the expected benefits. Here, again, the information I received clearly hints at an explicit and, most importantly, a commonly shared knowledge that is sometimes underpinned by printed leaflets, booklets, or lists in which these benefits are announced. In the temple of *kōlaṃkuḻaṅṅarakkāvu'*, one of the strongholds of *muṭiyēṯṯu'*, the choice of *vaḻipāṭu'* depends on what the devotee expects from the goddess.

> Previous manager of *kōlaṃkuḻaṅṅarakkāvu'*: If a person wants his child to get married he will give *paṭṭum tāliyum*[22] as *vaḻipāṭu'*. For other cases he will give *guruti, for example* if we have *śatrudōṣam*.[23] If we want to get ourselves in a good position

> in job we will give *pāyasam*.[24] We give her *muṭiyēṯṯu'* as *vaḻipāṭu'* for smallpox, also any diseases, also for having a total change in our situation: we will get general *aiśvaryam* ('prosperity') by doing that.[25]

Similarly, the leaflet of a goddess temple from the Kottayam district announces that sponsoring a *muṭiyēṯṯu'*, which is 'the most important *vaḻipāṭu''* in this place, brings different types of benefits. First, it pleases the goddess (*dēviprīti*). Second, it ensures a prosperous progeny (*santāna bhāgyam*).

> Brahmin officiant of *nāmaṃkuḷaṅṅara* (Maniyur): Here there was a *nampūtiri*, he married thrice but didn't have any child. Then the fourth marriage took place and his mother prayed to Kāḷi: 'my son has attended marriage thrice and still doesn't have a son. Please give him a child and I will offer you *muṭiyēṯṯu''*. That *nampūtiri* has now 6 children and after the birth of the first child his family sponsored a *muṭiyēṯṯu'*.[26]

Third, it provides relief from diseases (*durvyādhi śamanam*).

> Lawyer from Velloor (South Ernakulam district): On a *muṭiyēṯṯu'* day when I was on my way to the temple [*paṭiññāṯṯukāvu'*] accompanied by my mother five dogs attacked me. My mother had to take me to a special hospital to get an injection. Immediately my mother took the oath that if I get well she will finance a *muṭiyēṯṯu'* the next year.[27]

And fourth, it protects against afflictions caused by enemies (*śatrudōṣam*). According to the worshippers whom I talked to, sponsoring a *muṭiyēṯṯu'* can also lead to success in studies and work.

> Manager of *paḷḷippāṭṭukāvu'* (Tiruvamkulam): This man [*vaḻipāṭi* in 2005] is from the *pulaya* caste [caste of very low status] and last year he took the *vaḻipāṭu'* for *muṭiyēṯṯu'*. He prayed so that his brother gets a good job, and he did get an employment in the government service. So he is going to finance the coming performance.[28]

It can also lead to increases in wealth.

> Manager of *pāṭattukāvu'* (suburbs of Mulanthuruty): This year a *nāyar* from Bombay sponsored *muṭiyēṯṯu'*. He works as a mechanic there. He sponsored *muṭiyēṯṯu'* because he first wanted to purchase some land here [Mulanthuruty] and he got it last year. Immediately after getting that he offered money for *muṭiyēṯṯu'*.[29]

Finally, it can help with marital happiness. The received answers make plain that all worshippers who attend performances of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* standardly receive a dose of divine blessing for the simple act of being there. But when the goddess' assistance is required for a targeted purpose, then just being there is not enough to solicit and orient divine help. A *vaḻipāṭu'* must be offered.

When we turn our gaze to other temples, the list of benefits expected from offerings becomes even more specific and detailed, as for instance in the *maṇṇāṟaśāla* snake temple in Alappuzha district, where the list printed for worshippers quotes the following:[30]

- For wealth and prosperity, offer a vessel full of gold or of other items;
- For education, prosperity, and fame, offer silk, grains, or divine ornaments;
- To recover health, offer salt;
- For protection against poison, offer turmeric;
- To cure diseases, offer pepper, mustard, or green gram;
- For protection against misfortune, offer golden effigies of snakes, snake eggs, or trees;
- For a long life, offer ghee (clarified butter);
- For 'receiving everything that one wishes for', offer milk, ripe fruits, and *pāyasam*;

- For pregnancies, offer a large copper vessel to be used for *nūṟum pālum*.[31]

In some cases, there is an easily distinguishable link between the item and the expected benefits, such as a wedding locket offered to secure a good match, or ghee—the food 'fit for the gods'[32] with long-proven medicinal properties for a strong healthy body—that is offered for securing longevity. In other cases, the connection is less clear. There even seems to be an interchangeability between some offerings that probably all serve the same purpose of showing attention and respect to the deity.

To end this discussion about the dimensions of the *vaḻipāṭu'/nērcca*, one last important component to note is that they are 'normally circumstantial, related to distress' (Tarabout 1986, p. 324) and to disrupting life events or lacks. For this reason, they are usually punctual, unless the *vaḻipāṭu'* concerns a many-year or even life-long offering, such as when *muṭiyēṯṯukkars* pledge to dedicate their entire human existence to serve the goddess by enacting her story and allowing her to use them as human vessels for physically interacting with devotees. But in this context, it is the word *arppaṇam* meaning 'an offering, a placing, a dedication' (MP: 71) that is rather used. The general idea is that the *vaḻipāṭu'/nērcca* is a ritual tool integrated within the broader logic of a committed give-and-take relationship between the worshippers and the deity, a balanced 'relationship of mutual exchange' based on trust (Dempsey 2001, p. 104) that allows both parties to meet and fulfil each other's needs and desires.

In order to give an idea of how these considerations take shape in concrete life and dig deeper into the logics of the votive offering, especially when applied to performing arts, I will now describe a concrete case of silent wish-emitting followed by the negotiation of the practicalities and the consecutive performance of the promised act as I witnessed it in a village of Central Kerala in 2005. This description will allow me to illustrate the usual procedure of a *vaḻipāṭu' muṭiyēṯṯu'*, introduce the other participants that play pivotal roles in the preparation and implementation of a private votive offering, and analyze the negotiations that takes place around its content as well as its *effect*.

3. A Ritual Performance as *Vaḻipāṭu'*

> Nandini's daughter: For my marriage, my mother prayed for *muṭiyēṯṯu'* [offer a *muṭiyēṯṯu'* as *vaḻipāṭu'*], that if it's over in a good way and I got a good partner and good family [in-laws], then she will do [sponsor] a *muṭiyēṯṯu'* here in Pangarapilly.[33]

Nandini[34] mentally (*manasil* 'in the mind') uttered this wish (*āgraham*) during one of her daily prayers to *kōlaṃkuḷaṅṅarakkāvu' Bhadrakāḷi*, the goddess of the village where she lived with her husband and two daughters, Reema and Riya, on an evening in the early months of 2001. She was sitting next to the oil lamp she lights every evening for the *sandya* (dusk) *pūja*. Her daughter was studying for an engineering degree in the neighbouring town and was at the right age (21) for marrying. She would complete her course within the next 2 years, which gave Bhadrakāḷi plenty of time to put her powers at Nandini's service and manifest a suitable party for her daughter. For Nandini, praying to Bhadrakāḷi in this endeavour was an obvious choice not only for her, but also because her family and the entire neighbourhood are devout goddess worshippers who instinctively turn to her in times of need. Each of them, when asked, had no difficulty listing the blessings identified as the work of the powerful and awe-inspiring but unquestionably caring mother that Bhadrakāḷi is, especially in her incarnation as kōlaṃkuḷaṅṅarakkāvu' Bhadrakāḷi in Pangarapilly. Nandini was born a *mārār*, the caste that sing and play drums during worship in the Brahmin temples. What is more, her family is among the four that hold the hereditary right to perform *muṭiyēṯṯu'* in the Bhadrakāḷi temples of the region. Her father was a renowned devotional drum beater and singer, a legend in the landscape of

muṭiyēṯṯu', who taught her to sing in the traditional style of *sōpāna samgītam* at a time very few women did. Since Reema was her first-born daughter and thus the first one to be married, it was of paramount importance for Nandini to secure a good match for Reema in terms of social rank and occupation. The dowry had been painstakingly accumulated from Reema's birth onwards by putting aside parts of the meagre salaries that Nandini earned as a nursery teacher and her husband (from the socially equivalent *kuṟuppu'* caste) as a veterinarian. Rajesh, himself a growing star among the *mārār* drumbeaters in the region, son of another even more famous musician with heaps of awards received from different artistic institutions, was the ideal groom. Besides being appropriately born, skilled, and from a prestigious family, Rajesh was also good-looking and kind-hearted. And to top it all, he was not interested in receiving a dowry—the money converted in gold was still offered to the young couple as a wedding present. At the beginning of 2003 (so almost exactly two years after Nandini voiced her wish and before her daughter's engineering degree results were even announced), the lavish wedding between these two prestigious (if not wealthy) families was celebrated, as yet another testimony of Bhadrakāḷi's renowned readiness to act in favour of those who wholeheartedly worship her.

It was only at that time, after the outward manifestation of her successful wish-uttering through her daughter's wedding celebration, that Nandini revealed her pledge to her daughter. A little later, she also revealed it to a small circle of close relatives. She had indeed kept quiet about her wish and intention for about 2 years, but this is how it always works. 'When we vow (*vaḻipāṭu' nēruka*) on behalf of our children, we never tell them anything right away, only later', she said. 'We need our children to behave well'[35] she added, meaning that sharing the information about the vow might influence their actions and motivate them to surrender their fate to the goddess instead of being active creators of their own happiness. She also added that she did not inform her relatives about her wish so that none of them could volunteer to help her in financing the costly *muṭiyēṯṯu'* performance, as it is believed that the emitter of the wish should carry the costs alone. Maybe it was also a way to ensure that the divine intervention expected from the *vaḻipāṭu'* would not be 'diluted' among different participants or diverted from Nandini's sole groom-finding target.

Now that the wish had been granted, which is articulated as '*āgraham sādhicchu*' (lit. 'the wish was accomplished'), the time came for Bhadrakāḷi to enjoy what was promised to her. But the already meagre bank account of Nandini's family had already been heavily impacted by the wedding bills, meaning that she was in no condition of paying the 9000 Rs for a *muṭiyēṯṯu'* performance when the time for it came. So, Nandini delayed the completion of her end of the bargain. But this did not concern her, because she 'spoke to Bhadrakāḷi' about the situation and had the conviction that she can read straight into her worshipper's heart and even peek into their bank account to identify whether they act truthfully and honestly or not. After one additional year, saving coin for coin, she had finally gathered the needed amount. That was when she approached the committee in charge of organizing the festival in *kōlaṃkuḷaṅṅarakkāvu'* at the beginning of 2005 with the words '*āgraham sāphalyam* [*āyi*]' ('[my] wish [was] fulfilled'). She thereby officially announced her firm intention to sponsor (*naṭattukka*, lit. 'carry out') the *muṭiyēṯṯu'* that was going to take place in this temple on 11th of *mēṭam* (24th or 25th of April), as it has every year for generations.[36]

As is the case for many other dramatic performances conducted as part of popular worship in the Hindu context,[37] there is a dichotomy between private/occasional and public/regular *muṭiyēṯṯu'* performances that are distinguished by their respective source of funding and the recipient of benefits.[38] If the performance is financed by the management committee and/or by the owner of the temple, it is integrated within the annual cycle of ritual acts targeting the maintenance and, if necessary, the refuelling of the deity's active

power. These performances, called *dēvasvam*[39] *muṭiyēṯṯu'*, are entirely 'for her to enjoy' and do not compel her to do or offer something in return. They are exclusively meant to please and serve her, to sustain her enduring ability and willingness to be the active agent of the temple's and the locality's prosperity. The *dēvasvam muṭiyēṯṯu'* are also the minimal compulsory performances that ought to take place no matter what. The alternative to *dēvasvam muṭiyēṯṯu'* is the *vaḻipāṭu' muṭiyēṯṯu'*, sponsored privately by an individual or a family in connection with a vow. This type of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* is precisely conducted to thank the deity for a wish that was expressed before and that had already been fulfilled. The benefits derived from this type of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* are unambiguously oriented towards the *vaḻipāṭi* at first and then to the rest of the community, since a *muṭiyēṯṯu'* performance is (almost) always public and gathers a large crowd of worshippers regardless of the source of funding.

In theory, a *vaḻipāṭu' muṭiyēṯṯu'* can be programmed at any time of the ritual season (end of December to beginning of May), ideally on the birth *nakṣatram* (lunar mansion) of the sponsor, as is often the case for simple votive offerings[40], but this is an absolute rarity in practice (see below). *Muṭiyēṯṯu'* performances, both *vaḻipāṭu'* and *dēvasvam*, are generally conducted on dates (*nakṣatram* + Malayalam month) that are fixed for every temple. These dates are usually the result of oral agreements set generations ago in consideration of ritual logics linked with auspiciousness and preferred days for the goddess. They were also fixed by taking into account logistical constraints stemming from the availability of *muṭiyēṯṯukars* and the fixed itinerary they used to travel on foot from temple to temple. The customary practice in wealthy temples is to conduct the *vaḻipāṭu' muṭiyēṯṯu'* in addition to the 'regular' *dēvasvam muṭiyēṯṯu'* on consecutive days, adding up as many performance nights as needed to accommodate the number of *vaḻipāṭis*. In the goddess temple of *murikuḷaṅṅara* in Kurumallur (Kottayam district), I attended eleven *vaḻipāṭu' muṭiyēṯṯu'* performed after the *dēvasvam muṭiyēṯṯu'*, each on a separate day, and four in the goddess temples of Kumaramangalam (Ernakulam district) and Purapuzha (Idukki district). In the less wealthy temples such as *kōlaṃkuḷaṅṅarakkāvu'*, the *vaḻipāṭu' muṭiyēṯṯu'* is conducted in lieu of the *dēvasvam muṭiyēṯṯu'*. This is, of course, a windfall for the managers, who can save the temple's funds and only jump in when nobody else volunteers (which never happens nowadays). The rationale behind this substitution[41] is based on the assumption that the goddess requires an annual performance, regardless who pays for it. As such, both devotees and temple administrators share the responsibility of maintaining this minimum requirement.

> Nandini: This year another family wanted to sponsor *muṭiyēṯṯu'* because their daughter got a job in USA [as result of a wish]. But this family has a lot of money, so they can sponsor *muṭiyēṯṯu'* any time, while my family only has enough money now and we might not have it next year. My brother [singer and leader of the *muṭiyēṯṯu'* troupe] told me that a lot of people might come to sponsor *muṭiyēṯṯu'*, so I should book it in advance, but I couldn't do it because we were not sure about the money![42]

The Pazhoor[43] *muṭiyēṯṯukars* perform yearly at *kōlaṃkuḷaṅṅarakkāvu'* on 11th of *mēṭam*, and have for generations, meaning that there is no need to specifically book or call them. A discussion between the lead performer, the sponsor, and the committee, however, does take place shortly prior to this date, in order to set the price of the performance as well as the duration (usually 8 h approx.), the number of participants (the standard is seven characters and five musicians), and the potential extras (fireworks, additional oil lamps, elephants, small *vaḻipāṭu'* within the *vaḻipāṭu'*)[44] that can be adapted upon the sponsor's request and financial means.

> A villager from Pangarapilly: If there is no money, only 1000 Rs will be given [to the *muṭiyēṯṯukar*] and the performance will not be in detail: it will last only one and a half or two hours.[45]

When Nandini officialised her intention to sponsor the *muṭiyēṯṯu'*, the committee not only requested her to pay an advance, but also to cover the cost for the *kaḷameḻuttu' pāṭṭu'*[46] drawn prior to the performance. They even strongly advised her to pay for all the other devotional activities planned for the entire *mēṭam* 11th, i.e., *niṟamāla* (adorning of the idol with jewellery), *cuṯṯuviḷakku'* (lighting of oil lamps in the temple), and *dīpārādhana* (swinging of oil lamps in front of the idol). Nandini was told that all these rites composed a unit with *muṭiyēṯṯu'* and that it would increase the benefit of her *vaḻipāṭu'*. It is actually an increasingly common feature, especially in the temples administered by the Nair Service Society[47] or a Devasvom Board,[48] to expect the *muṭiyēṯṯu' vaḻipāṭi* to pay for the twice as expensive '*muṭiyēṯṯu*' package' composed of the performance itself and all other devotional activities taking place on the same day.[49] Nandini was quite upset by this assertion. The final amount exceeded by far her resources and did not reflect the vow she had initially taken. Upon Nandini's wish, I asked the previous year's *vaḻipāṭi* (whom I had to meet for an interview) if he had also paid for the entire day. The answer was negative. In his opinion, the committee, which yearly goes from door to door to collect funds from the Hindu villagers to finance the festival, had certainly yielded a bad harvest that year[50] and tried to make up for the loss by fooling Nandini's family. To top it all off, the committee claimed that a 10% increase had been promised to the *muṭiyēṯṯukars* the previous year. However, Nandini stubbornly insisted on paying for the sole performance and only Rs 8 500, which was the amount paid by the *vaḻipāṭi* in 2004. The *kaḷameḻuttu' pāṭṭu'* was to be sponsored by another *vaḻipāṭi*. As usual, this amount was to cover the salaries of the *muṭiyēṯṯukars*, their *dakṣiṇa* (ritual fee), their dinner[51], and their beverages for the whole evening (mineral water, tea, and coffee). The amount also covered the oil poured into the *nilaviḷakku'*, the vegetal offerings made inside the green room, the flowers used for decorating the headgears, and the material needed to craft two torches, as well as the *teḷḷi* powder thrown into them during the whole session.[52]

> Nandini's daughter: If we have money we can also add the amount for fireworks, that will make *muṭiyēṯṯu'* more beautiful, *Dēvi* likes it![53]

Given the kinship link between Nandini and the Pazhoor *muṭiyēṯṯukars*, they suggested that she dealt directly with them, without the committee's mediation. The committee reluctantly accepted under the condition that Nandini's name would not feature in the festival's leaflet, meaning that she would not be officially presented as this year's *muṭiyēṯṯu' vaḻipāṭi*. This was quite an imposition, considering the implicit importance of this public display of wealth and devotion for the sponsor's social status and reputation. And yet Nandini did not mind, as, in her words, 'it's enough that the goddess knows' (*dēvikku' aṟiññāl mathi*). Besides, she believed, as many around her do, that *Bhadrakāḷi* prefers those who give discreetly with no other aim than satisfying her.

What was special about this 'family arrangement' is that it enabled Nandini to take over the role of traditional *vaḻipāṭi* standing in direct relationship with the officiants of her vow, sort of being the only 'boss' of the performance she pays for. This was unique, as temple committees have in many places set themselves up as ritual intermediaries, thereby preventing this direct bond that used to be a standard in olden days. On the day of the performance, at around 9 p.m., approximately 1 h before the start of *muṭiyēṯṯu'*, Nandini presented herself at the entrance of the greenroom (pollution rules prevent her from entering it) holding the ritual fee, *dakṣiṇa*, of 101 Rs placed in her hands together with an areca nut on a betel leaf (*veṭṭila*). The *dakṣiṇa* itself is only represented by the compulsory

one rupee coin. The rest of the amount, which is freely set by the sponsor, is considered an auspicious gift to the performer/officiant. It sets an impulse towards continuation, reciprocity of action, and an increase in wealth for the receiver.[54] By handing over this *dakṣiṇa* to the *kāḷiyāśan*—the lead performer who was about to embody Bhadrakāḷi and happened to be her maternal uncle—Nandini formally inaugurated their relationship as sacrificer (patron of the sacrifice) and officiant. In exchange, the *kāḷiyāśan* gave her a banana leaf with a burning cotton wick lighted on the small oil lamp at the centre of the greenroom (Figure 3). Nandini then carried the wick to the centre of the performance area and lighted the tall *nilaviḷakku'* (oil lamp) around which the performance was about to unfold. Through this act, the *vaḻipāṭi* 'expresses her thankfulness to the goddess and announces to her that she is performing [paying for the performance of] *muṭiyēṯṯu'* today as promised.[55] Nandini was thereby setting the stage for the final closing act of the contract she opened 4 years ago. She would finally conduct the long sought-for offering that would not only free her mentally from her long-lasting and financially burdensome commitment but also express in unmistakable ways how profoundly grateful she was for the goddess's assistance in such an important matter as her child's secure and happy future. It would also add a substantial affection-filled coating on the already well-nourished bond that connects her with this ever-loving divine warrior she looked up to in many critical moments of her life. It was the act of a daughter presenting her mother with the best gift her little means could allow, bearing in mind the certainty that she could have selected nothing more pleasing.

Figure 3. *Dakṣiṇa* exchange between the sponsor (**left**) and the *kāḷiyāśan* (**right**), Pazhoor family (photo by author).

When the performance started, Nandini went back to being a simple spectator, as she did every year of her life in these same temple premises. She sat with the other women on one side of the performance area, witnessing the mythical deeds of her divine mother as the drama unfolded, snacking on roasted groundnuts purchased from ambulant salesmen and talking with her neighbours, sometimes even dozing off during the less noisy moments of this intense ritual performance. Once the enactment part was over and the goddess was about to distribute her blessings (via flowers, the swinging of children, and the waving of torches) to all assembled worshippers, Nandini, her two daughters, and her husband came to stand in front of Bhadrakāḷi, incarnate in the body of the possessed lead *muṭiyēṯṯukar*, to

receive the 'special *prasādam*' reserved for the *vaḻipāṭi*. The *prasādam* consisted of a bunch of red flowers, taken from the goddess' headgear, that all four of them tucked behind their ears and some sandalwood paste, directly applied to their foreheads as outward markers of the personally bestowed grace. Nandini then handed to the lead *muṭiyēṯṯukar* the agreed amount of money wrapped in a piece of red silk (*paṭṭu'*). Her role as *vaḻipāṭi* was thereby satisfactorily accomplished and her contract with the goddess terminated.

4. About Human Transactions in Votive Offerings

The human transactions that are needed for a *vaḻipāṭi* to be able to fulfil his side of the contract are interesting because they underscore part of the trends and moods that currently dominate popular Hindu practices in this part of India.

The first of these transactions is the administrative and financial formality that brings together a sponsor with the authorities and workers of the temple in which he wishes to conduct his offering. This interaction was unequivocally described in negative terms by informants, including by those employed for their musical service in the same places. The committee's grip on the performance's organization in the temple of *kōlaṃkuḷaṅṅarakkāvu'* is symptomatic of the administration of many sanctuaries in my area of study, in particular those that were transferred to caste associations (NSS[56], SNDP[57], etc.) or government agencies (Devasvom Boards) in the last 20 to 40 years due to a lack of resources. Their highly hierarchized and tightly structured management style tends to lock up the frame of activities and procedures to an overt religious agenda that leaves little room for personalized wishes of devotees. With their target of purifying Hindu practices (through the prohibition of objectionable elements such as animal sacrifices, hook swinging, obscene songs, etc.), cleansing them of excesses (costly rites and functions for weddings or funerals, overly loud music, etc.), prohibiting parasitic activities (non-religious sales or art programs in temple precincts), democratizing access to religion (abolition of caste restrictions, multiplication of possible offerings, etc.), homogenizing procedures at a state level (standardization of pollution duration after birth, death, etc.), and promoting a more pious form of devotion, the caste associations and government agencies deploy an intense form of interventionism at the heart of popular religion that the worshippers I spoke with considered with quite a few ill feelings.[58] Corruption, the misappropriation of donations, irregular procedures for the appointment of priests, ritual incompetency, and mislaid politicization made out most of the criticism against temple officers that was voiced during interviews. Nandini's experience was just one example of the distrust-imprinted interactions between worshippers and the representatives of the temple's administration. No *vaḻipāṭi* is sure their money will be spent in the intended way, I was told. It is a fact that the vast majority of small temples finance themselves and pay their priests with the money received in the form of votive offerings. But instead of viewing this state of affairs as a regular procedure, the worshippers I spoke to interpreted it as a sign of dishonesty.

> Daughter of Nandini: Some *pūjāris* don't do their job properly and take money from our *vaḻipāṭu'* for themselves. Some of them are asking us for 50 Rs for doing something while the official price is 30 Rs. (...) When someone gives a lot of money for some *vaḻipāṭu'* or *pūjā*, some of them [*pūjāri*] simply say that they used the necessary money for God and the rest, that was not needed, they kept, that is not a problem for them.[59]

Today, the list of standard *vaḻipāṭu'* displayed in most temples clearly mentions the price per item: 'so they can't ask for more', as one worshipper said. But *muṭiyēṯṯu'* is a 'special *vaḻipāṭu*'' that usually does not feature on those lists. *Vaḻipāṭu' muṭiyēṯṯu'* are therefore ideal playgrounds for unscrupulous officers, with an open-ended possibility of additions and improvements highly prone to financial bargaining. What is thought-provoking about

this is that temple officers often explain that, the more lavish the performance, i.e., the higher the amount paid by the sponsor, the more likely it is that the goddess will be pleased. I have come across instances where temple officers did not just strongly recommend that the sponsor pay more, but imposed this as a precondition for proceeding with the *vaḻipāṭu'*. This happened most frequently when several sponsors were 'competing' for financing the only performance of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* that could be conducted in a year. Some sponsors, such as Nandini, however, responded that, the more bargaining they comply with, the higher are the chances that their final offering will differ from what was promised to the goddess when the vow was mentally voiced. While the questionable handling of private votive offerings by temple officers and officiants is obviously not generalizable, it is well-integrated into the discourse of the worshippers I spoke with. A notable trend is that this form of bias seems to trigger a defensive response from worshippers, who then use the intimate bond between the devotee and the goddess that lies at the core of the *vaḻipāṭu'* as a shield or as a stronghold. And it appears that this bond is built against those 'bad officers' that are seen as pale projections of the mighty enemies the goddess was sent to kill in her foundational myth. I was indeed repeatedly told that, because the goddess knows her worshippers' heart and soul, she can clearly differentiate between the offering that a worshipper honestly intended to give, the modified offering that the same worshipper was eventually forced to pay for, and the completed rite reshaped by the officer's intervention. Whatever the distance between the intended and the conducted offering, interferences from third parties are considered as altering neither the substance nor the benefits of the *vaḻipāṭu'*, as long as the straight relationship with the goddess is preserved.

> Nandini: We think that the Goddess knows what is happening with that money, she knows how much we give and if the *pūjāri* or other take that money for themselves. If they are making money with our *vaḻipāṭu'*, then she will know because we aren't rich people, it's tough for us to make money.

One final aspect of the human transaction that clearly appears in the situation described above is the apparent contradiction between the interpretation of true devotion as inward and silent, and the emphasis on the need to increase the scale and beauty of a votive offering to please the goddess in a more efficient way. The fact that the goddess is not the sole beneficiary of more beautiful offerings is an established notion. Social pressure and the search for prestige evidently factor into the religious activities undertaken by individuals, even though they are explicitly criticized. In Kerala, this trend discernibly impacts public activities as a whole within popular Hinduism, especially as a development of the exponential increase in economic migration to the Gulf countries since the 1970–1990s and the conversion of economic to symbolic capital through the medium of religion (Kurien 1993, 2002; Osella and Osella 2000; Karel 2003). This development, which shows when newly enriched families pay for the renovation of a temple or sponsor an expensive ritual in their native place, is particularly visible in the performing arts conducted in Hindu temples, where private sponsors sometimes compete for the brighter and lavisher offerings (Osella and Osella 2003, 2006). But what is interesting for our purpose is that this competition is deployed with ritual efficacy as its target, meaning that the outspoken objective is to please the goddess in a more productive way; she is said to enjoy offerings to a greater extent when they are more entertaining and more pleasant to watch and to hear.

Explicit aesthetic considerations incontestably play an important role in Hindu practices. This can for instance be seen when the *kuṟuppu'* spreads a fine mica powder over the *kaḷam* to make it glitter, or when the *mārār* adds Carnatic ornamentations to his *sōpāna* singing[60] to increase its melodic appeal. But here, again, these aesthetic qualities are considered in terms of efficacy of worship, as a beautiful drawing or a beautiful song works better in materializing and manifesting divine entities and satisfying them (Tarabout 2003). The

artistic qualities of ritual acts are therefore instrumental, and, what is more, they theoretically do not stand out as more potent for reaching ritual efficacy. As such, ritual acts with artistic qualities are 'not distinguished, *in principle*,[61] from all those that can work towards the success of the celebration of gods' (ibid.: 6). However, in practice, these considerations do play an increasingly weighty role. Today, they are decisive strategies used by ritual performers to increase their popularity and patronage networks (see Pasty 2010). But even then, the issue of aestheticism remains controversial. All performers of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* basically agree that an aesthetic performance enhances its ritual efficacy, for it attracts more audiences and intensifies the happiness of the deity. But when it comes to banking on this effect by developing it, their opinions diverge, because it entails moving away from traditional standards set many generations ago and, what is more important, moving away from the proven secure baseline formed by tradition. *Muṭiyēṯṯu'* is a power-infused spectacular act handling the potent forces of the goddess and the lower entities that accompany her. If improperly performed, it could definitely backfire—as is demonstrated by stories mentioning lethal accidents and live beheadings that performers and worshippers like to speak of. Opinions in this matter are also divided among sponsors and worshippers. Most of them condemn ostentation, especially those, like Nandini, who do not have the means to compete in this game. But here again, prestige and social capital are rather pictured as (for some, certainly convenient) byproducts of efforts to satisfy the deity and secure her good graces. Indeed, most of my interlocutors (sponsors and audience members alike) said that the additional expenditure that enables the enhancement of the beauty of the ritual act, through more lamps or fireworks, more musicians for more powerful music, or more actors for a longer and richer performance, is highly appreciated and even favoured by the goddess. Less wealthy villagers such as Nandini reject these additional expenditures due to an obvious lack of resources, but what is compelling is that they justify this rejection by resorting to the abovementioned criticism of ostentation.

The issue becomes even more tricky when incentives and pressure from outside are added into the game, as in Nandini's case. While the member of the festival committee in *kōlaṃkuḷaṅṅarakkāvu'* I interviewed insisted that the collection of funds from households does not obligate anybody to participate in the festival's financing, the door-to-door method definitely exerts pressure on each inhabitant; not giving any money remains a private decision, but refusing to give when one is appealed to is a public decision. Moreover, seeing one's name on the festival leaflet printed along with the amount spent represents a significant stimulus, even though my informants interpreted it in differing ways. Those who form part of the audience of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* tended to condemn this officialization as a sign of arrogance and as tool for displaying personal wealth. For sponsors, having their name featuring on the leaflet, just below the announcement of the timing for the performance of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* (Figure 4), certainly counts as additional benefit in the form of prestige for those who can afford it. But what about the public humiliation of those who can only afford less? When the name and expenditure feature on the leaflet, they also publicly present the sponsor as model of devotion, since no one pays for an offering unless the goddess has answered his wish in advance, and everybody believes that she only does so when she senses true devotion. Countering criticism of ostentation, some sponsors of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* I talked to—that is, those whose name and expenditure already had been or were going to be listed—expressed the opinion that the public display was not targeting the surrounding humans, but the goddess. For them, it is a means to overtly and wholeheartedly express their devotion and gratefulness to this almighty being whom they see as the source of their prosperity. The display of wealth is then used to acknowledge the goddess' pivotal role in this prosperity, to honour the fruits derived from her intervention and to spread the news that it is definitely worth worshipping her in a proper way. In this sense, the officialization

of the identity of the sponsor, as well as how much he spent, are valued as components of this intimate and unmediated bond between the goddess and those who pray to her.

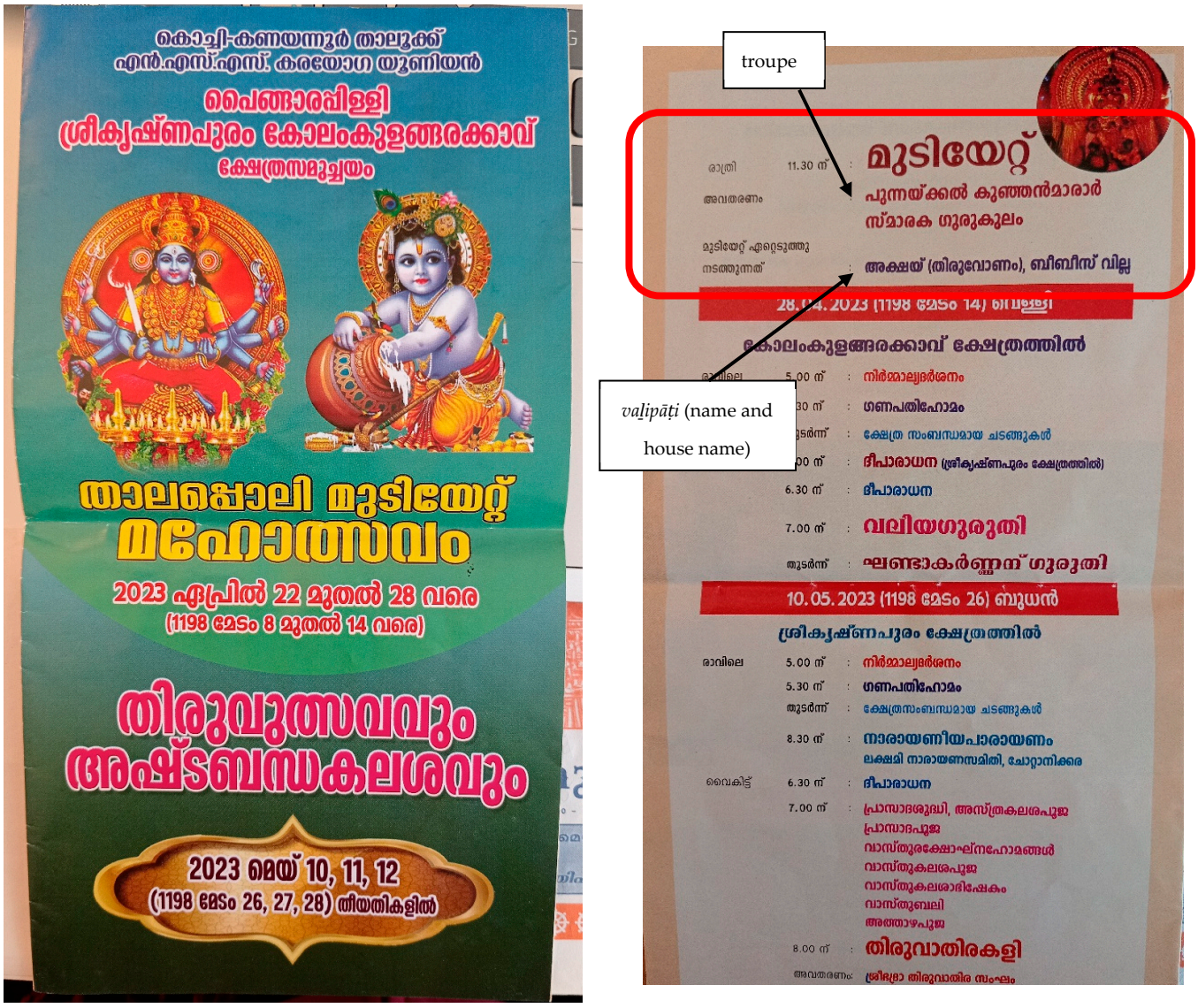

Figure 4. Combined leaflet for the festivals in the Bhadrakāḷi and Kṛiṣṇa temples of Pangarapilly, with inner page (**right**) concerning *muṭiyēṯṯu'* (മുടിയേറ്റ്) mentioning the troupe and, underneath, the *vaḻipāṭi*'s name (red frame).

The second important transaction that characterizes a *vaḻipāṭu'* in general and the *vaḻipāṭu' muṭiyēṯṯu'* in particular is the relationship set within sacrificial logics[62] that confronts the sponsor with the person(s) in charge of conducting the offering on his behalf—that is, the officiant(s). For standard *vaḻipāṭu'* that would be a *pūjāri*. For *vaḻipāṭu' muṭiyēṯṯu'*, it is the *muṭiyēṯṯukars* from the troupe, who have the hereditary right to perform in the sponsor's temple of choice (see Pasty 2010), and, in particular, their leader, the *kāḻiyāśan*, who is also the one who wears the goddess's costume. As shown in Nandini's story, this relationship is inaugurated and also signalled by the handing over of the *dakṣiṇa* a few moments before the performance starts. Prior to this formal meeting, the *vaḻipāṭi* and the *muṭiyēṯṯukars* generally have no direct contact. By accepting the *dakṣiṇa* and exchanging it with a banana leaf and lighted wick, the *kāḻiyāśan* commits himself to acting as technician and conductor of the ritual action, at the service of the sponsor. By this act, the *vaḻipāṭi* also allows the officiant to participate in the contract he has entered with the deity at the

time of the silent vow-uttering. The *valipāṭi* thereby shares with the *kāḷiyāśan* the binding commitment as well as the responsibility for the proper conduction of the promised offering, for it is said that both will suffer the consequences of errors or failure to conduct the *muṭiyēṯṯu'*. The *muṭiyēṯṯukars* I spoke with, however, explained that their contribution to the *valipāṭi*'s contract tends to be more and more partial and technical and that they are gradually being pushed out of the inner circle. In olden days, the *valipāṭi* used to be in close contact with the *muṭiyēṯṯukars*. What is more, he used to entrust the *muṭiyēṯṯukars* with the reason for sponsoring this ritual performing art. The sponsor and the officiant were thereby linked with a personalized trust-filled bond going beyond devotional technicalities. One lead *muṭiyēṯṯukar* explained that this bond allowed the performers to take an active part in the *valipāṭi*'s prayer (*prārtthana*), thereby increasing its strength (*balam*) and helping to orient the benefits of the performance towards the sponsor. This was notably carried out during the preparation phase in the greenroom, when the performer about to transform into Bhadrakāḷi mentally prays to the goddess in order to prepare for the transfer of *caitanyam* and *śakti* into his body. In this prayer, the name of the *valipāṭi* as well as the personal motivation for sponsoring that day's *muṭiyēṯṯu'* used to be mentioned. By doing so, the *kāḷiyāśan* outed himself as an instrument for the *valipāṭi*'s devotional undertaking in front of the goddess and informed her that he would be acting on behalf of that specific worshipper.

Nandini was uniquely allowed to place herself in this type of position thanks to her kinship connections with the *muṭiyēṯṯukars.* But the common practice today is that the sponsor neither interacts nor shares anything personal with the officiants of his votive offering. In temples administrated by caste associations or Devasvom Boards, it has become a habit for a representative of the management to take the *dakṣiṇa* and the final payment from the sponsor and hand them over to the *kāḷiyāśan* at the appropriate moments. In a *valipāṭu' muṭiyēṯṯu'* I witnessed in the temple of Pangarapilly in 2003, the representative of the temple management even stood right next to the sponsor, acting as the middle man, with the *dakṣiṇa* as well as the final payment transiting from the sponsor's hands, to his, and then to the performer's. To me, this felt like a caricatural staging of the administration's agenda that clearly stood against the ritual meaning of these financial exchanges. This form of interventionism quietly but overtly sabotages the ritual function of these financial exchanges for the other two participants, as it depersonalizes the active part of the *valipāṭu'* and the role of the officiants. For the temple management, however, the substitution of the *valipāṭi* by its own agents in these moments is a necessary response to logistical and bureaucratic hierarchy.

> Member of the management committee in Pangarapilly: The *dakṣiṇa* and salary should be given by the secretary of the festival committee, because he is the organiser of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* and he has the full responsibility for the performance. If you want to hire a man to do something for you in my house, you have to tell me and give me the money so that I give it to him. That is the proper channel.[63]

The worshippers I questioned regarding this recent evolution explained it as another sign of the dishonesty of temple officers, who appear to appropriate the profits to be expected from the *valipāṭu'* by squeezing themselves in between the two main actors of the ritual. When confronted with this argument, the administrative staff of the temple of Pangarapilly could not make sense of worshippers' criticism, for the benefits of the *valipāṭu'* cannot be personalized, so they said.

> Member of the festival committee in Pangarapilly: The blessing will always go to all the villagers, whoever sponsors the *muṭiyēṯṯu'*. The family sponsoring will only have a mental satisfaction that they did something good towards the God, but they don't get any special benefit from it.[64]

It is a shared opinion that not only the worshippers gathering to attend a performance of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* but also the temple where it is performed and the entire surrounding locality also benefit from the performance, regardless who pays for it. The goddess is known to lavishly bestow her blessings upon all who are directly or indirectly connected with this ritual performing art. And, as already mentioned, performances of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* are also conducted with the target of regenerating the goddess, maintaining her active power (*śakti*) and consciousness (*caitanyam*), and making her happy. When the goddess is at her 'optimal level', this translates into prosperity and wellbeing in the human world. So, as said by the member of the festival committee quoted above, the benefits of a *muṭiyēṯṯu'* are in some way shared by many even if it is privately sponsored as a *vaḻipāṭu'*. However, when the temple staff negate the personalized benefits the sponsor may derive from his *vaḻipāṭu'*, he evidently clashes with the worshippers' opinion that their individual devotion, clustered around their votive offerings, has a creative and agentive power—a good illustration of the 'diversity of practice]and] orthodoxies in lived Hinduism'.[65] However, uttering such an opinion could be considered shooting oneself in the foot, for votive offerings are capital income sources for temples, and worshippers are primarily motivated by the benefits they and their families can draw from their active participation in religious activities. As such, the worshippers who revolve around the high-caste Hindu temples of Central Kerala featuring *muṭiyēṯṯu'* do not respond to Victor Turner's idea of communitas (Turner 1969, p. 131). They do not come together around stages of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* with the intention of forming a 'solidary body of devotion' that will trigger a global auspicious response from the goddess who will bless all, irrespective of their form and level of participation. What brings them together is the belief that attending, performing, or sponsoring a performance of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* will help them fulfil their own religious duty, accumulate a stock of divine blessings to protect and shoulder them throughout the year, and receive support in very personal endeavours. General welfare is rarely the primary motivation.[66] Without a personal wish as a target, the entire votive offering as displayed here would be pointless. Be that as it may, the argument opposing personal and collective benefit falls within the same dynamic as the argument opposing silent devotion and beautifying strategies drifting towards ostentation; both apparently opposed views are juxtaposed by most interlocutors, who occasionally favour one or the other explanation depending on the position they occupy and the point they want to make at the time the question is asked.

In other shrines that are still under private ownership, the old habit of letting the *vaḻipāṭi* take over these highly charged ritual actions tends to maintain itself. But, even here, the tendency is for sponsors to keep quiet about their personal motivations for choosing to offer this drama—a tendency the *muṭiyēṯṯukars* feel fairly frustrated about. In some shrines, the performance ends with the goddess visiting the *vaḻipāṭi*'s house, accompanied by one or two drummers and torch holders. There, she distributes blessings and protection to every family member, as well as to the family's property. But this practice too tends to be more of an exception. One of the reasons for this is that it is not very practical for the fully geared performer and his attendants to travel a certain distance on foot, most of the time in full darkness, since the performance is set during the night. Currently, the usual practice is to relocate this personalized final blessing to the public sphere of the temple premises, as was described for Nandini.

In any case, when the *vaḻipāṭi*' receives the 'special *prasādam*' composed of flowers from the goddess's headgear and sandalwood paste, it signals that the contract with the goddess has been completed and that the blessing expected from the entire enterprise has been received. The formal relationship between the sponsor and the officiant is officially terminated by the payment (*pratiphalam*) of the agreed amount to the *muṭiyēṯṯukars*, which is normally done in person by the sponsor—that is, without any intermediary. But again,

things tend to be done differently nowadays, especially in temples in which the management has been surrendered to public entities. The payment not only retributes the services provided by the *muṭiyēṯṯukars* but also dismisses them from the sponsor–deity contract. An interesting practice I witnessed with only one of the four families that currently perform *muṭiyēṯṯu'* was the *kṣamāpaṇam* ('apology, asking pardon' MP: 317) conducted at the very end of the performance. Here, each one of the *muṭiyēṯṯukars* still wearing their costumes presented himself in front of the sponsor, performing the following actions: he made one jump to the front, and then, holding his headgear with one hand and placing the other hand on his chest, he swung his head three times in circles in front of the *vaḻipāṭi*. The sponsor then placed a *muṇṭu'*[67] and a small sum of money on the backside of the *muṭiyēṯṯukar*'s headgear (Figure 5). The explanation I received is that every performer formally apologizes to the sponsor for the errors committed during the performance. By doing so, they indicate that the ultimate responsibility for the final ritual act lies with the one who promised it and who pays for it. The gifts are then a form of *dakṣiṇa*, which this time does not inaugurate but rather concludes the relationship between the sponsor and the officiant. With this *muṭiyēṯṯu'* family, the sponsor unceremoniously handed the payment in cash to a representative of the temple's administration at the end of the performance. The payment was, later on, collected by the *kāḻiyāśan* when taking his leave from the temple in an employee-like fashion, after removing his heavy costume and make-up and packing up.

Figure 5. *Kṣamāpaṇam* at the end of a Varanattu' *muṭiyēṯṯu'*; the sponsor (left behind) places the *dakṣiṇa* on the back of the performer's headgear (photo taken from a video by author).

Although not systematic, the processes of centralization, institutionalization, and politicization of the management of temples that have crept into religious activities in Kerala seem to result in a depersonalization of religious procedures that ironically stands against the individualization of devotion that is so eagerly banked on to save temples from bankruptcy. While the number of worshippers interested in sponsoring *muṭiyēṯṯu'*

as *vaḻipāṭu'* has reached unprecedented levels (Pasty 2010, chap. 8), its progressive depersonalization from the perspective of the sponsor and the officiant, as described above, is a notable trend that especially performers notice and meet with dismay.

> Pazhoor *kāḻiyāśan*: We don't know about the *vaḻipāṭi* and the reasons for him to sponsor our *muṭiyēṯṯu'*, the committee manages all that. Now, we just perform and collect our money, that's all.[68]

A symptom of this trend is that the *kāḻiyāśans* tend to less often include the name and motivation of the sponsor in their preparatory prayers. Instead, prior to applying the goddess makeup on their face, the current routine of one of the Pazhoor *kāḻiyāśans* is to pray first to kalampukāvu Bhadrakāḷi, the patron deity of his family to whom he standardly dedicates the *muṭiyēṯṯu'* he is about to perform, and second to the Bhadrakāḷi of the temple in which he is sitting on that day and whose *caitanyam* and *śakti* he will receive in his body.[69] In doing so, he focuses his attention on his personal motivation for being there in that temple on that day. Two *muṭiyēṯṯukars* explained to me that practicing *muṭiyēṯṯu'* is their own continuously lived *vaḻipāṭu'*: they have chosen to dedicate their energy and time to the deity in exchange for her protection and blessing on a lifelong basis. Considering the precarious conditions currently attached to the function of *muṭiyēṯṯukar*, this dedication could also be seen as a sacrifice through which the performers vow to give up their material comfort and financial security for the sake of serving the goddess.[70] The current praying routine thereby signals that the current *kāḻiyāśans* primarily place their performances in the framework of their own relationship and commitment to their tutelary deity. Their involvement with the sponsors' commitment to the goddess is thereby reduced to the functional role of technicians. I therefore do not really align with Eveline Meyer's (1986) opposition between goddess personification as a profession and as the result of a vow. In her view, professional personifiers are dedicated to the goddess in order to serve the community of devotees, while those who do it as per a vow only act out of a personal desire to fulfil their part of the contract concluded with the deity (1986, p. 260). In the case of the *muṭiyēṯṯukars*, who are 'professional personifiers', both motivations definitely come together—but this current state is rather the result of a recent evolution motivated by external factors than a definitional characteristic of their family art. In any case, *muṭiyēṯṯukars* and sponsors of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* are today evolving in a loop of mutually indispensable vows: by staging his *muṭiyēṯṯu'*, the *muṭiyēṯṯukar* allows the *vaḻipāṭi* to fulfil his part of the contract with the goddess, while it is the *vaḻipāṭi*'s choice to vow a *muṭiyēṯṯu'* (there are plenty of other offerings he could have chosen) and especially to pay for it that allows the *muṭiyēṯṯukar* to fulfil his.

5. At the Source of *Muṭiyēṯṯu'* as *Vaḻipāṭu'*

I now would like to describe the exceptional case of a temple in which a *muṭiyēṯṯu'* is handled in the exact way as other standard *vaḻipāṭu'*, meaning that it is conducted exclusively on-demand, in a reduced modus, and in a privatized setting. The *kōthakuḷaṅṅara śrī bhagavathi kṣētram*, located in Angamali (Figure 6) (southern Kottayam district) and managed by the Travancore Devasvom Board since the 1950s, presents the unique feature of staging 15 to 25 *muṭiyēṯṯu'* per year instead of the regular single one.

> Manager of *kōtakuḷaṅṅara*: here, the *pratiṣṭha* [idol, here deity's incarnation] is the one right before *dārikavadham* [killing of the *asura* Dārika]:[71] she's the biggest enemy of Dārikan, here. This is her *avataram* [incarnation/fom] here and she wants *muṭiyēṯṯu'*. That's why it is (. . .) performed so often.[72]

Figure 6. The kōthakuḷaṅṅara śrī bhagavathi kṣētram (photo from temple website: https://kothakulangarabhagavathytemple.com/kothakulangara-temple-gallery.html, accessed on 12 December 2024).

The temple manager was also of the opinion that the *muṭiyēṯṯus* performed here are the only 'authentic *vaḻipāṭu' muṭiyēṯṯu*''—that is, the only performances conducted in the sole spirit of serving individual wishes in an entirely personalized fashion. As such, this is the only place where I saw the name *muṭiyēṯṯu'* and its price of 15,000 Rs featuring on the *vaḻipāṭu'* board along all the other possible votive offerings worshippers can chose from. 'Here, anyone can come and sponsor it', was the logic stated by the manager.[73] This logic entails that it can be offered without any restriction, as many times as desired, and most importantly, whenever it is desired, meaning independently from the temple's festival or any other scheduled ritual activity. To my knowledge, *kōtakuḷaṅṅara* is the only sanctuary that sets the date of the performance on the birth *nakṣatram* of the *vaḻipāṭi*. This feature is intended to ensure a maximum customization and, I was told, to concentrate the benefits on the sponsor alone. Another salient feature of this temple is that, unlike all the others housing a mature, fierce (*raudra*) Bhadrakāḷi similar to this one here, the *kōtakuḷaṅṅara* temple does not conduct any *guruti* for her. In the opinion of the Varanattu' performers, who have been in charge of this temple's *muṭiyēṯṯu'* for generations, no *guruti* is conducted here because the exceptionally frequent staging of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* entirely quenches Bhadrakāḷi's wish to see acts of martial violence and ritual blood-spilling. She therefore has no further interest in receiving any more of the substitute blood offering that is *guruti*.[74] He hereby hints at the functional explanation of standard and spectacular offerings. In this understanding, every ritual act that is conducted in the goddess' temples theoretically serves the purpose of meeting the needs and expectations that stem from the goddess' nature (*bhāvam*) and state of mind indexed on the episode of the myth in which she is 'crystallized' (Pasty-Abdul Wahid 2016, 2017). If we look at the continuum categorizing ritual acts based on the level of violence and the ritual pollution they generate, then *muṭiyēṯṯu'* and *guruti* both feature towards the more violent and polluting end of that spectrum. And here, not only the content of the performed act, but also its frequency is

relevant, for it determines which concentration of violence and ritual pollution is created and how long the deity is given breaks before being exposed to it again. One *muṭiyēṯṯu'* per year plus weekly *gurutis* are considered to be adequate for meeting the needs of the Bhadrakāḷis in a *raudra* ('violent, angry') *bhāvam*—the majority of Bhadrakāḷis housed in Malayali temples are of this kind. But 15 to 25 *muṭiyēṯṯu'* per year plus weekly *gurutis* would by far outreach her needs and expose her to an overload of violence she cannot withstand.[75] The risk is to 'simply' displease her, or, as I heard from other temples, to weaken her or even permanently alter or corrupt her nature. Another interesting factor here is that even the *guruti* that is usually conducted as a must after every performance of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* is absent in *kōtakuḷaṅṅara*. This *guruti* stands a bit apart from the regular ones, because it is explicitly performed for two audiences. The first is Bhadrakāḷi's army composed of evil spirits, who were enrolled with the promise of quenching their bloodthirst. The second audience is made of lower spirits and entities who are said to be attracted to the performance area by the ritual violence and pollution displayed and generated by *muṭiyēṯṯu'*. These lower beings need to be satisfied and professionally dismissed, as otherwise they would affect the well-being of the worshippers and prevent the goddess from doing her job properly. I witnessed a lively debate between the Varanattu' *muṭiyēṯṯukars* and the manager of the *kōtakuḷaṅṅara* temple about the absence of this compulsory *guruti* after the *muṭiyēṯṯu'* performance; the funny thing was that this important matter did not seem to be an issue until I raised it. In the end, neither of them were able to explain this state of affairs in *kōtakuḷaṅṅara.*

The performance I attended in *kōtakuḷaṅṅara* was identical to those given by the Varanattu' family in other sanctuaries. The only difference was that the usually very large and active audience was here reduced to the *vaḻipāṭi* (an elder woman in that case) and myself (Figure 7). From a technical point of view, this unusual setting was a blessing. It allowed me to film the performance without the usual hindrance of overexcited devotees. I was able to position myself at any strategic spot or to zoom in on special items I was never usually able to film close-up without interferences from others pushing or bumping into me. In spite of this advantage, I have to admit that this was a very puzzling experience. I was used to the tumultuous spectacularity of *muṭiyēṯṯu'*, which also contributes to its appeal; that somewhat chaotic mass of euphoric worshippers running, hooting, and shouting *ārppuviḷis*[76] around the performers, dancing to the pulsing rhythm of the drums (Figure 8). In temples like Pangarapilly, the yearly *muṭiyēṯṯu'* performance is awaited with much anticipation and is always the locus of an intense display of joy and devotion to the goddess who stands in the flesh in their midst, especially from the youngsters, who like to boost her with devotional shouts and jumps. There is an incredible release of positive energy during these events, an energy I was told that the performers and the goddess alike greatly appreciate. In *kōtakuḷaṅṅara*, all this had vanished. I was told before the performance that the elder woman promised the *kōtakuḷaṅṅara* deity to sponsor a *muṭiyēṯṯu'* in exchange for her son's recovery after a severe motorcycle accident that left him in a deep coma for days. Upon returning home from the temple after emitting that wish in her prayer, she received the desperately awaited phone call from the hospital informing her that her son had woken up and wouldn't have any relapses. In her case, she did not have to wait for the next festival to fulfil her promise, or for her bank account to replenish like Nandini. She was quickly given the possibility to schedule her *vaḻipāṭu' muṭiyēṯṯu'* on the next *aviṭṭam* (her son's *nakṣatram*). And yet, while her *muṭiyēṯṯu'* was unfolding, the elder woman sat slouched on a plastic armchair posted on the side of the performance area, dozing almost all throughout. Her presence here seemed to be a formality devoid of any particular interest other than a devotional obligation. With my European programming, I could not help but feel for those performers who were skilfully staging their art nobody seemed to pay attention to. I tried my level best to fill that void by following every

movement of the *muṭiyēṯṯukar* with my video camera, trying to look particularly attentive and fighting against sleepiness that naturally overcomes any spectator of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* when reaching the early morning hours.[77] In a normal setting, I would have indulged in sitting for breaks, but here I politely refused the chair I was offered next to the *vaḻipāṭi* out of solidarity with the performers. My overactive behaviour was met by the *kāḷiyāśan* who came performing his actions and gestures right in front of my camera. It is a fact that every *muṭiyēṯṯu'* family has its own style. Compared to the style of the Pazhoor or the Modakkil, the Varanattu' style is characterized by a slower pace, more abstract movements and, in general, less spectacularity (Pasty 2010, chap. 2). In the purged setting of *kōtakuḷaṅṅara*, their performance had a very unusual soporific effect which was not only felt by myself, but also by the *vaḻipāṭi* and the two Brahmin officiants who spent their time chatting before lying down to sleep on a wall near the performance area. The only reason they did not go home was due to the necessity of keeping the sanctum's doors open during the entire *muṭiyēṯṯu'* and to close them afterwards.

Figure 7. *Muṭiyēṯṯu'* in *kōtakuḷaṅṅara* (Varanattu' troupe): a goddess, two torch holders, no audience (photo taken from video by author).

Figure 8. *Muṭiyēṯṯu'* in Chottanikkara (Modakkil troupe), goddess *Bhadrakāḷi* with active crowded audience (photo taken from video by Sandhya Subhash).

The complete absence of the usual stir that contributes to *muṭiyēṯṯu*'s 'flavor' seemed to confuse nobody else but me. My years of researching the landscape of ritual performing arts conducted in Bhadrakāḷi temples of central Kerala somehow did not suffice to erase my Western concerns for respect of a performer's skills and acknowledgement of his artful contribution, that are notably shown through watching attentively and silently. A performer without an audience, be it in real time or deferred, does not make much sense in this framework. But one of the basic lessons in anthropology is to look at whatever we decide to focus our study on from the point of view of the participants, using their own concepts, understandings, and interpretations. From the point of view of the *muṭiyēṯṯukars* and their accustomed spectators, Bhadrakāḷi is the only needed audience. After the performance, the Varanattu' *kāḷiyāśan* explained that he had been performing in these conditions for many decades in this shrine and that he feels in no way disconcerted by the absence not only of spectators, but also of the interested response from onlookers. Bhadrakāḷi is the primary spectator, he explained. From the moment the doors of her sanctum open, he said, the goddess sees each and every one of his moves. That is the only reason he performs.[78] The presence of worshippers in other settings is a pleasant addition, but they are entirely secondary, or even superfluous in his eyes. Interestingly, this explanation is also found in neighbouring ritual performing arts, such as the shadow puppet theatre *tōl pāva kūttu*. In that context, performing without an audience, apart from the goddess, of course, and from the sponsor, who has to be present for the first half hour at least, has become a standard and not an exception, as in *muṭiyēṯṯu'*. Nowadays, nobody is willing to continuously attend performances that last 41 days, as they do in *tōl pāva kūttu*. Henceforth, the puppet theatre reconstructed itself around this absence, developing a little attractive style characterized by a slow pace, a monotonous flow of words in a hardly intelligible language, and entirely still puppets. In addition, the puppet theatre has reframed itself around an internal audience composed not only of the goddess, but also of the puppeteers themselves, who act as conversation partners with the puppets as well as spectators substituting for the missing ones (see Blackburn 1991, 1996). In the high-caste Sanskrit theatre *kūṭiyāṭṭam*, that is still partly performed in a ritual temple setting, the situation is a little similar, in the sense that performers adapt to the audience-less setting by shortening their performances. This is achieved by increasing the pace, cutting the extremely detailed artistic elaborations of mythic passages, and leaving out plenty of facial expressions that go along every hand gesture. In that ritual context, where the deity is the sole spectator, extreme attention is given to not leaving out any fundamental part or hand gesture used to tell the story in an interactive way. But the entertaining parts, the display of artistic skills that are so definitional of this theatre in secular settings, are left out.[79] In the case of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* in *kōtakuḷaṅṅara*, the performance was definitely shortened compared to a regular one. I nevertheless did not have the feeling that the performers were leaving anything out, rushing, or botching it just because there was nobody else, apart from the goddess and a sleeping worshipper, to watch. Would it have been different had I not been there too? I suspect that my presence did have an impact on the way the *kāḷiyāśan* was performing—let us not forget that the *kāḷiyāśan* is possessed throughout his performance, so asking whether human considerations interfere in his actions during that time frame is a bit tricky, even if highly interesting for a researcher.[80] What I know for sure is that, just as in *kūṭiyāṭṭam*, performers are very mindful to maintain the structural integrity of the performance regardless of the setting they are active in, which is, for instance, conspicuous when they are invited to perform in secular settings (see Pasty 2010, chap. 9). The 'risk' of leaving episodes out, or reducing the number of characters, or even worse, of skipping one of the many rites that punctuate the performance, is that such omissions can potentially anger the goddess. And here, it does not matter what motivated the performers to do so. I

remember attending an extremely truncated *muṭiyēṯṯu'* in a South Indian tourist resort that left the *muṭiyēṯṯukars* highly frustrated. This performance brought them a welcome financial bonus in exchange for little physical strain as compared to regular temple performances. And yet, they were required to squeeze 8 h into 45 min, to reduce seven characters to the two most 'spectacular' ones (goddess and *asura*) and they were not able to conduct some of the framing rites. I was told that Bhadrakāḷi unmistakably indicated her disapproval of this *muṭiyēṯṯu'* by breaking one of the goddess's ear ornaments worn by the *kāḷiyāśan.* So eventually, the final jurisdiction definitely lies with the goddess, regardless of the intervention of humans at different stages of the process.

This idea of the goddess being the main spectator and authority connects with the previously mentioned logic of silent unmediated devotion as key to generating active responses from the deity. The only thing that matters is that the goddess sees the *muṭiyēṯṯukars* perform and that she knows why they do it. For the sleeping *vaḻipāṭi*, we could say that she was exposed to the sound, smells, and vibes created by the performance she paid for and was thereby automatically on the front line for receiving benefits from it,[81] especially since there was nobody else to deflect or dilute these benefits. The goddess knew that, below the tired body, her heart was burning with honest devotion, which is why she had diligently fulfilled the elder woman's wish concerning her son. There was therefore no need for any other demonstration of devotion. As for the humans witnessing that sleeping *vaḻipāṭi,* the fact that she had officialised her willingness to pay for the performance was sufficient proof that the goddess had sensed in her all the religious prerequisites and commitments for agreeing to answer her call in a positive manner. There was no need for the elder woman to show any interest or to display anything in what followed, even more since there was nobody to display it to. I, however, never heard of any *vaḻipāṭu' muṭiyēṯṯu'* being performed without the physical presence of the sponsor. So here, *vaḻipāṭu' muṭiyēṯṯu'* are differentiated from regular votive offerings which are often conducted in the secrecy of the inner temple space by a Brahmin officiant, while the *vaḻipāṭi* waits outside and only receives the leftovers (*prasādam*) after the priest is finished. The extreme form of these rites conducted in the sponsor's absence are the votive offerings that are bookable and payable online. Here, the sponsor–officiant interaction is reduced to zero, since the sponsor stays at home and receives the *prasādam* in a postal parcel days or weeks later.[82] But even then, the quality of the benefits to be derived from such remote votive offerings does not seem to be impeded. With ritual performing arts, it is a different story. Worshippers who attend a performance of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* and bring back tangible leftovers (often red flowers from the goddess' headgear) to household members who were not able to attend are a common feature. But I have often heard regular spectators of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* say that they try their level best to be in their native place for the yearly performance of *muṭiyēṯṯu'*; a common feature is for those who moved abroad to set their home leave in sync with that date. So being physically present is an implicit requirement for bearing all the fruits of worship in this particular context. For the sponsor, those fruits are multilayered, since he or she has already benefitted from the goddess' help in their personal endeavour and then receives an additional layer, just like all present worshippers, by physically attending the act sealing their contract.

What is important to bear in mind is that the *muṭiyēṯṯukars*' statements about the secondary aspect of the audience seems to be limited to the context of the *kōtakuḷaṅṅara* temple where the audience is missing. In other settings, the *muṭiyēṯṯukars* rather claim that the presence and active contribution of the audience contributes a great deal to the pleasure that the goddess is said to feel when witnessing the performance. My description of the *kōtakuḷaṅṅara muṭiyēṯṯu'* to the Pazhoors, another *muṭiyēṯṯu'* family working further south to the Varanattu', aroused bare astonishment. The different *muṭiyēṯṯukars* I interviewed over the years always insisted that the worshippers not only contribute to

the theatre's ritual efficacy, but also that they act as catalysts and energy suppliers for the performers. At the end of 'tumultuous' performances involving large numbers of very active worshippers—some under the influence of alcohol—the Pazhoor *kāḷiyāśan* and his nephew explained that they felt carried by an exceptional *śakti* which increased the energy and pace of the performance, leading to more vivid fights, chases, jumps, and screams. For both performers, this exceptional energy unmistakeably transcribed the joy felt by the goddess at the sight of the large group of people, who came to attend her performance in a true display of affection and belief in her powers. As already elaborated elsewhere (Pasty-Abdul Wahid 2017), *muṭiyēṯṯu'* plays an important memory function: it reminds the worshippers in an interactive and dramatic way that Bhadrakāḷi was created for the purpose of defeating the *asura* Dārikan to save humans and gods alike and restore dharma, that she successfully accomplished this task and therefore earned the right to be worshipped by Man. I was told that seeing the mass of worshippers gathered to witness the performance she loves so much is extremely heartwarming for Bhadrakāḷi. It proves to her that the men and women she fought for acknowledge her mighty deeds and recognize her as almighty protector. The Pazhoor *kāḷiyāśan* also admitted taking special pleasure in fulfilling his role when young worshippers jump, run, and scream around him, even bumping into him or fighting against each other when he personifies the goddess.

> Pazhoor Murali Dharan Marar: I like the running and these fights; they are just for fun (*cumma*). *Muṭiyēṯṯu'* is like that, there has to be *ārppuviḷi* and all. They have big interest in *muṭiyēṯṯu'* and really take part in it that way. If they were just sitting and not running, *muṭiyēṯṯu'* would be very calm and there wouldn't be any *rasam* ('flavour'). We [*muṭiyēṯṯukar*] only like when people enjoy and scream, then only we like to perform.[83]

The downside of this bilateral interest and mutual stimulation is the current outbidding strategies implemented by some *muṭiyēṯṯu'* troupes to respond to the audience's taste by making the performance more attractive to more worshippers (Pasty 2010, chap. 9). But even then, the argument always conjoins the worshipper's and the goddess's pleasure—she loves huge crowds witnessing her beautiful offerings—in order to justify in religious terms the measures that would otherwise be described as plain showiness targeting economic benefits. The reduced setting of the *kōtakuḷaṅṅara* temple nevertheless allows us to uncover the root structure; the minimal form of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* as a ritual tool. In this minimal form, the audience of worshippers is not included, regardless of how much creative energy and flavour they contribute. In the words of the manager of *kōtakuḷaṅṅara*, the continuously increasing number of people interested in sponsoring this reduced form of *muṭiyēṯṯu'*, as well as the news of fulfilled wishes that were bound to this *vaḻipāṭu'*, undeniably prove that this offering 'works' and that the goddess appreciates it, even in a stripped-down form.

I have to admit that I did not ask the obvious question of why *muṭiyēṯṯu'* is performed without an audience in *kōtakuḷaṅṅara*. If the logic is that this *muṭiyēṯṯu'* is the 'only authentic *vaḻipāṭu' muṭiyēṯṯu'*, as claimed by the manager, then it would be coherent to do everything so that the one who pays for it is the sole beneficiary of its returns. The easiest way of doing that is by privatizing the event. If anybody else was to be 'exposed' to the performance, then those returns would have to be shared. Another more practical explanation could also be that, since *muṭiyēṯṯu'* is performed with such a high frequency in *kōtakuḷaṅṅara* and can almost be performed 'at will', it has lost its exceptional character. In other temples, such as in Pangarapilly, worshippers have to wait an entire year to attending the next *muṭiyēṯṯu'*, with a progressive buildup of excitement that translated very well through interviews.

> A young male worshipper from Pangarapilly: I know people seeing *muṭiyēṯṯu'* in other temples, and when they say 'tomorrow we have a *muṭiyēṯṯu*'' and the way they say it is different from the way we say it. When we say 'tomorrow we have a *muṭiyēṯṯu*'' we will feel very happy and impatient to cooperate in it. The others will just go and see it. When *muṭiyēṯṯu'* is taking place here, no guys will remain in the houses, they will all be in the temple.[84]

There are also a few temples in which the interval between two performances lies between 2 and 12 years, due to ritual and financial considerations pertaining to these temples alone.[85] The rarity of the event, combined with the magnitude of the performance when it is actively attended by a large audience, make it a real 'attraction'. There is also the fact that sponsors sometimes need to compete with others interested in sponsoring *muṭiyēṯṯu'* the same year, which happens when no more than one *muṭiyēṯṯu'* can be conducted during the festival. These facts contribute to creating a sort of climactic and sometimes also stressful anticipation, if we bear in mind the importance for *vaḻipāṭis* to fulfil their pledge to the goddess. In *kōtakuḷaṅṅara*, *muṭiyēṯṯu'* is accessible to every person willing to sponsor it (provided the bank account follows) with a maximum waiting time of 27 days (there are 27 *nakṣatras*). So, worshippers have plenty of opportunities to see it throughout the year. And even if they cannot attend the *muṭiyēṯṯu'* financed by others in *kōtakuḷaṅṅara*, no one living in the perimeter of the temple can physically withdraw himself from the loud musical accompaniment of the drums that can always be heard miles away. Chances are therefore that the worshippers living around the temple are jaded about this ritual theatre that is seen as glowing in an exceptional light elsewhere.

6. Concluding Remarks

Votive offerings are a sensitive matter, characterized by a web of intertwined beliefs, opinions and considerations, some of which are very individual and personalized and some of which are shared and have an official aura. Blurred boundaries between public and private spheres are also part of their essence, as the public world seems to intrude into the private whenever an individual discloses his personal wishes, his deeply intimate bond with the goddess, and the situation of his bank account. And yet, votive offerings that take the form of performing arts are per se public: a performance of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* almost always involves a large dynamic audience and is conducted in a large public space, that is, the temple's open space located around the sanctum or sometimes an open field next to the temple. These types of offerings are also, per se, a joint venture involving plenty of participants, from the group of performers to all of the temple staff who administratively organize and ritually frame the event as such within the broader temple organization. Considering the number of people that are involved, there is plenty of room for the intermingling of other people's interests and objectives that often do not coincide with that of the *vaḻipāṭi* and sometimes also do not match with official expectations. Today, the very essence of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* is to be a large, heavily attended 'spectacle' of divine powers that indeed looks grander the more the sponsor is able to pay for it. This essence undeniably collides with the special dimension of *bhakti*-infused popular worship; that is, the highly valued unmediated, intimate, silent and inconspicuous devotion. With a *vaḻipāṭu' muṭiyēṯṯu'*, this special dimension is pulled out of its inner human sanctum and thrown into the open. There, it is confronted by other very human concerns that exist in religion, generating active negotiations and defensive justification mechanisms more or less in line with the shared 'rules' of lived religion. A symptomatic act is the reception of the sponsor's 'special *prasādam*' within the public space of the temple, in full view of the entire audience. In the past, this reception used to be an intimate act performed by the incarnated deity at the sponsor's house without anyone else but the household members to witness it. None

of my informants directly voiced any complaints about this current state of affairs. As described above, the fact that most of the sponsors do not share their reason for offering a performance anymore certainly derives from the nowadays standard infiltration of private religious issues by temple politics. But this tendency could also be seen as symbolic of the worshippers' attempts to pull back some of their displayed privacy into their own holy of holies.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: There was no official procedure of ethics approval for anthropological studies as well as no ethics commission in place at the author's university (EHESS, Paris) at the time her PhD was completed and most of her research conducted. Today, only research involving human subjects and dealing with medical or biological knowledge requires an ethics committee's approval in France. Students are however sensitized to the ethical dimensions of their research via seminars and discussions with their supervisor. In Germany (current author's residence), students in anthropology are mainly required to read the official ethical guidelines and recommendations published by the DGSKA (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie) and to reflect individually or in a peer-to-peer modus on the ethical implications of their planned research using a question-sheet (https://www.dgska.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/DGSKA_Ethik-Reflexionsfragebogen.pdf accessed on 5 February 2025). In some universities, the new PhD students are also advised to submit a proposal to the Ethikkommission of the DGSKA. This is however a very recent practice with no possibility of retroactive approval. See here for more information: https://www.dgska.de/en/ethics/ (accessed on 5 February 2025).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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Notes

1 Most of my research since 2002, carried out in Ethnomusicology and then in Anthropology, has focused on the religious, social, political, and economic context of the ritual performing art *muṭiyēṯṯu'* and other neighbouring art forms imbricated in popular Hindu religious practices dedicated to the goddess Bhadrakāḷi in central Kerala.

2 All words in italics are transliterations from standard Malayalam.

3 In a bygone age, only the eldest *nampūtiri* son was allowed to marry within his own caste. The other sons had to select concubines from lower castes, such as the *mārārs* (Ananthakrishna Iyer [1912] 1962, vol. 2, p. 145).

4 An example of this were two Brahmins who explained the differences in the goddess's mood between her many incarnations on the basis of the scholastic and, for Kerala, the less relevant (Freeman 1991, p. 142) *guṇa* taxonomy, while most informants, including Brahmin priests, used the locally accepted taxonomy of *bhava* ('humor, nature') for the same. A similar 'out of sync' explanation came from another Brahmin, who insisted that the characters featured in the ritual theatre *muṭiyēṯṯu'* were categorized based on the extremely elaborate esthetical speculations laid down in the dramaturgy treatise *natyaśāstra.* While this categorization is definitely relevant for the classical Sanskrit theatres of Kerala (*kathakaḷi*, *kūṭiyāṭṭam*), it is not for popular theatres.

5 From 2002 to 2015, I have travelled to South India every year to conduct fieldwork over a 3- to 12-month period. After 2015 and until today, those trips continued for approx. 1.5 months per year (except during COVID-19 and my pregnancy in 2021), but my time had to be shared between fieldwork and family business.

6 'MP' refers to the *N.B.S. Malayāḷam English Dictionary* of Madhavan Pillai and 'G' to the *A Malayāḷam and English Dictionary* of Reverend H. Gundert.

7 The wish and the promise offered in return are often presented as mutually binding, not only in Hinduism but also among Christians in India. Here, a wish cannot be uttered without directly including the promise of a counterpart. See, e.g., (Sebastia 2007, p. 73).

8 An offering of a deep red liquid composed of lime and turmeric powder mimicking blood. The amount of vessels filled with this liquid determines the scale and price of the offering.

9 In the Muslim context, *nērcca* refers to the presentation of offerings to the tomb of a saint or a martyr in conclusion of a pilgrimage. A Muslim *nērcca* can be performed privately, but it can also lead to a large festival with songs and dances in lieu of offerings.

10 Corinne Dempsey also explains that the Christians of Kerala address their wishes to specific saints with the conviction that those who engage in such a relationship with a saint 'will suffer consequences if they fail to maintain their end of the deal'. For instance, 'St. George [might unleash] the biggest and most poisonous snakes on neglectful devotees' (Dempsey 2001, p. 104).

11 The situation differs in other contexts, such as the *sati*, for instance, where it is this public declaration of intent (*saṃkalpa*) 'made with a clear voice' and considered as 'determination of the sacrificer' that commits the widow to throw herself on her husband's funeral pyre. This 'solemn utterance (. . .) irrevocably triggers the rite' (Weinberger-Thomas 1996, pp. 46, 105).

12 Ann Gold noted the same type of discourse among Rajasthani pilgrims: 'to covet fruits openly may be considered reprehensible, but to pursue them quietly through appropriate daily routines of self-restraint and worship is righteous. (. . .) It is for similar reasons that anonymous donations to strangers made in distant pilgrimage centres are considered more meritorious than ostentatious charities undertaken at home' (Gold 1988, p. 7).

13 A performance of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* is an interactive reenactment of portions of the myth of *dārikavadham* using instrumental music, singing, dance, narration, speech, and staged fights. A standard performance lasts approx. 8 h and involves seven characters played by performers wearing costume, headgear, and complex make-up. These are: the goddess herself incarnated in a possessed performer, her enemy the *asura* Dārikan and his twin brother Dānavendran, the goddess's father and creator God Śiva, the sage Nāradan who intercedes with the god on behalf of humanity and is tormented by the *asuras*, the creature Kūḷi, who represents the goddess's soldiers, and Kōyiṃpaṭanāyar, the general of Bhadrakāḷi's army. This performance is the monopoly of four *mārār* and *kuṟuppu'* families split into eight troupes. During the ritual season, from the end of December to May, these troupes tour the Bhadrakāḷi temples in which they, respectively, have hereditary rights. A range of Bhadrakāḷi temples from central Kerala thereby have one performance of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* staged per year, usually as part of their festival.

14 Interview, Katikunnu, 12 December 2004.

15 Interview, Pangarapilly, 22 November 2004.

16 This is why performers and temple owners are diligent in making sure that, in every temple in which the tradition of yearly performances of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* was started, it is continued—unless the goddess signals she wants otherwise.

17 A similar claim is made for the vow in Christian context (see Sebastia 2007, p. 72).

18 On the contrary, a *nērcca kōlam*, i.e., a *teyyam* performance organized as avotive offering, is most often performed 'whether the *teyyam* [here the deity] has fulfilled the wishes of the devotee or not' (Ashley 1979, p. 100). For Tamil Nadu, Alf Hiltebeitel (1988, p. 440) and Car Diehl (1956, p. 259) noted that the performance of the promised act can also take place 'while [the devotee] is still hoping'. It may then include requests and supplications to the deity as gentle reminders of her long-awaited but still pending intervention.

19 Fulfilling a pregnancy wish with a girl instead of a hoped-for boy would be one such example.

20 Reema, personal communication, WhatsApp, 24 October 2024.

21 In his work on the modalities of artistic commission in Tamil Nadu from the 6th to the 18th century, Vincent Lefèvre presents various religious views on the appropriate size of offerings. The Laws of Manu stipulate that 'the donor will always be rewarded at the height of what he offered', and that 'a too small donation may cause various inconveniences', such as 'destroy the sense organs, the reputation, the future happiness in heaven, life, glory after death, the children and cattle' (Lefèvre 2006, p. 116). From this point of view, the amount spent and the actual implementation of the offering outweigh the intention, implying that 'the poor shall refrain from it' (idem). The agamic literature (here, *Śaivāgamaparibhāṣāmañjarī*, quoting the *Suprabhedāgama*), on the contrary, specifies that the intention—devotion—is paramount, and that the 'key is to adjust the importance of the gift to one's financial capacity' (idem p. 116–117), which is exactly what I heard from my informants.

22 A wedding locket wrapped in a square piece of red silk.

23 Misfortune resulting from a curse by enemies.

24 A sweet pudding with rice of vermicelli prepared with sweet milk or jaggery.

25 Interview, Pangarapilly, 12 January 2005.

26 Interview, Maniyur, 12 August 2005.

27 Interview, Velloor, 26 January 2005.

28 Interview, Tiruvamkulam, 22 November 2004.

29 Interview, Mulanthuruty, 11 January 2005.

30 Taken from (Guillebaud 2003, p. 376).

31 A rite consisting of smearing a paste composed of turmeric and milk onto the snake effigies.

32 Quoted from 'A brief history of ghee in the US', in *Forbes India* (19 December 2015), https://www.forbesindia.com/article/think/a-brief-history-of-ghee-in-the-us/41767/1, accessed on 5 November 2024.

33 Interview, Pangarapilly, 5 November 2004.

34 The names of worshippers mentioned here are pseudonyms.

35 WhatsApp interview, 29 October 2024.

36 There is no tangible evidence, e.g., comparable to the thread worn around the wrist by those who vowed to walk on fire (cf. Diehl 1956, p. 251), that formalizes the commitment of the *vaḻipāṭi* and constrains him or her to fulfil this commitment.

[37] In *teyyam* for example, a distinction is made between the annual performance and the '*nērcca* (vow) *kōlam* ("form", here a mask/headgear)', which corresponds to an 'unscheduled performance commissioned after a deity has gratified the wishes of a devotee (Ashley 1979, p. 100; 1993, p. 6). Similarly, performances of *tōl pāva kūttu'* (leather puppet theatre) sponsored by a family in exceptional cases and for private purposes, called '*nērccai* (Tamil form of *nērcca*) *kuttu''*, are distinguished from performances regularly sponsored by the temple (Blackburn 1996, pp. 15–16). The same distinction also appears in other contexts and other regions of India, such as the Punjabi *dēvi jagrātā* (ritual performance composed of public readings and songs) which may take the form of a smaller and private performance when individually sponsored in response to the fulfilment of a wish (Erndl 1991, p. 340). In general, the private/punctual vs. public/regular distinction corresponds with the *nitya*/*kāma* distinction: *nitya* rites, which are the usual, compulsory, and regularly performed ones, are opposed to the *kāmya* rites, which are the optional and occasional self-serving ones conducted in response to a wish and/or for the realization of a particular desire (*kāma*) (Reiniche 1999, p. 46).

[38] Some temples distinguish a third type of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* called *karayōgam muṭiyēṯṯu'*, which is sponsored by a specific local community or a caste. An example of this is one of the two *muṭiyēṯṯu'* scheduled annually in the temple of *nāmaṃkuḷaṅṅara* (Maniyur, northern Kottayam district), which is jointly sponsored by all the *nāyar* families of the village.

[39] *Dēvasvam* means literally 'God's own'. This concept refers to the land belonging to a temple as well as to the group (government agency, devotees or caste association, families, or individuals) responsible for its management.

[40] At the *kīḻkāvu'* temple in Chottanikkara, where *guruti* is the most sponsored *vaḻipāṭu'*, the worshippers usually book their *vaḻipāṭu'* on their *nakṣatram* day.

[41] This substitution also works because of the absence of variety and flexibility of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* performances, meaning that the form and content of both types of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* are identical.

[42] Interview, Pangarapilly, 16 February 2005.

[43] The Pazhoor are one of the four families performing *muṭiyēṯṯu'* today. The three others are the Modakkil, the Varanattu', and the Kunnayckal. For more detail see Pasty (2010).

[44] As part of the atomatization of patronage, some temples have introduced small supplementary rites conducted within *muṭiyēṯṯu'* that are sponsored by others than the *muṭiyēṯṯu' vaḻipāṭi*. In the temple of Katikunnu, worshippers can purchase red silk squares to be placed on top of the goddess' headgear at a designated moment of the performance. In others, worshippers can purchase steel glasses full of coconut oil they themselves empty into the large oil lamp standing in the centre of the performance area. I have also heard of temples where worshippers can sponsor an additional character that will perform alongside the usual seven characters, duplicating one of them.

[45] Interview, Bharata Kurup, 24 July 2005.

[46] A large powder drawing representing Bhadrakāḷi in full soldier attire that is drawn by the *muṭiyēṯṯukars* themselves on the day before or few hours before every performance *Kaḻameḻuttu' pāṭṭu'* is also standardly performed as part of regular worship, independently of *muṭiyēṯṯu'*.

[47] An sssociation created in 1914 for the social enhancement of the *nāyar* caste with an overt religious programme targeting the unification, purification, sanskritisation, and revitalization of private and public Hindu practices. The association is renowned for its economic means and is thereby a body to which many owners of low-income temples surrendered their temples. The *kōlaṃkuḷaṅṅarakkāvu'* temple of Pangarapilly is one of these.

[48] Government agencies created in the 1950s for the management of temples that used to be supported by former princely states, as well as privately owned temples that were voluntarily delegated to them, mainly for financial reasons.

[49] These are most often a *dīpārādhana*, a *cuṯṯuviḷakku'*, a *kaḻameḻuttu' pāṭṭu'*, fireworks, and sometimes also a *pañcavādyam* (a five-instrument orchestra comprising the drums *timila*, *maddaḷam*, and *īṭakka*, circular horns *kompu'*, and brass cymbals *ilattāḷam*).

[50] In Pangarapilly, the funds for the temple festivals (all activities except the final *muṭiyēṯṯu'* performance) are gathered through door-to-door collections conducted in the village by the committee members.

[51] This is organized at the home of the sponsor if it is located close by; otherwise, it is located in the temple.

[52] The prices of standard *muṭiyēṯṯu'* performances vary between the four families. In 2005, they oscillated between 6500 and 12,000 Rs. Currently (2024), the regular prices are in the 40,000 Rs range.

[53] Interview, Pangarapilly, 27 February 2005.

[54] Interview, WhatsApp, 22 November 2024.

[55] Interview, Thirumarayur, 19 November 2004.

[56] Nair Service Society.

[57] Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam.

[58] For more information about the link between politics and temple administration in Kerala, see Jayaprasad (1991), Jayashanker (1997), and Tarabout (1997).

[59] Interview, Pangarapilly, 5 November 2004.

60 *Sōpāna sangitam* is the traditional singing style used by the *mārār* during religious services. The term derives from '*sōpānam*', denoting the steps leading to the sanctum on which they stand for singing. Carnatic music is the so-called classical music of South India.

61 My emphasis.

62 In the Vedic model of the sacrifice (*yajña*), the offering stands as substitute for the ideal victim, the sacrificer (*yajamāna*), who is the one who offers, pays for, and benefits from it. It is through the very act of surrendering the offering to the deity and destroying it (by killing, burning, cooking, or eating) that the offering bears fruits (see Malamoud 1976). While this model is obsolete, its symbolism lingers on in a filtered and reinterpreted state in popular Hinduism (Biardeau 1976; Tarabout 1986) and also in *muṭiyēṯṯu'*. As I have shown elsewhere (Pasty 2010, chap. 6), *muṭiyēṯṯu'* is a composite tradition simultaneously nourished by the customary martial culture in which it is embedded and by clear sacrificial themes such as violence, pollution, and absorption into the divinity (transfiguration) that are characteristic of the old Vedic sacrifice.

63 Interview, Pangarapilly, 9 June 2005.

64 Interview, Pangarapilly, 2 November 2004.

65 Personal communication, anonymous reviewer.The issue regarding the beneficiary of the rite is standardly controversial in Hinduism. In South India, it notably opposes the *śaiva* and the *vaiṣṇava* texts. The former state that the benefits derived from the rite always go back to the community (the country), and that whatever the individual (the sacrificer) manages to receive is only a 'side effect' (Brunner 1990 quoted in Colas 1996, pp. 120–21). Conversely, the *vaiṣṇava* texts (here *vaikhānasa* medieval texts) state that 'even though the effect of temple worship is universal, the sacrificer remains the primary beneficiary of the rite he finances' (Colas 2006, pp. 121, 193). The same question also opposes the Vedic and the Agamic sacrifice theories; in the first, it is said that 'the sacrificer always sacrifices for himself (. . .) even if it is above all meant to maintain the universal order', while the second declares that the sacrifice 'is always offered "for the good of the worlds" and not for obtaining a personal "fruit"' (Biardeau 1976, pp. 19, 139).

66 See also Sax (1991, p. 12) and Assayag (1992, pp. 56–58).

67 A cotton loin cloth that Malayali men wear traditionally. The white version with a golden border is worn on official or special occasions. At home, men often prefer the beige- or brown-coloured version with a simple coloured border. Pilgrims of the god *Ayyappan* are recognized by their black *muṇṭu'*. The *muṇṭu'* is still a standard gift offered on different important religious, social, or political occasions.

68 Interview, Thirumarayur, 12 February 2005.

69 One of the main aspects of current popular Hinduism that stands out in my research is that the goddess is viewed as both a single, immanent, all-pervasive entity *and* as a very localized deity incarnated in a specific place and having character traits that differ from other incarnations in neighbouring temples. Performers of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* clearly say that it is not a portion of that immanent deity that flows into their bodies to possess them during the performance, but a portion of the deity incarnate in the temple in which they are performing. See (Pasty-Abdul Wahid 2016).

70 There is no formal vowing nor any initiation of the sort when a *muṭiyēṯṯukar* 'enters' the profession. He is rather 'born into' the tradition, either by being born into one of the four *muṭiyēṯṯu'* families, in which case he is progressively integrated into it from an early age, or by being born into a family accustomed to attending the yearly performance of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* in their temple since childhood. Attending *muṭiyēṯṯu'* is definitely a family thing. Even though performances take place during the night, young children are frequently part of the audience and receive their own personalized blessing at the end by being held and swung around by the incarnated goddess. Some of them thereby develop a passion for *muṭiyēṯṯu'* and convince the performers to accept them when they come of age. Premraj, currently one of the most talented and fervent goddess impersonators in the landscape of *muṭiyēṯṯu'*, is a case like that.

71 The incarnations of goddess Bhadrakāḷi housed in the temples of central Kerala are typically described in connection with a specific episode of her founding myth of *dārikavadham*. This episode then not only serves as an illustration of her state of mind in the given incarnation, but also as point of reference for her needs and expectations in this particular stage. A majority of Bhadrakāḷi temples host incarnations of the goddess pictured as 'stuck' in the episodes that surround the mythical killing of the *asura* Dārikan, whom she was created to defeat. The performed episodes are either the one that precedes the imminent killing, the one of the killing itself, or the episode that describes her in an extreme fury directly after putting her enemy to death. Based on the moment of the myth she is attached with, Bhadrakāḷi's *bhāva* (mood/nature) oscillates between angry (*raudra*) for the pre-stages, extremely ferocious (*ghōra/ugra*) for the killing or just after the killing stages, appeased (*śāntam*) after her anger subsides, and radiant with benevolent satisfaction (*mōkṣam* or *vijaya śrī lalita*) for the final stages. Another important parameter influencing the nature of the deity's incarnation is her maturity: she can be a very young Bhadrakāḷi (*bālabhadra*), usually described as malleable and gentle, a mature Bhadrakāḷi displaying all the features of the angry warrior, or an aged Bhadrakāḷi (*mutti*) described as weakened with a partly faded anger. Ideally, there is a correspondence between the types of offering she receives and the behavioural disposition of her incarnation in every temple, but the reality in the visited temples looks a bit different. See (Pasty-Abdul Wahid 2016, 2017).

72 Interview, Angamali, 30 March 2005.
73 Interview, Angamali, 30 March 2005.
74 Interview, Koratti, 5 April 2005.
75 The question of how much is too much differs from temple to temple. In the Bhadrakāḷi temple of Cheppanam, I was told by a worshipper that 'the *śakti* of the goddess would become too strong' if performances of *muṭiyēṯṯu'* were conducted more frequently than just once a year (interview, Cheppanam, 4 April 2005). In *kōtakuḷaṅṅara*, it is not the 15 to 25 *muṭiyēṯṯu'* performed per year that are considered too much, but the sum of these performances added to weekly *gurutis*. This discrepant apprehension probably derives again from the distinct form and differing needs that the goddess has in each of her temples. There is no one model of worship that fits all, even though all of these incarnations are theoretically one and the same.
76 '*ārppooooo, ho ho ho!*'. *Ārppuviḷis* ('shouting in joy by a multitude', MP: 115) are usually uttered by young men in groups during specific religious activities, especially at auspicious moments.
77 A standard performance starts around 10–11 p.m. at night and ends at around 6 a.m.
78 Interview, Koratti, 5 April 2005.
79 Personal communication, V. P. S., 28 November 2024.
80 I have already explained elsewhere (Pasty 2010, chap. 7) that the experience of possession by *muṭiyēṯṯukars* is highly personal and varies from one *kāḷiyāśan* to the next. The more traditional ones explain that they are entirely moved by the goddess and that she takes over their consciousness, leaving them with no memory of the happenings afterwards. The more progressive performers say that they receive an extraordinary dose of energy, giving them increased stamina, physical strength, and resistance, as well as a pull towards positive aggression. By refusing the 'traditional' explanation of possession, these more modern, usually also younger performers place themselves at the centre of the process. This, in turn, allows them to stress the importance of artistic talent and skills that do not feature in the elder performers's argumentation.
81 There is definitely a notion in popular Hindu worship that being simply exposed to the sound generated by the recitation or performance of an important religious text is beneficial, even if the attention is somewhere else or if one is sleeping. 'The text's resonance (. . .) falls onto the body', said Catherine Choron-Baix about public readings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (Roundtable 'Indian and Sout-East Asian rāmāyaṇas', Cité de la Musique, 22 November 2008). This statement can clearly be extended to non-textual displays of religious stories, such as theatrical performances based on oral religious narratives.
82 This service has been, for instance, offered by the *cōṯṯānikkara bhagavati kṣētram* since 2004. Worshippers can order a votive offering via the temple's website. In a questionnaire filled out online, the cyber-sacrificer specifies his name, his *nakṣatram* and the desired date and temple (Chottanikkara houses different deities). He can also add any comment (e.g., his reason for sponsoring?) to help the priest personalize the offering. The price of these votive offerings is slightly higher than the ones booked and attended in the temple, as they include an additional service charge, as well as postal fees for shipping the *prasādam*. See https://booking.chottanikkarabhagavathy.org/, accessed on 13 December 2024.
83 Interview, Thirumarayur, 12 January 2005.
84 Interview, Praveen, Pangarapilly, 12 January 2005.
85 In the temple of *kōdēśvara* (Cheppanam, outskirts of Ernakulam) for instance, Bhadrakāḷi is a deity secondary to the main deity, Śiva. Her usually 'violent' offerings are incompatible with the fundamental nature of Śiva in this place, which is why her worship only consists of a standard *pūjā* here. As could be expected, the goddess did not take long to show her displeasure, which was confirmed through an astrological enquiry (*dēva praśnam*). The corrective measure was to move her idol every 2 years to a temporary sanctuary, located a few hundred metres further away, to celebrate a 7-day festival including all her favourite rites just for her. The highlight of the festival is a performance of *muṭiyēṯṯu'*. As told by a worshipper, here she absolutely craves *muṭiyēṯṯu'*, but it can only be performed for her every 2 years because Śiva—her 'boss' in *kōdēśvara*—'doesn't like *muṭiyēṯṯu*'' (Interview, 3 April 2005). In the goddess temple of Tottur (Ernakulam district), *muṭiyēṯṯu'* is only scheduled every 12 years. This was decided shortly after the family owning the temple was severely hit by the land reforms and could no longer afford the annual performances of *muṭiyēṯṯu'*. Shifting this responsibility to the worshippers or interrupting the tradition were not viable options in this shrine, which is why the rhythm of 12 years was established as a manageable alternative.

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