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The Poetics and Politics of Practical Reason

Indigenous Identity, Ritual Discourse, and the Postcolonial State in the Northern Nilgiris (South India)

This article explores how in the northern Nilgiris of South India the postcolonial state and indigenous *ādivāsī* communities imagine, perform, and negotiate ideas of a good life in ritual and political discourse, that is, how they articulate practical reason. I analyze the politics of ethics and how indigenous Jenu Kurumba and Sholega *ādivāsī* groups on the one hand and the state of Tamil Nadu on the other construct and perform their identity with respect to moral ontologies and ideas of a good life. The postcolonial Nilgiris thus appear as a political field where various articulations of ethical worlds compete with and challenge one another, while at the same time the collective actors seek to gain hegemony over other imaginations of a good life.

KEYWORDS: politics of identity and ethics—performance of ethical worlds—practical reason—South India

IN THE northern Nilgiris of South India, the postcolonial state, indigenous *ādivāsī* communities and global flows of imagination constitute a dynamic field of often tense but also creative relationships. Though within that configuration of postcolonial local modernity indigenous communities position themselves in various ways, this article focuses on the politics of identity. Identity is a widely discussed and broadly defined term. In this article I understand it, following Charles TAYLOR (1989), as the explicit ethical self-understanding of people. This kind of self-understanding can never be fixed or taken for granted but is developed and achieved in an ongoing process of dialogue and debate. To claim an identity in ethical terms means taking a position in the ethical space of value orientations, most notably with respect to ideas of a good life and to virtues. Identity in this sense is a product of practical reason and is articulated through a poetical and figurative language, both verbal and nonverbal.

The postcolonial terrain of the Nilgiris, however, is constituted by a multitude of collective agents such as NGOs, tribal communities, or the state (regional and national), and all of them are engaged in specific practices of ethical identification. As per other postcolonial localities across the world (ESCOBAR 2001; FRIEDMAN 1994) this one too is traversed by multiple imaginations of what has to count as a "good life." Accordingly, in this field of complex agencies, claims of knowing how to live best—and attempts to live up to one's identity as an ethical project— are always confronted with, and challenged by, other similar attempts. Ethical identities, therefore, are not only articulated and constructed but also contested, defended, or hegemonial. In other words, identities are subject to a politics of identity. This article addresses this kind of politics. It explores how indigenous and modernizing identities in the Nilgiris are poetically constructed and how they are defended, challenged, and embedded in hegemonial practices.

The first section explores the performance of ethical debates among the Jenu Kurumba. The second examines how the modern state of Tamil Nadu and the ruling party (in 2009) imagine a good life and how they present this idea in a public political performance. It also describes the politics of power involved in that process and how it relates to the subaltern ethics of the *ādivāsī*s, in particular of the Jenu Kurumba and other tribal groups in the region.

Finally, the third section explores a new religious cult: Sansavara's shrine. At this site people from various sections of the society—tribal people, villagers, and even

nonresidents from Chennai and Mumbai—are engaged by the shaman (embodying the deity Sanesvara) to search for a new ethical code.

To study the making and politics of identity in that way demands, however, a renewed and deeper reflection on the fundamental preconditions for the creation and articulation of values, value-oriented views of the world, and ethics, namely ethical agency and the faculty of practical reason. In what follows I will therefore briefly outline the latter concepts and what they mean for the epistemology and ontology of a postcolonial anthropology of ethics.

Cultural identities and practical reason on the postcolonial terrain

To account for the politics of cultural identity I propose to understand this phenomenon in substantial ethical terms and as a product of what has been called "engaged practical reason" (Taylor 1989). A short explanation of what is meant by this is to say that the question of identity, of who I am, also—and always— implies the existential and unavoidable quests central to all human beings: How should we live? What is a good life really about? Whenever this question is answered through a language of strong evaluation and in debate or dialogue, and this indeed is often the case across the world, we observe the execution of engaged practical reason.[1]

Practical reason is relevant here because this form of rationality is concerned with the question of how to live a good life, with the quest for virtues that should be cultivated, and with the definition of desirable life goals. Yet, it is an engaged mode of practical reason because actors must actively relate to respective social others and to the cultural resources available to them to find answers to these quests. Engaged practical reason thus relies on the explicit articulation of self-interpretations of subjects and groups. Ultimately it is a dialogic activity proceeding in deliberation, debate, and conversation. Moreover, this type of reason entails a particular form of agency, namely "strong evaluation," as termed by Taylor (1985a; 1985b). This is the ability of ethical deliberation, as the faculty enabling us to structure goods and values in a hierarchical order, to define what is worth desiring and, based on those deliberations, how to live in a good way. Moreover, human beings cannot live without that kind of ethical orientation. Our identity is intimately linked to—and even dependent upon—a system of values that enables us to identify ourselves in terms of how we wish to live with others in a good way. Put in another way, the ethical quest is an existential issue and engaged practical reason is fundamental for our identity.

The proposal that engaged practical reason is the basic human faculty when we study cultural forms of life today starts from the premise that ethical identities emerge in discursive formations of ethical self-interpretation (Taylor 1989). Indeed, as Taylor (1989) and MacIntyre (1984) hold, ethical life forms are constituted through ongoing reflections and discourses about who we want to be in terms of how we want to live. Identity is therefore derived from continuous

engagement with a living ethical tradition understood as a "historically extended, socially embodied argument" about the goods considered most important to those who argue about them (MacIntyre 1984, 222). This viewpoint underscores the premise of cultural and postcolonial studies (Hall 1990) that identity is not a thing or a substance. Accordingly the exploration of identities does not consist of ethnographically excavating an inner realm of the true self or community. Rather, the study of identity is concerned with the evaluative, substantial, and moral discourses in which ethical self-understandings are deliberately reasoned. The study of how people shape their identity is, therefore, not only concerned with people's engagement with the question of how one should live, but also with the "myriad practices through which people engage their own acts, desires, and feelings as objects of deliberation and critique, cultivation and transformation" (Pandian 2008, 468).

To this observation one must add that the dialogic or at least interactive process of engaged reasoning is not only applied to one's own acts and desires but also to other forms of life that every group in the postcolonial zone is confronted with. Given this, ethics becomes a highly political issue as well, and recent ethnographic studies confirm that perspective. Laidlaw's study was one of the first showing the political and historical significance of ethics for the Jain community in India (Laidlaw 1995). Another fine monograph (Pandian 2009, also focusing on India) explores the politics of ethics among the Kallar caste in the South. As Pandian's (2009) sensitive study shows, the Kallar of Tamil Nadu have cultivated specific virtues and ideas of a flourishing life through self-reflection throughout centuries (in pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial times), and moreover, in response to other agencies such as Tamil upper castes, the colonial, and later the postcolonial state. Other studies demonstrate the political significance of ethical identity in other parts of the world as well.[2]

In all these cases cultural identities are answers to the ethical predicament. Taking account of the specific ways people ethically identify themselves and what these processes entail—claiming identity, defending it, challenging others, trying to realize it, forming oneself, seeking hegemony, and so on—is thus a vital issue in the study of the politics of identity in postcolonial times.[3] Hence, this article explores identities as ways of arguing out, of making or imagining good, ideal (not utopian) ways of life, and of actively identifying oneself accordingly. In taking engaged practical reason as the most basic mode of rationality this approach allows us to really listen to others and represent other voices and cultural identities in a new, realistic, and therefore more appropriate way.

The performance and contestation of ethical worlds

Performances of various kind—political events, religious acts, rituals, theater, the dinner table gatherings of a family and many others—are one of the most important arenas for the articulation of ethics and identity. In many cases they are also about reasonable, grounded happiness or what Aristotle called *eudai-*

monia. Lambek reminds us that ritual performances, for instance, are instantiations of *eudaimonia* and "at once end and means, the goal of life and the carrying out of a good life. Performances of ritual are marked instances of such activity" (LAMBEK 2000, 314). In that sense performances are processes whereas FERNANDEZ (1986, 42) rightly observed that ethical ideas, imagination, or metaphors can be taken literally and become real experience. Moreover, the articulation of ethical worlds in performances is often achieved through argumentation, negotiation, and public deliberation of the good. Yet, ritual performances were not always seen as processes of dynamic negotiation, ethical argumentation, and (at least temporary) realization of the good. Instead there is a long tradition to regard them as mere enactments of society and its rules or as interactive ways of representing ethical codes, social norms, or relations. In recent decades, however, cultural performances became increasingly seen as arenas of negotiation and even argumentation. Rituals, political events, and cultural performances in general are increasingly recognized in one way or another as arenas of discourse (here understood as the use of language in interaction) where verbal and nonverbal strategies are employed to imagine, articulate, and debate cultural worlds, moral ontologies, and images of the good. Moreover, what holds true for the execution of engaged practical reason—namely that a dialogic, responsive, and engaged process—is equally the case with many performances. How do these processes of imagining and negotiating ethical worlds work? The concept of engaged practical reason suggests two dimensions are vital, namely rhetoric and poiesis.

Rhetoric and Poiesis

The rhetorical dimension I am concerned with in this article is the power of rhetorical performances to serve as a platform or arena of argumentation. Recent studies in the rhetoric of performance (DEMMER and GAENSZLE 2007; BILLIG 1987; PAINE 1981) demonstrate the various ways in which rituals and public political events unfold as conversational or discursive interactions, often with the aim of persuading or convincing either the audience or the performers themselves. Moreover, at least since FERNANDEZ's pathbreaking work (1986; 1991), we know that rituals often involve processes of ethical negotiation, mutual persuasion, and even argumentation. Since then a number of studies (DEMMER and GAENSZLE 2007) have shown the extent to which ritual discourses entail processes of mutual address and response, with all participants taking the role of both speakers and listeners engaged in moral debate, argumentation, and public deliberation. This is even true for contexts often regarded as irrational, like shamanic rituals or séances involving possession (LADERMAN 1996; ROSEMAN 1996; BRIGGS 1996) that also constitute a complex form of dialogical interaction. As LAMBEK points out, moral "reasoning is found in the reflective practice of healers and religious experts who provide advice and compassion" (2000, 315).

The second level that is vital for the performative construction of ethical worlds consists of the *poiesis* of performance. This dimension is concerned with the discursive and poetic construction of meanings, semantic fields, and with imagining a

good life. At least since Aristotle we know that practical reason is concerned with the creative construction of ethical meanings, a process he termed *poiesis*. Recently, Faubion (2001) and others have re-identified it as a basic feature of moral reasoning. How *poiesis*—the ethical imaginary (Faubion 2001, 95)—in detail works has been observed in studies of ritual speech concerned with poetic strategies. This research explores *poiesis* as the performed construction of culturally meaningful worlds. Thus, Laderman (1996), Roseman (1996), Raheja and Gold (1994) and others have shown how speakers use such figurative speech as metaphor, allegory, or irony as linguistic devices in ritual recitations, oratory, or song, and thus highlight cultural values through performance.

Power is also poetically constructed. In Kuna healing songs, for example, speakers not only use poetic devices like parallelism but also a particular "figurative lexicon" (Sherzer 1983, 132) and narratives, both of which enable healers to construct and demonstrate their knowledge and power, and also the agency and powers of the supernatural beings that they invoke in the course of ritual (see also Sherzer 1982; 1990; Briggs 1996). Finally, power is also exerted verbally in the sense that it can be used to change social relations and subject positions. This is where rhetoric comes in. Rhetoric is the study of how language use enables people to "move" one another, to actually change views of the world and to thus execute hegemonic power and force. Accordingly, a vital issue is how poetic strategies are employed in ritual and political performative discourse, not only to express, but also to actively construct ethical concepts, meanings, and world views in an artful way. In the following sections I will analyze the main poetical and rhetorical dimensions of ritual and political performances and their role in the construction of ethical worlds.

The ethical world of the jenu kurumba

As in many parts of the indigenous world (Niezen 2003), vital parts of the Jenu Kurumba indigenous imagination are poetically articulated in ritual performances. The Jenu Kurumba are former hunter-gatherers. Today they live as gatherers and traders of minor forest products, as elephant mahouts in the nearby wildlife sanctuaries of Mudumalai and Bandipur, or as daily laborers on coffee and tea plantations. They still have a rather egalitarian social order and live in communities of about three hundred people, widely scattered in small settlements. They have no political or judicial institutions like courts, chiefs, or assemblies of elders where public negotiations of community issues can take place. It is solely religious performances where those issues are articulated, namely in their death rituals (*pole*), in the healing séances (*adike*), and in the worship of deities (*puje*). This is possible because all three rituals are dialogic and interactive arenas of verbal and/ or nonverbal debate and argumentation. Dialogues in the former two rituals are performed between the Jenu Kurumba on the one hand and their shamans on the other. In the *puje* the dialogue is conducted directly and nonverbally between the worshiper and the deity that is represented through its mental image. The shamans act as vehicles or carriers of the other (than) human beings, namely the deities and

the dead. Those beings are conceived as substantial members of the moral community who not only act but who are, like human beings, responsible and accountable beings as well. The moral community thus includes all moral beings that the Jenu Kurumba acknowledge as such and all actual communication between these beings takes place in ritual settings. Mediated through the shamans, the deities as well as the dead discuss and interact with their relatives the vital ethical issues of their community.

In those contexts people debate and define what a good life really looks like—but also how it should not be, what is bad, and what is good. The proper community is always depicted in terms of caring, solidarity, and protection. Moreover, and not surprisingly for hunter-gatherers, the good community is described with metaphors of forest life. Thus it is imagined as a "pleasant and protected camp in the forest" and as a "cool location," the "shady spot" in the forest, or it is likened to the "calm and peaceful camp under trees that offer shade." Another picture describes the community as a nest of birds in which humans help each other, like "eggs in the nest mutually support one another and prevent that one tips over" or like "birds in the nest who though they occasionally fight do not throw one another out" (see DEMMER n.d. for the debates quoted here and below). The shamans are depicted, because of the help they render in the rituals, as the trees that offer shade or as trees that provide people who are camping with backrests. (People can lean their backs against them.) The root of the tree serves as a metaphor for the safe foundation of a joint and peaceful community.

Other images make clear that a good community not only comprehends human beings but also the deities and the dead. All are moral beings in a shared social world. We often hear of how the living present themselves as "the children of the deities" or of the priests addressed as the "favorite children" of the deities while sitting in their lap and being well taken care of. In turn, the deities are imagined as parents who hold the human beings "like children by their hand," take them "like infants in their lap," or "weigh them into sleep" like children. In other passages the dead are likened to "parent" birds, who protect and take care of their male and female children even though the children will always fight and behave badly.

This poetic imaginary is further enriched through the meanings of symbolic action. Ritual actors not only use words but also the performance of tropes to imagine their world. This is most explicit in the death ritual where the encompassing good community is actually instantiated in the series of symbolic acts and where a powerful allegory of the community as a cooperative household is achieved. With the gradual performance of these scenes, the death ritual can indeed be seen as an allegory of the good, protective, and caring community. In ritual it becomes alive; it is performed and visualized.

It must be emphasized, though, that the above images are not simply presented as an unquestioned concept of the moral community but rather emerge as rhetorical devices to back arguments and positions. In the same way, however, negative images and tropes are also brought forward. Again and again people argue against concepts of sociality that they do not want and which they think are not appropriate images

for a good social life. Though these counter images are used in all ritual discourse they are particularly pronounced in the healing rituals.

Thus social life is depicted as a path (*da:ri*) or a way of life on which people move, suffering (*pa:du*) and endangered. On this sorrowful path the failure of humans falls down on them like "a rock" and human beings are depicted as "human worms" that are innocent and helpless. They are overwhelmed by their social wrongdoings like "a tree is overwhelmed by blooms in spring." Moreover, social life is not only sorrowful but also vitally dangerous. Humans are exposed to the misdeeds (karma) of others, they are crushed by others' magic that is hiding and waiting for them "at holes at the wayside," and so forth.

Accordingly, we also find the image of social life as a forest camp. However, this time it is conceived as an endangered place imagined as a hot, unprotected, and hostile camp. The deities build a fence around it in order to protect human beings. We also hear of the bad community as a place without "trees that offer protection" and without "cooling shade," that is, without peace. In other arguments this bad community is depicted as a "desert-like location," dried up by the "fire" of human-made diseases, that is, magic, and fighting. In it people continuously quarrel and hurt one another. Accordingly one can hear the wounded crying and the sufferers lamenting. In such a bad community, it is said, people weep and beat their chests because of their sorrow and worries regarding relatives who become sick, weak, or who die due to the mistakes and misbehavior of others. But humans are not always intentionally bad. As the discourse reveals, the Jenu Kurumba also see them as existentially weak and fallible. Often they use the term "human worms" (*nare ullu*) to denote human beings and emphasize the inferior condition of humans in relation to, for example, the deities and the deceased. Other expressions liken them to innocent children as like very small babies they are said to be blind and weak. This idea is also sometimes used to point out the existential need of the humans for the deities' support and guidance. Without it, it is said, the "human worms" inevitably miss their way, hurt one another, and suffer.

Finally, while the death ritual is clearly an allegory of a good community, the performance of the healing ritual enacts a master image of a bad social life. As the performance unfolds, it gradually combines a set of poetically constructed images into an allegory of the immoral community. In the course of a séance, the shamans descend into the underworld several times to search for helpful deities, to bring them up for a talk with their human relatives, and to finally help them. Yet, instead of getting assistance, the shamans very often come across deities that are indifferent to the suffering and pain of the living; some deities confront them with the mistakes and the humans way of living, thus justifying or indicating their unwillingness to help those "misbehaving human worms." Moreover, if they are ever successful in persuading the deities to talk, they often simply disappear after a while, thus making the deities' support unpredictable. This dramatization of the performance underlines the endangered and miserable condition of the allegorical "bad community."

In sum, then, the poetics and performance of Jenu Kurumba ritual discourse discloses tropes that constitute a vital part of their culture. Speakers and performers can draw upon this poetical resource to justify or deny claims, to articulate or refute arguments, and to work towards reconciliation and a good community. Most important to note is that this is not a uniform and unchallenged reservoir but a two-sided "toolbox," so to speak, that enables people to shape their arguments for and against positions in discourse. Ultimately, the ritual discourse also reveals that the Jenu Kurumba themselves conceptualize their community as a tradition of persuasion which is *per se* dilemmatic and therefore demands continuous rhetorical specification. On the one hand, people are in need of moral orientation and accordingly have to make appropriate links to moral resources and standards. On the other hand, however, human beings are intentionally bad, or they simply fail and go wrong. In both cases, social life is, due to the weakness and fallibility of the "human worms," inevitably fragile and unpredictable.

Yet, the Jenu Kurumba also point out the ways this dilemma can be solved, at least temporarily. In many instances of discourse, speakers make it explicit that the foundation of a good community is debate and argumentation. Thus, many of the most-often used verbal expressions are related to the performance of discourse and argumentation itself: "speak out," "ask," "listen," "tell which way we should go," "give the account," "break up and narrate," and so forth are all phrases that initiate and keep the ritual debate going. For the Jenu Kurumba, ongoing participation in the "speeches on good and bad" and engagement in ritual discourse and debate are the key. Without them there is no justice, no allocation of responsibility, no moral orientation for the correct way of life, and so on. In short, without debate there can be no foundation (*nele*) for the moral community. Given the predominance of dialogue and argumentation, the Jenu Kurumba truly represent a moral community in Neo-Aristotelian terms and what PANDIAN (2008, 470), with reference to Macintyre's approach to ethics, has called a "tradition of argumentation."

Performing the ethics of the state

The *ādivāsī* ethics outlined above constitute the Jenu Kurumba community and define the identity of those who articulate and generate them. In other words, they represent an internal, tribal view of a ethical world. But the Jenu Kurumba do not represent a traditional culture in terms of an isolated or timeless community, nor do they possess a closed system of meanings. Instead, one could argue, what we have described above as the tribal view is already an active response to the outside world. One major agent this *ādivāsī* view is responding to is the postcolonial state and its imagination of what constitutes a good modern life.

It may seem contradictory to say of a modern state that it understands itself in ethical terms, while at the time such an institution regards itself as being bound to modernity, secularity, and the Western legacy of the enlightenment (CHAKRABARTY 2000). However, as TAYLOR (1989) has shown, modern ways of life are no less ethically constituted then other ways of being. What makes them peculiar is simply that

modernity denies its substantial ethical grounding. The principal form of practical reason is disengaged, procedural, and formal. Images of what a good or bad life is about are said to be premodern and overcome by enlightenment thinking (Taylor 1989). Despite all these claims, however, modernity is also based on substantial views of what a good life should be, and the Indian state of Tamil Nadu makes no exception. It is not possible to outline in detail the many aspects of Tamil ethical identity in this article, and so I focus instead on how the state and the ruling party represent an ideal Tamilian modern identity to the village and tribal people.

What the state considers as a proper life and a valuable kind of identity is most explicitly expressed not only in political manifestos but also in speeches and in political performances. As in other parts of the world, political performances are a privileged way to accomplish this (Breckenridge and Appadurai 1996; Brow 1988; Schein 1999). Political performances constitute fields of collective action where meanings are represented and/or performed in an expressive and explicit way. On the other hand, they also have a pragmatic dimension, and in particular their rhetorical function is of great importance in the struggle to strive for hegemony of "governmental" ideas. Thus performances often aim to persuade the participants to accept or to consent to the meanings expressed and therefore to expand their hegemonic reach as far as possible into the population and/or the *ādivāsī*. This is of utmost importance for the state, whose institutions often like to represent themselves in public ceremonies and events (Tenekoon 1988; Kertzer 1988).

In the northern Nilgiris, numerous public performances are held intending to persuade people that the state's ideas of modernity are the best way to a accomplish a good life. In particular, annual ceremonies—like the annual meetings of national cooperative societies and fair-price stores—are performed to accomplish this aim of persuasion. Thus all over Tamil Nadu (and India as well) the establishment of institutions to "develop" the population, like cooperative stores, health centers, and tribal schools, for example, are publicly celebrated. Politicians, civil servants, and members of "backward sections" like tribal communities appear on a stage, speeches are given, and symbolic actions (greetings, distribution of grants or loans, flag hoisting, and so on) are carried out. At the same time, specific aspects of the power and value of the federal state, of modernity and of progress—all part of what is seen as a good, modern life—are made explicit that way. In addition, locally-rooted meanings, for example Tamilian notions of a "protective and promoting state" (see below), are articulated as well.

Yet in November 2005, the local population experienced an extraordinary spectacle of political performance. In that month, and after more than ten years of construction, a technically very ambitious hydroelectric power plant, situated in the middle of protected state forest areas with the intention of delivering electric power to the highly energy-intensive industrial region of Coimbatore, was completed. For the inauguration and start-up of this state-run prestigious development project, the then Chief Minister, Jayalalitha, and a number of other high-ranking cabinet members announced their participation, and in addition, the chief minister had arranged for a sophisticated simultaneous multimedia presentation of the

event. Employing a range of performative means, this multimedia performance displayed the ruling party's specific understandings of what constitutes a good, modern life, and of the role of the state.

To begin with, one of the important aspects was the display of the power of the state and of the governing party. Already in the run-up to the opening, substantial and normally unattainable resources of the state (construction machines, bitumen, workers, and so on) were mobilized in a very short time, and within days a helicopter landing pad and, to the surprise of the audience, an ultramodern media landscape were erected at the periphery of the village, constituting an impressive political arena. Moreover, the ruling party arranged the transport (including free bus rides and lunches) of a mass of spectators from the whole region. When the large audience had finally been through security checks and assembled in the stadium-like media arena, and after some hours of tense expectancy, the chief minister flew in by helicopter. Yet to the disappointment of the audience, she was immediately separated from the excited population in an even more dramatic and impressive enactment of state power.

Surrounded by her security troops, the so-called "black cats" (dressed in black and heavily-armored) and security forces who were seen continuously talking on walkie-talkies and mobile phones, she left the helicopter, performed an offering to a Hindu goddess (Laksmi) in the company of Brahman priests (brought in from faraway Kerala), then quickly entered a luxurious jeep with blackened windows and speedily disappeared, accompanied by an armada of other VIPs being rushed away in a convoy of cars and jeeps. This somehow unreal and striking appearance and disappearance of powerful people certainly enhanced the demonstration of the state's power, underlined its unpredictability and inaccessibility, and left the crowd impressed—but also silenced.

It was very quiet for a while after she left, a silence, it seemed, that echoed the audience's experience of being sidelined and reduced to the role of a silent and, at best, applauding population. Moreover, many of the people I talked to later on compared the event with political performances staged by George W. Bush or the chief minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi, both of whom they saw in television news being broadcast by satellite into their village and tribal homes: "G. W. Bush and R. Gandhi," people remarked, "only they have 'black cats,' no?" "They don't come close to people, you know, they never shake hands, remember?" Those were ambivalent statements, however, combining a sense of respect with feelings of fear and disempowerment. Most people were explicit, though, about their dislike of the distance and separation that this event established between the people and those in power. Others drew parallels with the performances of the military in contemporary Iraq that they had come to know—as most other people in the world today—through watching the daily television news. Yet the message for the audience was clear—well being and a good modern life is only possible when it is secured by the power of the ruling party and the state.

A second aspect of a good modern life being displayed by means of performance was the modern technology that was used and displayed in the political

arena itself. A huge mobile TV screen, such as those used in European large-scale sports or political events, was brought to the village site from faraway Chennai (as the advertisement spots shown before and after the broadcast made clear). Along with a number of large-size TV (LCD) screens that were set up at the outer circle of the arena, it was used to broadcast live the inauguration and the opening that chief minister Jayalalitha and other important politicians performed in the main building of the hydroelectric power plant. This plant, however, was situated only a few kilometers away from the arena in the forest and jungle area, but at that time it was completely cordoned-off from onlookers and the public. Instead, and as if to underline the hypermodern vision of modernity, this broadcast was transmitted via satellite from a power plant to the nearby media arena where the assembled village/tribal population could watch this "performance of modernity" simultaneously on the big mobile screen and on the large TV sets. Indeed it is hard to imagine a more suitable arrangement for the accomplishment of the rhetorical function of this act, namely to convince the audience that an essential part of Tamil identity today is the possession of state-of-the-art technology.

However, the state's power and modern technology do not exhaust Tamil identity and a good life. Therefore further values and traditional ethical sources were articulated in the performance, and this time the ideas of a good life and the values being needed to accomplish it were unfolded explicitly.

In a central sequence of the whole political performance, when the transmission of the inauguration ceremony was finished, all screens simultaneously began to show a film of about ten minutes in length. It was produced, as it turned out, by the ruling party. That clip had two dimensions. In the opening of the film, a scene was shown wherein the then chief minister Jayalalitha was the main protagonist. A first scene showed her image accompanied by the message that she is *amma*, the mother; the second scene showed her giving a speech in the Tamil Nadu Parliament. One could not hear what exactly she was talking about but when she spoke from the podium to the assembly her gestures and expressions made it clear that a powerful woman was acting here. Moreover, with the clip being shown in the context of the opening of the power plant, the scene suggested that she was giving a speech concerned with the well-being of her people. This was indeed made explicit in the next part of the movie.

That scene was a short film of scenes put together and taken from the cinema movie *Nam Nādu* (Our country). This movie was extremely popular in 1969 all over Tamil Nadu and, as the title suggests, its main theme was the identity of Tamilian people and their relationship to their country. The main protagonists were not only cinema actors but also politicians, namely the former chief minister and famous movie star M.G.R. and the actual chief minister (in 2007) and former actress Jayalalitha. It is impossible here to examine this fascinating movie in detail. Suffice to focus on the main theme, namely the imagination of Tamil identity in terms of what a good life for Tamilians is all about.

The main protagonists were shown as members of different castes and social standing. M.G.R. played the young man Durai belonging to the rich upper class.

Durai is an honest government office clerk who is against corruption, always sincere, proud of being a Tamilian, and his political ideal is a secular democratic anti-caste Tamil Nadu state. In the film he is also shown as always helping the poor and needy. To save the rights of the poor he fights with corrupt higher society people.

Jayalalitha, in contrast, is a young and poor woman selling coconuts on the streets and obviously from a lower section of society. To make a long narrative short: they fall in love with each other, are not allowed to marry, but they rebel and ultimately they manage to marry and live together.

The third main character is Durai's elder brother-in-law. He is a simple man from the middle classes and represents the "man from the streets." He is a modest man, open to modern society but also holds a deep respect for Tamilian cultural tradition. Like Durai, he dislikes corruption, but in contrast, he will not do anything against it and never rebels or fights with upper-class people or powerful politicians. While Durai is the brave hero in the film fighting against evils such as corruption and drinking, his brother-in-law represents a kind of citizen that needs to be overcome if the secular modern democratic state is to fulfil its promises of equality, modernity, development, and prosperity.

The main plot of this movie showed Durai (M.G.R) visiting his brother-in-law's family, his sister, and her two children in the house. They live in a small but modest and clean suburban house with a little garden, with the whole family leading a modern way of life. This is indicated by the dress of the father, the scene of his coming home after work and being greeted by his wife and then his children, who are doing their homework. Further images of modernity are the interior of the modern kitchen, the children's school uniforms, and the scooter parked in front of the house. Moreover, in one short scene modern education is highlighted as a positive value, in contrast with the probably attractive, but unfortunately no longer appropriate, way of traditional village life.

This scene has no dialogue or speeches, but Durai is accompanied by his sister's children in performing a song. This is explicitly a song of what a good Tamil Nadu looks like and how good citizens should live:

> *We want a good name*
>
>> Children, we want to get good names,
>> get good names
>> Our country is like a garden, tomorrow it will be blooming
>> Our mother is feeding milk, she is like a mobile god
>> Father is giving knowledge, and also guiding the good path
>> for the children, he is a leader,
>> Milking the mother,
>> father is giving knowledge,
>> In unity we want walk that way
>> today
>> one good future day will arise

> Children, we want to get good names,
> get good names
> Our country is like a garden, tomorrow it will be blooming
> You talk like a parrot and
> sing like a quail
> laugh like a flower
> live according to the *Kural*
> [But] If you grow angry with your mind
> it will be a mistake
> true love is like holiness
> protect our language
> like our eyes
> Our mother is feeding milk, she is like a mobile god
> Father is giving knowledge, and also guiding the good path
> In our democracy
> we are all kings
> our South Indian Gandhi [Annadurai][4]
> that day told

The song depicts Tamil Nadu as a garden, praises a mother and father as the providers of food and knowledge, values traditional knowledge transmitted by the father, and foregrounds the virtues of living in unity and sincerity. Both virtues are seen as crucial for a democratic state where all are equal and are "kings." Finally, the classic Tamil ethical work *Kural* is declared as the source and yardstick for ideal behavior of the modern Tamil citizen. Durai, the singer, represents this ideal modern citizen, fighting against corruption and praising not only the modern state but also the ethical standards of the ancient Tamil *Kural*.

In a final sequence, moreover, the film dramatically shows the outstanding value of the "Tamil mother" as key protector not only of the modern family, but also of the state itself (see RÖSEL 1997; HELLMANN-RAJANAYAGAM and FLESCHENBERG 2008). In the movie as in the whole political performance, the "mother" was Jayalalitha herself. This idea was accomplished through a simple but effective montage. The clip taken from the movie *Our Country* ended by showing Jayalalitha as the newly-married wife of Durai, respectively of the famous Chief Minister M.G.R. Her image, however, was then cine-technically doubled: it turned into the scene of the beginning and Jayalalitha appears (again) as the actual chief minister of Tamil Nadu speaking in parliament, accompanied by the script "mother." In that way, two figures merged: the ideal Tamil wife and future mother, as well as the present chief minister. The message was that both are the same person, namely Jayalalitha. In addition, she appeared as the legitimate heir of M.G.R., the "superhero" and famous politician, and as the political warrant of a good modern life. The media landscape thus served as an arena where the imagination of a good modern life, warranted by the state and by the chief minister Jayalalitha as mother, was explicitly displayed and represented onscreen.

Last but not least, the political performance also served to represent the social position of the tribal population as a marginal sector of society. Members of various

ādivāsī communities were indeed present, but only as spectators of the performance, and nowhere did tribal groups play an active part, contrary to the announcements of the programs that were circulated early on in the villages and among the audience. The message of their visible absence was clear: *ādivāsī*s are valuable members of modern society—but only as consumers and as the subject of political modernity, not as constitutive actors of that modernity. In sum, then, the entire political event employs a variety of performative means that articulate and put into perspective the ruling party's—as well as the government's—specific understanding of what a good modern life should be, what kinds of powers are needed to sustain or rather bring it into existence, and most importantly the power of the "mother," the media, and (surprisingly) the ethics of the ancient Tamil work *Kural*.

Unfortunately we do not have detailed studies of the content and scope of those discourses among shamans (that is, the deities) and their modern clientele, and we do not know whether the latter, too, are confronted with moral issues regarding their responsibilities, their social conduct, and justice in the same way as the *ādivāsī* participants are when they participate in healing and death rituals. So we can only wonder whether their role as servants of the state is discussed. In other transcultural performances, however, this is clearly the case, and the shrine of Sanesvara provides a vivid example of how that works.

At Sanesvara's shrine: the poetics and rhetoric of social critique

Sanesvara is a deity that was brought out of the forest only recently (in 1996) by an *ādivāsī* shaman/priest. Its shrine was built midway between the *ādivāsī* settlements and the village, and since then what was first only a small hut of clay and bamboo has now become a rather impressive small temple attracting an ever-growing number of clients. Basically its performative pattern corresponds with the *ādivāsī* rituals described above. At Sanesvara's shrine, the discourse links issues of illness, suffering, and well-being with the morality and correct behavior of the clients. It also implies the embodiment of the deity and extended debates between the shaman (that is, the deity) and ordinary participants serving as arenas where the responsibility for sorrowful experiences is discussed. In addition, it serves as a forum where concepts of what counts as a good or bad life, where ideas of the person as a social individual and where the fundamental need to negotiate and argue about those themes in discourses with the deity, are articulated. In this context, however, the deity's claim of being able to tell the human beings how to live in a good way is mediated in a totally renewed manner.

First, not only *ādivāsī* people but also other social groups take part. Second, a whole set of meanings is drawn from heterogeneous cultural environments or "cultural flows" (Appadurai 1996) empowering (third) the priest to address a broad public. Accordingly, the deity's clientele no longer consist of *ādivāsī* alone, but includes village people, local taxi drivers, and also various types of government employees (local people but also those being transferred from other parts of Tamil Nadu and

even from Delhi). As the shaman/priest proudly points out, the deity therefore not only speaks the local *ādivāsī* languages, but also Tamil, Kannada, and even Hindi. In addition, he deliberately draws on the contemporary media plurality of India to lend new meanings to his performances and to the shrine. For this purpose, almost every day he spends most of his time in the tea shops of the village. Sitting on a bench, he follows closely the current political events (local, national, and international) with the help of newspapers read out to him by friends and better-educated relatives, but he also takes part in the political debates that emerge in those tea shop contexts.

In addition, he keenly follows the TV news being displayed in the two larger restaurants that have television sets arranged so that not only the resident guests, but also those passing by or shopping, can see the program. Yet he does not passively reproduce what is heard or seen, but actively (and creatively) appropriates the media strategies of newspapers and television in his own way, and translates at least some of the meanings of media that seem relevant to him into the semantics of his own performances at the shrine. Thus, during his possession at the shrine, and speaking in the voice of the deity Sanesvara, he interprets, for example, current political events or natural disasters, just as the newscasters do.

Indeed, when we talked about the role of media in the village, he invented for me the slogan "My temple is my TV," and used that phrase to underline that his messages are not only as interesting and up-to-date as the TV news, but even more relevant because the deity, as he said, not only talks about the past, but also the future. "Sanesvara's job," he explained to me, is not simply to report events but to explain how people must behave and act in order to avoid harmful events and suffering in the future. In other words, mediating messages for him is not simply an issue of representation but an existential intervention into the personal life of his clients and also local politics. This corresponds neatly with *ādivāsī* and villagers' local understandings of the power of deities. In contrast with technical media (and also with political parties or the government), the deity attests to its superior power through its very ability to prevent or reduce suffering and bad experiences.

This reinterpretation is only one instance of how the meanings of trans-local and global media are actively appropriated and reinserted, so to speak, into local contexts of meanings and social praxis. In the case at hand, this semiotic creativity is an instance of *poiesis* being used in the service of hegemony. It seeks to extend the meanings of an indigenous discourse on morality—one that was restricted to members of the *ādivāsī* community—and to overcome its communal limits, reaching out instead into wider social and political realms where moral issues of good or bad behavior are discussed with respect to matters of statehood, the nation, and modernity as well. The following paragraph outlines in more detail how that actually works.

Performing at sanesvara's shrine

Once a week, on Saturday, the priest holds a public puja at Sanesvara's shrine consisting of worship and offerings to the deity. Worshippers usually approach the deity to heal illness and suffering, or to ask for the deity's support

when they go to marry, when they apply for a job, when they have trouble with relatives or colleagues at the office, and so forth. Most of the time, however, the performance also includes an oral discourse with the deity. Similar to the *ādivāsī* rituals discussed above, the priest acts as a medium for the deity and becomes possessed by the god Sanesvara. Embodied in the medium and speaking through its mouth, Sanesvara (that is, the medium) addresses the clients one by one, enquires about their concerns, suffering, and wishes, but sooner or later the medium also addresses the social behavior of his interlocutors in moral terms. He wants them to disclose the kinds of bad deeds they performed in their immediate social environment—why, for example, did they not care for their relatives?

Often, however, the deity extends the moral field beyond the narrow community and addresses issues relating to the institutions of the state or to the behavior of specific government employees as well. Moreover, the deity not only talks but also intervenes, giving orders to local officers and clerks, or threatens forest guards or police personnel. In those cases, Sanesvara questions whether its clients performed their duties as government employees to the disadvantage of the local forest and village people, or whether they acted for their own benefit and their "own pocket." As Sanesvara explicitly claims, it acts for the benefit of the forest people. Those enquiries often turn, as in the *ādivāsī* rituals above, into emotional debates where the speakers are engaged in mutual arguments using narratives, memories, and other rhetorical devices.

A vivid example is provided by an incident that was called by Sanesvara itself (in a performance) the "locking of the forest." The background was that the forest authorities had forbidden the *ādivāsī* to enter the forest and prohibited access to the resources on which many of them live. They collect forest products (honey or soap nut) and firewood either for their own needs or to sell. The forest department saw no need to explain anything to the local *ādivāsī*s, nor did it give any reason when it stopped them from entering. When I asked, the only reason given was that "the forest needs rest" and "must come to peace" after people exploited it, felling trees illegally, killing elephants for ivory, and so forth. The forest, it was said, must recover from the excessive misuse and the illegal tree felling of which they accused the *ādivāsī*s. In practice, this meant that to ensure the exclusion of the *ādivāsī*s from the forest, employees of the forest department were stationed at the edge of the forests. They were ordered to prevent any unauthorized entrance by Jenu Kurumba or Sholega into the forest. If that should nevertheless happen, the watchmen were advised to catch the *ādivāsī*s "in flagrante" and arrest the trespassers.

These events did not escape the attention of the shamans. With Sanesvara's shrine being located just at the edge of the forest and with the priest keenly following various political events, the shaman/priest was always well informed of politics. Indeed, when shortly after the governmental order to "close" the forest a puja was performed at the shrine, Sanesvara, embodied in the *pūjārī*, made the incident a theme to discuss. During the performance the deity/medium asked some of the devotees assembled in the shrine to hasten to the areas of the forest where the watchmen were hiding to catch *ādivāsī* trespassers and call them in the name of

Sanesvara to appear in front of him immediately. Soon afterwards, two watchmen did indeed appear, and the deity interrogated them about why they were "locking the forest" and took them to task. At the same time it intimidated the forest personnel with words like, "Don't you know how dangerous it is here at night, where elephants and bears and tigers wait for you?"

Moreover, it shamed them by suggesting their cowardice and, at the same time, underlined the courage, the competence, and the right of the *ādivāsī* people to enter and also use the forest. The deity justified that claim and pointed out that the *ādivāsī*s belong to the forest, that they are the "children of the forest" (*kādu makkalu*), and accordingly, since Sanesvara is also the Lord of the forest, they are Sanesvara's children as well. Sanesvara, the deity claimed, will protect them and take care of them: "This is my forest; the forest—children and the coolie [*ādivāsī* working for daily wages] are my children," it announced in front of the forest staff. As a consequence of the deity's intervention, the following day both forest watchmen reported ill and did not appear for work. Moreover, others also refused to do the job by referring to the great danger of nocturnally-moving elephants (which actually was true enough). Finally, the "locking of the forest" was cancelled and the deity's intervention turned out to be successful.

Another example of Sanesvara's interventions is represented by a performance where the well-being of a policeman, himself an *ādivāsī* of the Sholega community, was an issue. He came to the shrine with his family members (his pregnant wife plus mother) and asked the deity to protect the forthcoming delivery of his child. After puja, the deity embodied itself in the priest and entangled the clients in a moral debate. In particular, it reminded the policeman of his responsibilities vis-à-vis his own forest people (the Sholega community), mentioned the "locking of the forest," and raised further questions regarding justice and state politics, without, however, going into concrete details. In rather general terms, it told the Sholega policeman to act in favor of the well-being of the *ādivāsī*s, and suggested he should resist the orders of the government when directed against the well-being of the deity's children, "the forest children," as it said.

A similar debate on morality and modernity occurred in a séance where relationships between illness, the state, and the modern medical welfare system were made an explicit issue. Some Jenu Kurumba had submitted a seriously ill relative to the local government hospital, where according to law, free treatment is to be provided to *ādivāsī* people. The Jenu Kurumba knew this and accordingly demanded that the physician on duty provide treatment free of cost. Nevertheless, they were asked to pay a certain amount. Moreover, the treatment did not improve the woman's condition (in my judgment because she was treated wrongly) and instead of becoming better her suffering increased. After waiting for some days her Jenu Kurumba relatives went to the shrine of Sanesvara in order to ask the deity for help, to heal her, and also to clear up from where "the difficulties are coming from." When the clients had given their offerings the deity raised the issue of the "bad behavior" of the hospital staff.

On the other hand, however, the deity also blamed the weakness of Jenu Kurumba ancestor-deities who the Jenu Kurumba usually consult for the purpose

of healing (see DEMMER 2007). Sanesvara questioned those deities' power but underlined its own force and demanded that the Jenu Kurumba clients should henceforth worship the deity Sanesvara, thereby recognizing the god as the ultimate power in the region. Finally, and without the explicit consent of the clientele, it agreed to help and also to take the hospital employees to task and make them account for their "bad behavior"—without, however, identifying any particular people, names, or positions.[5]

These discourses show how the deity (that is, the priest as medium) pursues its own interpretation and policy with regard to modernity and the state. At the shrine, an explicit criticism is articulated, being particularly directed against modern governmental institutions like the forest department or the hospital staff. Thus the inability of the hospital to overcome the suffering of people and the irresponsible and arbitrary orders of the forest department, "locking out" the *ādivāsī*s from the forest and preventing them getting an income by themselves, are articulated in a public arena. In other cases it is the corruption of local policemen and government physicians that is brought up for discussion.

Moreover, these case studies also show how these criticisms are articulated with reference to a "traditional" and ethical idea of sociality, namely the concept of the moral community. Accordingly, issues of illness, suffering, and well-being are linked with moral issues, correct behavior, and a good way of leading a proper life. In addition, these quests are related to the power, morality, and demands of the modern governmental state and in particular with respect to its institutions. Ultimately this discourse argues that it is the deity and not the state that governs the forest, the "children of the forest" and their well-being, as well as the other non-tribal clients seeking its support. According to this interpretation, the government employees are also responsible to the deity, and they are advised to act in solidarity with the *ādivāsī*s since the latter belong to the forest and to the deity itself.

The political consequences of this idea is that the deity acts in practical, micropolitical terms: it intervenes in the politics of the forest department by exercising its authority over the state's employees, and it takes the local people and government agents to task in telling them not to forget the *ādivāsī*s and not to act against them. Those who do not follow the deity's command are threatened with consequences (for example, illness or failure of their forthcoming enterprises).

The following excerpts from Sanesvara's speeches may illustrate his discourse as it is addressed directly to the state. These utterances are no longer dialogic, but they are shaped as a monologue to challenge and critique its modern ethics or view of what a good life is about. At the same time these speeches deny to the state the power that it claims for itself.[6]

Sanesvara's talk to his "forest children"[7]

TEXT I

About the government, concerning that
Whether it is difficulty or sorrow
Concerning this very big Lord [Sanesvara]

Concerning this Saniraja
In this world here, inside of this forest
How the children are
How the children are, (you god) take care!
They need to be made and become happy
The children must think over it a little bit,
then one will see,
Will it not happen?
Audience: Yes, will happen!

This working people (coolie-people) children,
Suffering, for whom is no (suffering: all suffer)?
This working people (coolie-people) children,
Which way (to go, behave) they need to be shown

Look after all of them

TEXT 2

(He is remembering how he protected forest people from being caught by
the government)
The children being in the forest,
did anybody catch them?
In this time,
concerning this group of (forest-) people
What is government? (nothing it is)

In those times, what is government? (nothing it is)

What is the "system" of the government? (nothing it is)
What is the white man's (power)? (nothing it is)
What is the king's (power) (nothing it is)

TEXT 3

For them, this government

it may have gone to many places [it might be present at many places]
is it, dear? Today, which meaning can be caught [got]?
(After you are) Checking … [all this]
(Tell us) How it is? This [forest-working] peoples habits?
How did sense [about how to live and behave in a correct way and
about Gods power] come?
How did learning [about how to live and behave in a correct way and
about Gods power] come?
Seeing all this, and
[you people after] taking into view his [Gods] "system" as well,
after caring about his [me, the *pujari*s] safety as well
What blessings will he [God] give?
He is not like children [people]!
One [everybody] has to stand [in front of me, and be responsible to me]
money will not stop that, whoever,

never doing injustice, be never unjust to a neighbor,
If you do, it (your life) goes as it is,
go (live) straight, even if you have (only) five *paisa*

Even so one will be king,
one will be minister,
you all want be rich,
There is sun's power, man's power, sky's power, God's power, all these ...
Correct? [Sanesvara is laughing]
Second power, third power, elephant power, bear's power, no? Am I right?

White man's power, government power, this government
[Sanesvara is laughing]
For Saniraja, and for Sanni's children, if the particular time (of his
power) comes,
just one minute (and all is done well by him, crushed all other powers),
no more time (is needed for him)
One power, second power, third power has come here (to this area),
where can we all come? (no place for us is left), is that possible?
ahaa, ahaa [angry]

What is a car, what is a lorry (the rich and powerful)?
Can I leave my children (you who are here)?
Here, for my children, if any danger comes,
I have no fear! Take care (you powerful people), who is court?[8]
Who is this (you rich and powerful people), beggar's children!

Conclusion

Identity in the northern Nilgiris of South India is certainly an ethical
issue and closely bound to engaged practical reason. Accordingly, this article has
examined how in the postcolonial Nilgiris of South India the self-understanding
of *ādivāsī* people and of modern citizens are shaped in response to the most fun-
damental human questions: What is a good social life? How can, or should, we
live ethically in practice? Moreover, we could also examine the performances these
cultural identities are constructed with, are defended against, or how hey are made
to gain hegemonic ground in this culturally complex postcolonial contact zone.
Poetical processes are as vital here as rhetorical strategies, and both appear as the
driving forces and powers of identity politics. These strategies are employed as col-
lective actors to position themselves with respect to substantial ethics in a moral
space—that is, with respect to what each of them understands as the good life.
This holds true for indigenous identities as for the modern state of Tamil Nadu
imagining what a good citizen's life should look like.

The ethical view of the modern state of Tamil Nadu and its government is
expressed in political performances. The state's imaginations do not, however,
articulate a seamless image of a good life. On the one hand, its vision of a modern

life largely conforms to the model of modernity as it was first developed in the West, in the "Province of Europe" (CHAKRABARTY 2000) and is committed, as TAYLOR (1999, 153) has called it, to a basically "a-cultural" imagination of modernity. In its contemporary version, modernity is imagined as a good life in terms of "development" and foregrounds the access of any individual to education, economic prosperity, proper housing, and infrastructure, and so forth. The *ādivāsī* people have a fixed place in that scheme in the sense that they are the needy candidates for that kind of development, no matter what these groups themselves regard as the best way of life. As we saw in the case of the Tamil Nadu government, imagination aims at hegemony by means of governmental strategies and by the various micro-practices described above, to implement among the *ādivāsī*s that postcolonial "culture of modernity."

Yet this vision of modernity cannot claim complete and already-implemented hegemony in the sense that it receives widespread consent and thus dominates the mind of the population. Instead, it has to struggle with a second, modified and regionally-specific variant of modernity, the hypermodern version articulated in the political performance of the then ruling party, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). That concept of modernity is based on two sets of values. On the one hand, it stresses the values of the modern suburban domain: here the ideal social unit is the primary consanguine family, living in the suburban metropolis, in the modest but neat and fully-equipped home of its own, consuming modern consumer goods and with access to modern educational institutions. This set of values, however, is supplemented or "enriched" with a second set of values that derive from, and relate to, the contemporary global media-plus-high-tech world. Its attractiveness derives from the idea of mastering the most modern and sophisticated technologies (helicopter, ecologically adapted hydroelectric power plant) and media (above all, the latest variants of television). Moreover, in contrast to the national vision of modernity, it does not regard the traditional village way of life as backward and mistaken. Instead, this hypermodern version of modernity imagines traditional life in rather neutral terms: village life, so the message goes, is the base of our Tamil culture, but today it has to be enriched and modernized. Therefore ancient Tamil ethics as depicted in the literary work *Kural* are recommended as a base for the behavior of a good citizen, even today.

Accordingly, this idea of modernity incorporates—rather than simply excludes—certain aspects of the Tamil villagers' way of life. Religion and gender roles, for example, are not depicted as wrong but only as somewhat insufficient: they do not provide access to modern goods and lifestyles. In modern life, this vision claims, those aspects have to be enriched by an approximation to urban modernity and by a certain redefinition of other key values, for example the image of the Tamil mother that plays such an important role in Tamil culture. Both of the above visions constitute particular imaginations and practices of the governmental modernity of the state.

As we could also observe, however, this particular view of modernity has not remained unchallenged. Local *ādivāsī* communities actively respond to, and engage

with, the state's visions through a complex set of activities that range from creative appropriation to criticism and even to cultural resistance. The political authenticity in the region thus includes ways of affirmatively appropriating the measures taken by the modern nation-state to develop *ādivāsī* communities: job opportunities as a result of reservation policies, free medical services, cooperative stores, and so forth. Equally significant, however, are the complex ways *ādivāsī* actors engage with that (ambiguous) model of a good life in critical and creative terms. Thus the ethical imagination and practice of the state—its "ethical world"—is challenged by what we call the "tribal view" of the *ādivāsī*s in the region. This represents the ethical self-understanding of the people.

Articulated mainly in ritual performances, it is constitutive of the *ādivāsī* culturally-specific subaltern consciousness and in certain respects it can be read as a response to the ethics of the modern state. The proper community is always depicted in terms of caring, solidarity, and protection.

That does not mean we are dealing with a closed system of meanings and values. Instead, we could read these *ādivāsī* imaginings to a certain extent as a response to other ethical imaginations and to different ways of living in the region. Moreover, these imaginations and the performances they rest upon are not innocent discourses, but are pervaded by claims to cultural superiority and power, turning the area into a highly political multi-sited locality pervaded by powerful hegemonic strategies put at work. In other words, the postcolonial zone is traversed by multiple cultural hegemonies and claims to ethical identities.

In the case of the Jenu Kurumba, hegemony operates predominantly within the community. The shaman's power, we found, is directed towards convincing his immediate audience of the superior value of this community-oriented ethics. This is at least partially successful since it is this communitarian world view that offers a conceptual basis for cultural resistance. As we have seen, the communal ethics expressed through the tribal view constitutes a specific form of the infra-political strategies vis-à-vis the modern state.

Beyond that, the "tribal view" also provides the cultural and imaginative resources for the establishment of a new forum of critique—the shrine of the deity Sanesvara—where the state and its modernities are engaged in various ways. The religious performances at the shrine of Sanesvara on the one hand attest to the creative and transformative appropriation of new and partially-global cultural flows and elements (for example, the format of television news), while at the same time expanding the discourse community from a primarily tribal clientele to include a wider range of people from the village, the region, and even from metropolitan centers like Chennai and Delhi. On the other hand, these performances re-ground, justify, and thus defend local identity and the *ādivāsī* commitment to their own values and concepts against the claims of the modernity of the state. In other words, the shrine articulates an explicit critique of the governmental and hyper-modern state. At the same time this discourse tries to expand the hegemony of the "tribal view" into the new and wider clientele of the deity. This recently invented "tradition of argumentation" contributes in a vital way to the emergence of a new

cultural "*ādivāsī* and beyond" identity. It is still—and for a considerable time to come it will be—in the making, responding to, asking, challenging, and also, in its modest but forceful way, trying to gain hegemony over the state, global actors, and their visions of what a good life really is.

Notes

1. As I discuss in detail elsewhere (Demmer 2013; n.d.) most concepts of reason that anthropologists have applied hitherto are not only inappropriate for the self-declared purpose of anthropology to make other voices and views count, but they also tend to epistemologically suppress the "native point of view." They have prevented us from taking the native point of view into appropriate ethnographic account and from doing justice to other people's articulations of identity. Therefore, studies of identity should be another form of reason, namely practical reason.

2. For contemporary Egypt, see Mahmood 2005 and Hirschkind 2006. For New Guinea, see Robbins 2004, and for Madagascar see Lambek 1993.

3. Clifford urges us to take this kind of "identity politics seriously" (Clifford 2000). He observes that the postcolonial predicament raises the question of who speaks for whose identities, what we mean by identity and what we mean by "identity politics." His answer is that collective identities are imagined and politically contested (Clifford 1988, 10–11) but also, as he remarks with reference to Calhoun (1994, 29), that "identity politics aim not simply at the legitimation of falsely essential categorical identities but at living up to deeper social and moral values" (Clifford 2000, 95). In other words, although largely overlooked in postcolonial debates, identities and identity politics in the postcolonial era are vitally concerned with ethics.

4. Annadurai was the first chief minister of Tamil Nadu and has become a legendary figure all across the state (Hardgrave 1979).

5. Actual discourses and dialogues between the shaman and his audience are represented and analyzed in Demmer (n.d.). The speech quoted here was performed in vernacular Kannada and I translated it as it was held, the rough and sometimes incomplete English meanings, therefore, correspond to the way the speech was performed.

6. Demmer (n.d.) provides a more detailed analysis of this and other speeches.

7. These are unpublished fieldwork texts recorded by the author in 2009.

8. He said "who" here to mean that "court" is a person that one can hold responsible.

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