Frank Heidemann
Ludwig Maximilian University Munich

Between Devotee and God

The Study of Atmosphere in a South Indian Temple Festival

Badagas, peasants in the South Indian Nilgiri region, take great care to prepare for the annual festival of the god Jedayasamy. In the festival week all activities are monitored to achieve a perfect performance. This article argues that devotees and visitors are affected by the special atmosphere of the place. According to the philosopher Gernot Böhme an atmosphere is a semi-object; it exists between individuals and the surrounding environment, and those who are affected by the particular atmosphere are its co-creators. Based on the concept of social aesthetics, this article examines several contexts. Devotees walk in a procession from village to village, dance in public places, and on the final day firewalking takes place. The festival atmosphere is planned, performed, and evaluated. The impact of the festival atmosphere is created by sensuous perceptions, symbolic public performances, and metaphorical references to social categories, here called reduplication.

Keywords: Hinduism—Badagas—worship (*pūjā*)—atmosphere—social aesthetics—firewalking

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This article opens with a riddle: It is invisible, omnipresent, immaterial but considered almost like a thing, it influences me, and I am part of it. What is it?

In South India, temple festivals mark a special moment in the course of the annual cycle.[1] The relationship between devotee and god is transformed to a high level of intensity. Near the sanctum sanctorum there is loud music, the smell of camphor, and the heat of human bodies engaged in acts of worship. I often experienced a special atmosphere, and so did my friends and informants visiting Hindu temples. In spite of the force of these intense moments, I have neglected the study of this charged space until recently. A few academic texts make mention of this special atmosphere at Hindu temples, but to my knowledge there is no separate study taking this phenomenon as its specific focus. In my search for an appropriate method to analyze this atmosphere, I found the work by two authors especially helpful: first, documentary filmmaker David MacDougall's reflections on vision and social aesthetics in film; and second, philosopher Gernot Böhme's discussions of artworks and atmospheres in his "new aesthetics." I began to recall my own visits at Hindu temples after reading their works. The atmospheres of rituals—in my personal perception—have the capacity to condense various forms of experience into one. They evoke feelings from the past in a new formation, they are reflective and progressive, and they develop a consistent scale or format to represent abstract forms of knowledge in a totality that is accessible to our sensory system. Ritual atmospheres develop new ways of pointing out what we know in rather abstract terms by using a material, textual, or musical form. They focus my attention, appeal to me, and affect my emotional state. I would argue, therefore, that the experience of god in a complex ritual could be studied effectively with reference to the concept of atmosphere, as I develop it here.

My methodological approach has its origin in an article entitled "aesthetics of religion," in which Hubert Cancik and Hubert Mohr (1988) argue against the monopoly of textual interpretations of religion, Western logocentrism, and the focus on normative aspects of religion. Religion, they say, is experienced by all of the senses: the practice of religion and the exposure to sound, smell, taste, movement, and vision have a deep impact on believers. The sensory dimension has been overlooked by the study of religious texts. Cancik and Mohr argue for *aisthēsis*, the science of sensual perception, initially proposed by Alexander Gottfried Baumgarten in the eighteenth century against Immanuel Kant and his beauty concept of aesthetics. Baumgarten claimed that knowledge could be achieved through aesthetic perception and laid

the foundation for the study of atmosphere as a distinct methodological approach (Hauskeller 1995; Grieser 2015).

In spite of the positive reception of Cancik and Mohr's "aesthetics of religion," there are just a few studies describing the process of sensual perception in religious practice. In my opinion, the lack of empirical study is caused by methodological problems. One of the few groundbreaking scholars in this area is Birgit Meyer (2010), who investigates the aesthetics of Pentecostal charismatic churches and their sensational appeal. Her approach of "sensational forms" reveals in more detail how religious *practice* makes people *believe*. The question of persuasion is not new, since it was already a part of Clifford Geertz's famous 1973 definition of religion, where he states the following as distinct features of religion:

> (1) a system of symbols (2) which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men (3) by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) *clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic*. (Geertz 1973, emphasis added)

The difficult task, then, is to describe how this "aura of factuality" is constructed and why it seems "uniquely realistic." Meyer's ethnography documents the sensorial modes of religion in practice and "how the body and sensations are *subject* to powerful (competing) politico-religious formations" (2010, 759, emphasis added).

It proves to be most difficult to approach believers' sensory systems and to find words to describe them. When believers talk about their emotions in (or from) a religious context, they refer to the atmosphere that they experienced. I share the interest of Cancik and Mohr in the aesthetics of religion, and I try to approach it by describing the atmosphere of a South Indian temple festival. I shall argue, therefore, that the atmosphere is masterminded, planned, created, and finally evaluated. I have no doubt that the organizers of the festival would agree with Bruce Kapferer's words: "Performance both expresses and creates what it represents" (1979, 154). Before (re)turning to a specific South Indian temple festival, I would like to introduce the concept of atmosphere. I shall begin with the notion of atmosphere as it is understood in most of the Western world but will try to be as general as possible.

Atmosphere and social aesthetics

Atmospheres

Human beings sense and evaluate the quality of their immediate environment. The circumstances around them—the context—may be constituted by a great number of qualifiers, but those qualifiers tend to be perceived as a totality, or in relationship to this totality. The dialectic relationship between the individual and their surrounding space is the focus of my interest. I shall refer to the quality of this relationship as an "atmosphere," similar to one of the uses of the English word. An interesting aspect—and at the same time the methodological challenge—is the fact that the perceiver of the atmosphere is part of it and indeed a potential coproducer of the atmosphere perceived. The recipient tends to objectify the atmosphere, almost like an artifact,

a semi-object in its own right. The physical body and the felt body (according to Hermann Schmitz [2016]; in German, *Körper und Leib*) are in dialogue with the self-created charged space. The actor-network theory of Bruno Latour (2005) has demonstrated that actors and other agents are inseparable in the social process. Likewise the anthropology of the body has demonstrated how the physical and the cultural environment are inscribed in and on each human body.

Atmospheres are perceived with all our senses and result in emotional states. The perception of an environment is by no means a mechanical process but is highly influenced by our cultural training and specific knowledge. Today it is commonplace to assume that "people from different cultures inhabit different sensory worlds" (Hall 1968, 84). In this sense, atmospheres are part of, or influenced by, a culturally informed process of sensing. Social values help us to filter and focus our perceptions. We tend to feel what we know and know what we feel. The study of atmosphere, however, does not offer a privileged perspective or a suitable starting point. Atmospheres do not correspond to any clear taxonomy, for they lack clear demarcations. They are, though, omnipresent and at times quite powerful.

What remains unclear is the ontological status of atmospheres. In question is the issue of autonomy. Böhme refers to the phenomenology of Herrmann Schmitz, who defines atmospheres as "affective powers of feeling, spatial bearers of moods" (Böhme 1993, 119). Böhme questions the autonomy of atmospheres and instead suggests that they exist only as a kind of coproduced entity. An atmosphere "is the common reality of perceiver and the perceived" (Böhme 1993, 122). Atmospheres are a perceived reality.

Social aesthetics

I propose that the best way to examine atmospheres is the method of social aesthetics.[2] David MacDougall begins his programmatic article on "Social Aesthetics and the Doon School," a reference to a North Indian élite boarding school, with the following observation: "Through our senses we measure the qualities of our surroundings – the tempo of life, the dominant patterns of color, texture, movement, and behavior – and these coalesce to make the world familiar or strange" (2006, 94). His use of the term "social aesthetics" does not relate to the concept of beauty but refers to "culturally patterned sensory experience" (ibid., 98) and situates it very close to my concept of atmosphere. The social aesthetic field, composed of objects and actions, is in some respect the physical manifestation of the largely internalized and invisible "embodied history" that Bourdieu calls *habitus* (ibid., 98). I would like to add that Bourdieu comes very close to my own study of atmosphere, especially in the relationship of habitus and field (Bourdieu 1997, 52–111). His point of departure, however, is social categories, while I attempt an analysis of atmosphere irrespective of class, age, or gender within the physical environment and the cultural landscape.

Devotees interact with the atmosphere in and around the temple that I will describe in the following paragraphs. They express what they feel when they know that they are there. With reference to aura, a quality that radiates from an object or a center, Walter Benjamin claimed that it must be inhaled; it has to be absorbed "into one's own bodily state of being. What is perceived is an indeterminate spatially extended quality of feeling" (as quoted in Böhme 1993, 118). Aura combines knowing

and feeling into a totality, not unlike the anthropology of emotions has asserted in other contexts (for example, Leavitt 1996).[3] Kojiro Miyahara locates aesthetic knowledge "between a personal awareness of bodily sensation and impersonal conceptual knowledge," and therefore it can be "intersubjectively understood" (2014, 68). Similar concepts have been discussed in anthropology. Piers Vitebsky calls this quality "trans-sentience" (1993, 255) and Unni Wikan "resonance" (2012). I would argue that the temple festivals analyzed in this article provide an aesthetic field that transforms the emotional states of individuals and contributes to a process of identification. Group feeling in the context of temple worship need not be shared by all, "but [it] helps individuals to navigate their own emotional states that are connected to the general cultural patterns and are idiosyncratic" (Berger 2016, 150).

The deity Jedayasamy and his annual festival

Every year Jedayasamy (*caṭāya*, matted hair; *cāmi*, deity) visits his festival in Jackanarai, a Badaga village on the southern slopes of the Nilgiri Plateau in south India. According to the local myth, long ago a beggar with matted hair came to Jackanarai and stayed for a while in a valley below the village. The forefathers gave him food, but when they saw him commanding tigers, they realized that he was a god. After being unmasked, the guest said that he could not stay and had to leave. He expressed his thanks for the community's hospitality and promised to visit the village once a year. From Jackanarai he proceeded to the Badaga villages of Nedugula and Denadu, and then left the plateau, traveling toward the east. Today he is worshipped in these three Badaga villages as well as in Germa (close to Hasanur) in the Billiranga Hills. When I told elderly headmen and priests that Pastor Kanaka from the Basel Mission wrote in 1903 about a *new* festival for Jedayasamy in Jackanarai, they replied that this might have been the first grand festival for outsiders. His worship, they said, has a much longer history (Heidemann 2006, 390–98).

According to Badaga myths Jackanarai was one of the first villages founded by their forebearers and therefore has the status of a village with religious autonomy and its own jurisdiction. Their ancestors came from the northern regions to the Nilgiri plateau in times immemorial, because they objected to a proposed wedding of a Muslim ruler with one of their sisters. "Seven brothers" climbed up the hill and became the first inhabitants of many surrounding villages. Their sister, Elinge Hette, and her husband built the first houses on a southern ridge overseeing the plains of Karamadai and Mettupalayam. This settlement became Jackanarai and grew into an upper part with the genealogy of priests, a middle part, and a lower part from where the headmen came. A rather small part of Jackanarai is also inhabited by the Torreya, an endogamous group with special ritual and social duties. North and east of the main village nine further hamlets cropped up, founded by descendants of the original settlers and from their in-laws. Together, these thirteen hamlets (or villages) with roughly one thousand houses constitute a so-called "head village" and celebrate the festival for Jedayasamy.

In most Badaga villages the largest temple festival is for the mythical village founder (Hockings 2013). He is the assertive progenitor of the respective patriline and

worshipped as the god Hireodeya in each head village. In contrast, the benevolent goddess Hette unifies all Badaga people. Her temple is visited by Badaga from (almost) all villages. Also in Jackanarai the Hireodeya temple is used for all regular rituals associated with the planting of the first seed and for the first harvest, but the worship of Jedayasamy appears to be more important. I would argue that the worship of Jedayasamy emerged in the nineteenth century when the legal status of those who married into the village of Jackanarai became unclear (a Badaga who settles in his wife's village still comes under the jurisdiction of his native place, and it remains uncertain when his male successors gain all of the legal rights of their birthplace). The deity with the matted hair is worshipped by all families living within the head village and must be considered as an integrating force. The sociology of his festival marks a difference from other villages, but the symbolic forms, architecture, dress, music, and dance resemble those of other Badaga temple festivals.

The families of Jackanarai take great pains to prepare for Jedayasamy's arrival. Rules of purity are observed, and social harmony in the village is carefully maintained. The temple grounds are spotless, while its walls are whitewashed. A white flag is fixed on the highest tree next to the temple. A few dozen devotees prepare themselves for firewalking through abstinence and isolation. They should not sleep in their homes but in temples or school buildings for the duration of the event. The elders of Jackanarai hire several Kurumbas, classified as hunters-and-gatherers, who live in the steep slopes located in the direction of Mettupalayam. Once they were feared as sorcerers and employed as village watchmen to keep away ghosts. At the time of the festival, their drums and wind instruments can be heard throughout the entire valley. They lead the procession to all hamlets belonging to the head village. The Badaga devotees dance to their tune to mark the village boundaries. On the last day of the festival a few thousand visitors appear dressed in white and provide a visual contrast to the green grass in the temple grounds and to the surrounding tea fields.

Each year, Jedayasamy is scheduled to arrive in the afternoon, just before his devotees walk across the fire pit. So, as in many years before, his appearance is necessary for the ritual performance of his devotees and the other villagers. His presence is thus crucial, since the devotees rely on him before they enter the fire-pit arena and walk on its glowing coals. But it is only with the deity's support that the firewalkers will remain unharmed. If Jedayasamy feels uncomfortable, he will stay back, resulting in the devotees burning their feet. This has happened in the past. The fear is not just about the physical injury one might have to endure but relates also to the future of the entire village. Only Jedayasamy can bring good health for the villagers, social harmony, rain for the crops, and therefore prosperity. Devotees and visitors have all this in mind as the proceedings begin. They pray for their own wellbeing, for relatives, and for the community. With a mixture of joy, respect, and pain they prepare for this crucial moment. All participants wait for the deity's arrival, which can be anticipated by the slight shaking of tree branches and the rustling sound of the tree's dry leaves. But the ultimate confirmation is the falling of flowers from the *liṅgam* in the temple. The head priest is expected to confirm the arrival of Jedayasamy.

Methodological approach

I visited the Jedayasamy festival for the first time in the early 1980s. For me, a sort of exoticism affected my perception: strange music, unusual dance formations, a kind of "turban cult" combined with concepts of purity, and men walking on fire. A few Badaga friends had invited me to come for the event. For them, the Jedayasamy festival was the major event of the year and incomparable with other festivals. They pointed out many details of the temple architecture and ritual procedure. They also stressed the extreme beauty of the festival and asked me to come again the following year. In the late 1980s I was engaged in collecting data: countless photographs, and then later videos, interviews, myths, maps, conflicts, archival material, missionary reports, and other things to adorn my office shelves. Today I am a visitor. My perception is not directed at gathering data that can be added to genealogies and included in maps. I allow myself to immerse into the emotion-laden field surrounding the temple. I do not believe in Jedayasamy, but I am extremely happy when he appears. Somehow I have turned into a known and regular attendee, a senior person, like my friends whom I met in the first years.

I came to the Nilgiris with a set of questions and expectations, with particular theories and methods. In my initial research I focused on religious and political institutions and applied a rather structural approach. My ethnographic background directed my view, while my Badaga contemporaries directed my movements. Quite often they tried to show me something, but I was unable to understand. There was no method to document what they considered as beautiful, what was stunning to them, what moved their hearts. These data were too "soft" to be grasped by "hard" methods. They were too subtle, too thin, too fluid, too transient to be named, to be categorized, and to be stored in notebooks. Atmospheres can hardly be drawn in scaled maps like fields and villages; they expand like sound, and likewise they are omnipresent, dynamic, and perceived with whole bodies of people deeply invested in the event at hand. I can now go back to my memories and to the ones frozen by audio and visual documentation. During my most recent visits I could ask questions that I did not ask initially, due to my empirical agenda to which I adhered in my earliest years of fieldwork.

There is no privileged way to investigate the atmosphere of a ritual. But by combining the approaches of Gernot Böhme and David MacDougall, two visually informed writers, I hope to address a neglected phenomenon. I intend to argue that the social atmosphere is the effect of collective and planned action. The following criteria, in no particular order, should receive special attention.

First, the village, the temple, and the surrounding space must be clean and neat, houses and temples whitewashed, and a vegetarian diet must be adhered to on the festival days. In the minds of participants, such rules of observance contribute to the overall sense of the event's purity. Purity, however, does not distinguish between physical and metaphysical dimensions. Second, village unity and solidarity must be made visible. The cooperation of the entire village indicates peace and harmony during festivities and in daily life. A village without factions has a better reputation in many aspects. It is considered as a place to do business, enter politics, or to get a daughter or a son married. Third, the festival should be grand and at the same time

extensive. If the festival extends over several days, attracts many visitors, feeds many devotees, engages many firewalkers, hosts several VIPs, and receives translocal attention, it is considered to be a grand festival. The dimensions of the festival, however, should be appropriate to the means of the village in which it is staged. Fourth, the performance of the festival should reinforce social relationships and social categories. I would argue that a kind of performative reflection on lineages, norms, personalities, or even abstract categories is appreciated by the society. This is a kind of focused mirroring and, since it is shown in the proximity or presence of the deity, it is understood as a blueprint for the sociology of the village. In my lexicon of terms, I shall call this aspect "reduplication."

Before I begin with the ethnographic context, though, I need to say that there is no Badaga word for atmosphere. They use (rarely) the Tamil word *cūḻnilai*, which means "surrounding," "context," "air," and by extension "atmosphere." In case of conflict Badagas speak of a bad *cūḻnilai*, and at good times when there is harmony they speak of an open or appropriate *cūḻnilai*. In daily contexts there are many indirect references to social atmosphere, and I have no doubt that the Badaga understanding of atmosphere is not very different from mine. They agree that it is created by people (but I have to add, also by gods) and has a direct impact on participants in the festival; although each person feels it differently, all somehow perceive the same atmosphere. Moreover, it seems impossible to reduce the totality to singular factors, and the total is more than the sum of its elements. When I asked more questions about atmosphere, my informants disagreed among themselves about the possibility to plan its effects and the extent of the deity's will as part of how people perceive *cūḻnilai*. In the following section I will discuss the varied atmospheres of a few specific contexts. First, there is the village council atmosphere; second, the procession's atmosphere; third, the atmosphere of worship (*pūjā*); and finally, the atmosphere of the firewalk.

Village councils

Badagas of Jackanarai make their decisions about the celebration of the Jedayasamy festival during their village councils several months before the festival begins. At stake is the size of the event. The contested question is how long it should last. A lengthy festival involves greater expense for each Badaga household. On the one hand, the festival should not be a financial burden, nor should villagers become indebted to moneylenders. On the other hand, a great festival will make the deity happy, resulting in good rainfalls and a prosperous year. But a celebration on a grand scale could be taken as a provocation to day laborers, who suffer from low wages. In their perception, more days of celebration equal more days with less work. The Badaga council in charge of festival planning takes these issues into account. Badaga elders consider the events of recent years and the effects a grand festival will have on the locality. The main objectors to holding a long festival worry about discontent from the laborers' side and are concerned that indebtedness among the Badagas might lead to the sale of land and therefore loss of ancestors' property. The proponents of the long festival argue that it is the deity's wish to celebrate and that humans should not act against his will (for a case study see Heidemann 2006, 427–29).

The main arguments revolve around observable or traceable facts and numbers in economic transactions, such as wages, tea prices, sales or mortgages of land, presence and prosperity of moneylenders, expenditures for consumer items in the village, open conflicts or fights between landlords and laborers, disputes over wages, emigration of laborers due to low wages, and so on. But there are hidden agendas too. Factory owners of high status and questionable reputation may want to prevent a large festival to avoid the payment of advances to their clients. Village elders who speak in favor of a big festival may do so in order to celebrate their own status. Devotees may want to perform firewalking to fulfill a vow. Others might propose a large festival because of the need to invite prospective in-laws for a new wedding alliance. Such issues cannot be brought into the public discussion, because arguments regarding the festival must address the village as a whole or refer to the deity. Hidden agendas—unlike hidden transcripts in the usage of James Scott (1990)—exist without reference to the question of dominance.

The atmospheres in the councils prove to be a decisive force. Therefore, results are hard to predict. I attended many village councils and discussed the chances of success for each faction with my friends beforehand. I can recall that in many cases factory owners, politicians, headmen, and other individuals with economic power or holding public office did not win the argument. In some cases it was a determined village youth or the angry peasants of a small hamlet who turned the decision in their favor. But I cannot remember any council meeting when a decision was taken against the dominant mood of the crowd. There were several instances when the powerful men—faced with unexpected opposition—postponed the debate, but verdicts are not decided against the feelings of the majority. Leaders of factions make sure to have sufficient support on the meeting ground. They also encourage speakers with rhetorical skills to support their cause. An important balance must thus be reached in the tone of the collective voice.

All men—the powerful explicitly included—should speak respectfully but still convincingly and firmly. Shouting is considered a violation of conduct. A walkout with a big faction seems to be the more appropriate way of registering strong disagreement. In short, council meetings require emotional control, group support, and effective public speech. Long before the Jedayasamy festival begins, council members have to take atmospheres of many kinds into account. The general economic and social atmosphere in the village, possible sentiments about hidden agendas, and the interactional atmosphere within the council itself all must be carefully assessed. To achieve their goals, leaders need good arguments and good atmospheres.

Processions and dance

The most visible and dynamic element in temple festivals among the Badagas (and beyond) is processions, usually accompanied by a group of musicians. In his book titled *Sacred and Profane Beauty*, Gerardus van der Leeuw argues that a procession is a "pure and universally preserved relic of the cultic dance" (1963, 39); indeed, the Badaga formation of the "line" moves occasionally into a "circle," and the slow walk of the men is transformed into a rhythmic dance. For van der Leeuw dance is the oldest art form, and through the dance experience a dancer experiences his or her

body and being-in-the world differently (ibid., 74). Van der Leeuw points to the same dialectic that I have discussed for atmosphere. Creating has an impact on the self. The dancers move according to the tune of the music and by so doing highlight the presence of the music and its rhythm. The dancers feel their bodies while they move, and the observer experiences music and dance as a complete phenomenon.

In the valleys of the Nilgiri plateau the sounds of the festival can be heard over long distances, and the procession is visible from afar when the men dressed in white walk through the green tea fields. Several days before the firewalking takes place, the procession visits all the hamlets of Jackanarai. At the village boundaries the devotees make a ritualized invitation to the in-laws. Each visit to a hamlet follows thoughtful consideration, because matters of status and prestige have to be considered. The size of the hamlet and its status has to be in balance with the attention it receives. I walked with the procession several times, but in recent years I used to wait in the villages or hamlets for the devotees to arrive. There is always a certain excitement. The village hosts observe the movement of the procession and estimate the time of arrival. They confirm the neatness of the village and that all are ready to welcome the dancers. In small groups, villagers discuss the recent history of the festival and recall the stops that the procession made in recent years. The duration of a break and the quality of the dance is considered, since a long stay and a beautiful dance is an expression of respect.

For the more general public, the procession and the dance performance are the first moments of an intense festival atmosphere. The days before the event were busy ones spent purchasing new clothes and special food for the festival, cleaning or whitewashing houses, and so on. Mattresses had been taken out to air in the open space where the sun could purify them; stainless steel utensils were washed and dried on the veranda. This effort created an atmosphere in its own right. Upon observation, I felt and remembered special festival occasions like Christmas or other major celebrations in Germany, but the Jedayasamy festival had its own specific profile. To receive the procession comes close to receiving God, and to welcome the dancing procession in an appropriate way requires a collective effort. All disputes in the village have to be settled before the festival starts, all village households should maintain a vegetarian diet, and all houses, verandas, and streets should be spotless. If the village community cooperates well, the reward will also go to the collective. Like at a football match, where a group of people follow particular rules and do their best to perform a particular role at a stadium, the villagers follow their own rules of purity, politeness, solidarity, and cooperation to transform the village into what Pierre Bourdieu (1997) calls a "field"; the field is not just the product of these rules but constitutes its own force, itself impacting on the social action and what follows.

The men in the procession are also excited about their reception in the village. Elders make sure that the pace is not too fast. Otherwise, the village may not have enough time to prepare their welcome. Before they enter the village, it is expected that a few young men will reach the procession as the first sign of welcome. The conundrum of formal status is then solved. The high status of a guest places him on one side, while a lower-status person walking toward the higher-status individual is mediated by a reception committee (Heidemann 2013, 57). The same process is

performed twice. First, young men leave the village to receive the procession when it approaches. Second, an elder in the village waits with a clay "spoon" and burning camphor on charcoal. A portion of the ashy essence is placed on the *pūjā* spoon of the *pūjārī*. By the final day, his clay spoon contains camphor from all of the hamlets visited.

The men in the procession are aware that they are making way for the deity to enter the village. They observe a number of rules concerning purity while walking from hamlet to hamlet and preparing for the firewalk. The men wear newly purchased clothes or those from the previous year's festival. Their turbans are tied in a particular style with a tail dangling down the back. At the end is a knot called the "seat" of God. Day by day they become purer by eating vegetarian food that has been specially cooked for them and by observing sexual abstinence. They are "calling God" and spend time in the community of firewalkers. In their right hand they hold a bamboo stick, freshly cut from a "clean" place in the forest, a place not accessible to men and therefore not polluted. In their left hand they hold a handkerchief of a uniform color. While dancing, each performer's cloth emphasizes the group's movement and visually pleases the observers. Musicians lead the procession, followed by five or seven elders, behind which are the firewalkers. The young men from the hosting village then lead the procession to the common ground. The line of the procession bends into a circle and the devotees dance. They turn on their own axis forward and backward and follow the movement in the circle. Regardless of age, sex, and status, all villagers may join the dance outside the circle, but usually a small group of young men outnumber the others.

The visit of the procession constitutes a special event and creates a particular mood in the village. From what I sensed and what I heard at that time and also in retrospect, the dominant feeling is overwhelming joy—the procession, as auspicious augury, signals the deity has arrived. But there is also a sense of release and relief, since all of the preparatory tasks had been completed on time and all pending work achieved. For some, especially those who feel responsible for the success of the event, there is also a sense of tension. Something might go wrong, signs of pollution might appear, a fight could break out, or rumors could spoil the perfectly planned and carefully created atmosphere. The elders pacify troublemakers, attempt to convince the procession to stay longer, or offer more tea and puffed rice to the devotees to encourage them to make one additional dance. Though the official agenda is decided in advance by the village council and is made public, some hosts will still try to induce the procession to make a detour to a village temple or to a hero-stone. The leader of the procession has to avoid setting a precedent for such additional visits and must keep to the official schedule. The mood of the crowd has to be managed and the ritual requirements observed. In short, the highly charged atmosphere does not simply appear but must be created and protected.

Much has changed over the last thirty years. New fashions are now popular, with young girls wearing North Indian style outfits called shalwar kameez. Many of the young participants are college students who invite their friends. Photographing the festival has also became more popular, and video recordings with smart phones that are later posted on social media are not uncommon. But the basic structures of the procession and its visits have remained constant. The talk about the event focuses

on various details: the number of devotees, the quality of the dance, the perfection of turbans, and the color that was chosen for the handkerchiefs that particular year. The dancing of individual performers is discussed, whether someone is too stiff or shows off. The line of dancers should be perfect and their appearance modest. Other comments are still often about the age of elderly persons who have participated in the firewalk for more than four decades. Unmarried girls continue to have a chance to stand quite close to the men as they dance to observe their movements and speculate about possible marriage partners in the future. However, there is no talk about the more general themes discussed in the councils. There is no talk about purity, unity, or appropriateness. By observing and commenting on the procession, the younger generation learns how to participate in this emotional landscape.

My own learning was a rather long process. During the early years of my fieldwork I busied myself documenting the festival calendar, noting the semantic fields of symbols and signs, conducting interviews, and mapping the procession's movements. That there has been a drastic change in my own emotional involvement can be illustrated by the following juxtaposition. In the 1980s one man had a dispute with the village community over the right to own a personal water tap. He claimed that he had sold the ground for a well to the village on the condition of having water in his house, while others had to collect water from a common tank. It proved to be a stable agreement for several years, but a drought caused long queues at the water tank. In spite of the water shortage the man with the tap continued to water his kitchen garden and caused anger among the villagers. Finally, the village elders cut off his water supply, so he threatened to kill a goat at the time of the festival in his own backyard, which would be a clear violation of the strict purity rules in effect during the sacred event. Without emotional engagement I analyzed the case in the context of conflicting legal frameworks or legal pluralism, since the state law does not prohibit the killing of an animal on one's own premises. The village, however, would not tolerate it.

A few years ago a similar threat arose, which induced me to act emotionally. I have to admit that I was enraged, because it would destroy the harmony and beauty of the festival, as I wished it to have. In that moment I thought that Jedayasamy might not come to the village as a result of the polluting activity. I thus felt invested in the outcome of the event, which made me think that such an intentionally polluting act would be an act of infamy, making me angry. Clearly my perception of the festival has changed from a distanced, analytic focus to an engaged, aesthetic appreciation. During the first few years I was *among* them, but later I was *with* them.

The creation of a charged atmosphere within play or performance requires what Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) call "ritual commitment." Participants in ritual arenas acquire bodily knowledge about the importance of any given scenario. They then have to agree on the rules of play, and they have to learn to engage emotionally within those rules. In addition, a consensus to communicate the emotional state—either verbally or through performance—is needed. Based on implicit rules, bodily performance, and emotional participation, a charged atmosphere can be created. The intensity of the atmosphere increases through the performance itself. There is a permanent interplay of performance and perception. *Acting* within and *feeling*

a distinct atmosphere happen as a singular process. The devotees receive *social* feedback from the audience in a manner not dissimilar to the way a surfboarder feels the *physical* reaction of a wave's gravity, torque, and force. The perfect performance has an impact on the perception of the self. In a dancer's moment of movement, there is no distinction between social norm and physical laws.

One of the rules that the firewalkers in the procession have to follow is the enforcement of absolute purity while the procession moves according to their dance steps. They should not smoke, drink, or urinate and should restrict their communication with other people while in the procession. There is a certain relaxation of these strictures, however, when the dancers take a coffee break or halt for the rice-based vegetarian meal every evening. The turban, with its knot at the end of the "tail," is considered to be the seat of God, so it must be removed and kept in a "safe place," one that is free from pollution. The men attach their turbans to their bamboo sticks and place them on a stone-framed platform, usually constructed around a holy tree. This place is used in daily life for village elders to sit and talk. For the festival, the stony space is cleaned with brooms, often whitewashed, occasionally garlanded, and purified by performing a number of *pūjā*s. Usually the head priest makes an additional *pūjā* before the men place their sticks and turbans on the platform. Without the turban the men feel freer: they can stretch their bodies; drink water, tea, or coffee; and walk in small groups away from the village ground to have more privacy for a talk or a smoke. The head priest and the village chief make sure the procession keeps up with the visitation schedule and call the men to join the procession with turban, stick, and handkerchief. The atmosphere in the village becomes more intense, and divinity is in the air when the procession sets into motion. The soundscape fills the village grounds as the firewalkers perform their last dance before departing.

What I have described—the visit of the procession to villages and hamlets—takes place repeatedly during the festival week. It is a kind of emotional rehearsal for the final day, when the visit of the deity is expected. Before I turn to the big event, it is necessary to introduce the atmosphere of a *pūjā*.

Pūjā

The word *pūjā* (worship) can refer to a short moment in everyday life or to a large event with thousands of participants around a major temple stretching over several days. "It is a ritual to honor powerful gods and goddesses, and often to express personal affection for them as well; it can also create *a unity between deity and worshiper that dissolves the differences between them*" (Fuller 1992, 56, my emphasis). On the cover of the introduction to popular Hinduism written by Christopher Fuller, who I quoted approvingly in the preceding paragraphs, we see an image of a woman in a sari doing a *pūjā*. She pours some sort of liquid on an artifact, which is not clearly visible, most likely a *liṅgam* (symbol of Shiva's fertile power); before her is a small tray with a camphor flame. At her left is a statue of the bull Nandi, which is associated with the deity Shiva, and on the floor to her right we can see a lemon and a small container. To understand that she is in the act of performing a *pūjā* we do not need to know

what exactly is around her, but we can understand from the context what the act is about. In India, millions of *pūjā*s are done every day. Components of the *pūjā* include an idol, flowers, camphor, incense sticks, a few sacred utterances (*mantra*s), and the movement of the devotees' hands.

All *pūjā*s are different, but they share observable family resemblances. What I just described in the preceding paragraph is a *pūjā*—a person worshipping a deity. At this moment, the world stands still—or at least moves at a different pace. If we try to analyze any given *pūjā*, we will quickly realize that each of the components is not constitutive. A *pūjā* can be done without an idol, flowers, camphor, or incense sticks, or without the movement of a hand or uttered words. But, I would argue, a *pūjā* is always embedded in a particular atmosphere. Without the atmosphere it would be a rehearsal or an imitation but not a real *pūjā*. A *pūjā* needs—perhaps obviously—an agent and, I would like to stress, a particular atmosphere. All other elements are dispensable.

When a Hindu performs a *pūjā*, communication with a god or goddess emerges. The act of the *pūjā* makes a difference to the devotee, to the deity, and to the space around them. The space is brought into harmony with the godly presence and affects the devotee. No matter how the *pūjā* is performed, the charged space is an essential aspect of the *pūjā*. A minor place of worship, a stone at the foot of a tree, or a small idol in a private home—all these seem easily overshadowed by everyday life. But when Hindus perform *pūjā*, it creates a special kind of atmosphere filled with the sacred quality that I have attempted to describe. For a short span of time the devotee and the idol are enriched with sacred ambience. In everyday life such *pūjā*s are not always highly charged and appear as almost profane practices that occur mostly in the domestic sphere. When a shopkeeper opens his business in the morning, he might interrupt a *pūjā* to receive a phone call. But strictly speaking, this is a violation of a religious norm. A common joke tells the story of a man returning home hungry, and he can smell the ready-cooked food, but he cannot start eating because his father is engaged in a never-ending *pūjā* in his household shrine.

To sum up, a particular atmosphere is the indispensible aspect of a *pūjā*. The space between the devotee and the idol is enriched with a communicative quality. The convergence of these elements has an impact on the actor and on the idol in the sense that something is conveyed. An objective third party not involved in the *pūjā* and not being transformed by it can observe this process. What the empirical observer can see is the *pūjā* as an act, but not the inner world of the person performing it. To identify the act as a *pūjā*, the observer has to sense the constitutive atmosphere. Without the altered sense of the space transformed by devotee and deity, the act could not be defined as a *pūjā*. My line of thinking here highlights the crucial role of atmosphere and the repercussions of the ritual act on the actor (or actors) conducting the performance.

Firewalking

On the last day of the festival the devotees rise at 2 am, have a cold-water bath at the local stream, then take a last coffee break before sunrise. Thereafter, they do not eat or drink until they have completed their firewalking in the afternoon. In the course

of the day they form a procession and dance in the hot sun. Before firewalking they go to a sacred place and hold a burning wick in their mouth. If the wick remains lit and if they feel no pain, they are pure and proceed with confidence. A few thousand people who have gathered at the Jedayasamy temple greet them when they return. The devotees circle around the temple until the deity Jedayasamy has arrived. His presence is indicated by flowers falling from the *liṅgam* in the temple and by the rustling of the leaves of a particular tree. After a few very specific rituals they all walk over the burning embers, while visitors emphatically express their support and happiness. In the early 1990s T. K. Mathan, my close friend and at that time my field assistant, was among the firewalkers. I asked him to describe his experience, and he made a handwritten report. I paraphrase and quote here from his report to show the emotional depth of the event for participants.

Mathan was proud to become a firewalker, since none of his family members had walked on fire after his father did so thirty-five years ago. His wife had spotted a few matted hairs on their daughter's head, a sign of the deity, and also dreamt about Jedayasamy, whose hair is also matted. With the consensus of his family, Mathan joined the group of firewalkers. His father donated 2,000 rupees to provide new clothes for him and for his family. At five minutes before the auspicious hour beginning the ritual performance, he left his home to meet the other firewalkers at exactly noon. His report stresses the various rules of conduct and the fulfillment of the same during the ritual performance. Contrary to daily life, observance of purity and pollution taboos are much more prominent. As my focus here is on the concept of atmosphere, I begin with a quote in which Mathan addresses the dialectics of performance and perception. He writes the following:

> Right from the first day [of the festival], the fear was in my mind about the fire, but when I joined the *kase karan* [*kāse kāran*, firewalkers], and when I saw everyone relaxed, I also could relax. (Mathan's report, p. B)

The most dramatic point in his account is the moment before Mathan entered the fire pit:

> The interesting part here is, when I stood in front of the fire and when my turn came, I bowed down in front of the fire pit. Till this moment I could watch everything around, and could hear every voice around me. But when I bowed down, and got up, I just looked at the temple statue, which was facing me, prayed for the last time and stepped on the fire. In this time, most surprisingly, my eyes were almost blind, my ears were deaf, and moments later I was dumb for seconds. I did not listen to a single voice around me.
>
> I was told that the fire pit is 24 feet long, and my feeling is that I did 20 feet without much consciousness. When I was at the last four feet, I could realize the damn hot of the fire, and my body automatically pushed me forward. After that I felt happy, that I did it successfully. (Mathan's report, p. B–C)

When I discussed this portion of his report with him, he added that his last sight of the statue of Jedaysamy appeared in black and white, with all colors missing. I could not confirm this extreme and graphic impact of the social environment on Mathan's

sensual perception with other firewalkers, because most of them stated that they had no clear memory. But to return to his experiential narrative, Mathan states that:

> only after finishing I regained my consciousness. Honestly speaking I did not hear a single voice and sound around me, though thousands of people were chanting and shouting. [Through] this only I really feel the power of the God. Before we all entered the fire, I forgot [to tell] one thing: we were particularly watching the tree close to the temple. Exactly by 3 o'clock, wind blew up and . . . the particular tree was shaking. I saw other trees, but there was no shake. I could very well make out the shake in that big tree, and prayed. This made me again courageous. (Mathan's report, p. C)

After writing the first draft of the present article, I attended the Jedayasamy festival again and spoke with a few of the firewalkers. Among them were some individuals who replied to my questions about their physical sensation in detail. I paraphrase their answers: "We are not used to walking barefoot, and it causes pain during the first few days." "I concentrated on my feet while walking down to the Jedayasamy temple and observed the different surface[s]. First there is a tarmac road, then steps made from rough cut granite, then gravel, followed by a grass field, which was wet and soft, very pleasant in the morning. Finally I reached the temple with a marble-tiled terrace." The firewalkers use the same path frequently when commuting between temple and village. It seems very likely that the approach of the sacred field is accompanied by numerous sensory perceptions, like the sound of birds, cooler air, the dominant green color of the tea fields, and so on. The sequence is just one of many sensations contributing to an embodied experience of the devotees' particular sacred space. Some things about the profound experience remain unsaid, but others can be discussed. A few of my respondents mentioned the unusual practice of wearing a turban. Elderly and experienced men fix the cloth rather tightly around the skull of the younger men, which appeared to me not a pleasant sensation at all. Asking explicitly about this process, one of the novices replied that, "The turban gives me a headache, . . . and . . . a lot of pride."

In sum, the firewalkers walk and dance barefoot, wear traditional dress including a turban, live on a restricted diet, lack sleep, and are dehydrated. Under these extremely harsh conditions, they walk on fire. They spend a week without privacy and live in close physical and emotional proximity to their fellow devotees. One man said to me that, "In those days, you feel that you are part of a system, a village community!" Most of my respondents agreed with Mathan's narrative, which suggests that beauty arises from the performance of social order in perfect symbolic forms. Absolute beauty creates an atmosphere of harmony and cooperation. The deity likes this and therefore will be good to the people.

To understand the joy and the beauty of the firewalk we need to consider one more aspect, which is the broader relational context. The idea of a relationship between a social unit and its connection to each individual is expressed in several ritualized occasions in the region. The social context that forges human relationships must be considered to be rather strong. If, for example, the village council fines a person any agnate may accept the punishment, bow down, approve the verdict, and ultimately pay the fine. Old Badagas tell stories about British times when they sent brothers or cousins off to jail in their place, and they considered this by no means

as inappropriate. Positive accomplishments—a victory in a political election or the attainment of a high administrative office—are taken as a village achievement. Individual accomplishments are thus collective accomplishments that reflect on the entire group. Such collective affiliation is not uncommon in my own German society, especially if I think of a victory after a football match, for instance. In the South Indian ritual context, however, I experienced the link between a (real) person and their (imagined) social rank to be especially strong. In light of the close association of person and village, the success of firewalking appears to merit the entire village. In Mathan's narrative he perceives himself as acting on behalf of his family and his hamlet. The enormous effect of the firewalk on the shared emotional state of the village community may be better understood looking at the close link between the individual and the collective group.

Symbolizing the invisible

I argued earlier that one of the dominant aspects in creating and perceiving ritual atmosphere is reduplication, a kind of mirroring of abstract categories. From a sociological point of view, the calendar for religious festivals in Jackanarai is different from most other Gowder villages. Gowder, the largest sub-group of Badagas, worship their village founder Hireodeya in the village and the female deity named Hette in her own temple, which is located in nearby Beragani. In the immediate Jackanari area, however, a great number of agnatic families reside, which would be excluded in the festival solely associated with Hireodeya. Jedayasamy, considered as an avatar of Shiva, once visited the village in the ancient past and is worshipped by agnates and affines. The most prominent feature of the festival is the path of the procession, because it appears—at least from a distance—to knit the hamlets together into one web according to genealogical criteria. The procession and the process of firewalking make no distinction between these two marriage groups.

It is only on the last day of the two events that a distinction between the village founders and their in-laws is marked. The first takes place in seclusion, when the first fire for the firewalk is lit in front of the temple, where long sticks are placed on the ground. When the sticks burn in the middle, agnates and affines take one end each and light the big logs in the fire pit, each on one side. Hours later, they celebrate the moment when the fire meets in the middle. The second event takes place just before the firewalk. Two pots filled with pure milk—taken from a cow at first lactation—are heated next to the temple. In a kind of competition, agnates and affines heat one pot each. The first pot whose milk boils over generates good luck for the entire region, and therefore for all, for both agnates *and* affines. This milk is used for *prasād*, a food to be shared with the deity, the remainders of which are eaten by all the devotees and visitors. This kind of symbolic representation of social categories is understood by the public and celebrated as an expression of the equal status of agnates and affines. In a similar way, the relationships between different status groups among the Badagas and their neighboring groups are expressed, especially the Alu Kurumba, who participate as festival musicians. To appreciate this kind of symbolic amplification, a detailed knowledge of the peculiarities of the local society is required.

My argument about the aesthetic perception of forms goes beyond the reduplication of social structure in ritual performance. I would like to argue that the charged atmosphere of a temple festival is the prominent, perhaps privileged space, where abstract categories are made visible. These abstract categories are hardly expressed in words but are manifest in the highly charged ritual atmosphere. The categories are expressed and received in an emotionally loaded moment full of expressive content. When I spoke to participants they told me that you have to "feel" it to gain an understanding. I would like to quote Mathan's report of one particular scene, which is less a reduplication of central values than a blueprint *for* them. The way in which the headman and priest relate to each other at the first opening of the temple appears to me as a moment of greatest clarity in an otherwise indifferent field. To explain this particular scene I need to refer to a concept developed and coined by Rodney Needham as "dual sovereignty" (Needham 1980).

Needham suggests that there are societies that make a clear distinction between status and power, and that accordingly, two respective hierarchies exist. So there is not just one "highest position" in society, but two. I have argued elsewhere that this is an answer to what Thomas Trautmann (1981, 285) called the central conundrum of Indian society (Heidemann 2010). Is the priestly brahman or the royal king at the apex of the social hierarchy? In Badaga society, the respective positions of the brahman and the king in broader Indian social structures are represented by the priest and the village headman. When I discussed their status within the local hierarchy, it did not lead to a satisfactory conclusion, for Mathan made a crucial observation and focused on a moment when dual sovereignty became visible. At that moment when he expressed it to me, a kind of phenomenological perfection emerged, since all major aspects of the social continuum were incorporated at the same time. According to him, the purity of the priest, the worldly power of the headman, the cooperation of priest and headman, the unity of the village, and an appropriate division of labor and responsibilities all converge. I quote Mathan's written report once again:

> 600 house pujari [i.e., the main *pūjārī*] lightened the *karpooram* at the bottom of the closed door [of Jedayasamy's temple], and the 600 house Gavvandikkay [i.e., the headman] took the key from his pocket, showed the key to the *karpooram*, prayed for a moment, and handed it over to the Wodeya Pujari. Later, Wodeya Pujari opened the door while all *kase karan* stood there chanting "oh oh ohm ohm, . . . holi holi holi." (Mathan's report, p. 4)

In this moment, the power and control of the temple by the headman, signified by the possession of the key, and the absolute purity of the high priest are expressed in the interaction of both (Heidemann 2010). The priest purifies the space; the headman purifies the key, then hands it to the high priest. The fact that Mathan documented this moment indicates that this very event warranted enough interest and attention to be included in his written report of a one-week festival.

The few seconds described in his report signify the transfer of the headman's worldly power to the control of the sacred space within the sanctum sanctorum. The highly charged atmosphere of the ritual performance clarified the respective fields of power and status, as highlighted by Needham. Mathan continues his report

by stating that in the next moment all firewalkers bowed down. The physical act of addressing the deity verbally and then getting down on one's knees, bending forward, and touching the floor with one's forehead is an active involvement in the creation of atmosphere. The production and reception of the charged space that I have been describing merge into one. The firewalkers sense the close proximity of their neighbors' shoulders when they bow down, the division of labor between *pūjārī* and headman is acknowledged, the commitment to walk on fire is expressed, and the deity is invited to participate. Compared with the process of walking on fire, the opening of the temple appears less complex and less charged. Still, the sensual perception appears as *one* totality and evades any attempt to distinguish the impact of each sensation on participants.

By the time the firewalking begins, a few thousand people will have gathered at the temple ground.[4] Without them, the ritual would, of course, be incomplete. To distinguish them from the firewalker devotees of Jedayasamy I shall refer to them as "visitors." They participate emotionally, not unlike spectators in a stadium during a football match. They do not feel the same anxiety as the firewalkers, and they do not feel the heat of the embers, but they watch and experience the travails of the devotees. The Indian concept of "seeing" implies more than visual perception but a transfer of matter, an engagement, or involvement (Eck 1998). Auspicious seeing is thus dialogical in that the gaze moves in both directions, from the deity to the devotee and vice versa. Young and middle-aged men near the fire pit show excitement and encourage the firewalking with loud verbal support. In contrast, the firewalkers remain calm, controlled, and do not make any emotional expressions or demonstrations.

Peter Berger (2016) has called this "negative effervescence," pointing out that the ideal north-Indian brahmanical version of death rituals avoids effervescent situations. This marks a clear contrast to low-caste death rituals, where emotional effects are made visible to others. This kind of effervescence appears to be a status marker and is apparently also foundational to ritual. Before the firewalking takes place a Torrea, a member of a Badaga sub-group, has to fall into a trance to enact this effervescence, but the group of firewalkers behave in a controlled fashion, reluctant to show their emotional state. The moment before they step into the fire, all the major figures who qualify for a role in this part of the electrified atmosphere form a long row. They represent absolute purity, for they combine agnates and affines, which means that they stand for the unity and solidarity of the entire village. The performers reduplicate the social order: the *pūjārī* and headman go first, followed by the large group of men, and finally the low-status Kurumba musicians. Each anxiously walks over the fire. The negative effervescence is a sign of a united village without conflicts, social cohesion, and trust in the village deity.

In the same article, Berger (2016) refers to Marshall Sahlins and his distinction of ritual as a process and ritual events. The first is usually controlled by the dominant sections of society and confirms social structure, while the second includes moments of potential change and transformation. I witnessed many incidents of the second type. About twenty-five years ago the Kurumba musicians refused to play music unless they were allowed to join the firewalk. To avoid tension, Badagas allowed them

to join the group of firewalking men. Today, they consider themselves as participants in the festival and not as merely providers of a particular service. In a more recent case, an expelled Badaga man ignored his banishment from rituals and participated in a funeral. This incident could not be reversed, and therefore his excommunication was lifted. In my view, it is because the ritual process confirms structure that ritual events carry such an enormous agency. In such a highly charged atmosphere acts of divergence count more than they do in daily life.

It is common for the "atmosphere," as I have been calling it, to impact upon the inner world of an individual. In continuation of everyday experiences, I have identified other special moments in the social processes that govern Badaga society. The actions that transform the social status of a person in ritual tend to create an appropriate atmosphere. This can be seen at weddings, funerals, court cases, or other events. But why does a priest or a judge require a specific atmosphere to declare a transformation into a new status? From the realm of pedagogics we know that emotional states influence the capacity to focus, comprehend, memorize, and learn (Rauh 2012). To make words more effective, for example, main actors modify the performative atmosphere. By listening to a priest or a judge, the audience joins in an unwritten contract. The main actor speaks, and by practicing silence they anticipate their agreement with what will be said. There are other ways to signal a consensus. The audience stands up, removes their headgear, or applauds. By doing so, they create an atmosphere of attentiveness and affirmation. An act of change without a corresponding atmosphere is hardly sustainable.

I would like to go one step further in my analysis. The management of atmosphere is a condition sine qua non for societal intention. Irrespective of whether an actor seeks social change or continuity, part of their strategy is—or at least affects—the atmosphere. In the same way as a mirror has the capacity to reflect light rays, or can show images reflected by it, I would argue, the atmosphere is a quasi-active force surrounding us that impacts humans and their social structures. The culturally constructed atmosphere is an amplifier of an ongoing process that has the potential to serve as witness to an event. If experiencers intersubjectively recall an atmosphere as being peaceful or tense, peace or tension is created in their recollections.

Atmospheres of truth

Rather than summarizing my argument, I prefer to conclude with a last speculation about the concept of atmosphere in the celebration of Jedayasamy. In my view, which I share with my friends and contemporaries in Jackanarai, the events occurring during the festival week reflect social facts and create an atmosphere of truth.[5] The annual procession periodically links the hamlets, which have been aligned together ever since the mythical past and reinforced by existing marriage ties. The elders who lead the procession hold an office, since they belong either to the upper or lower part of the surrounding villages. All of the devotees, however, belong to one of the hamlets belonging to the head village of Jackanrai and are either agnates or affines. The musicians share the food but eat in a separate place because they belong to the region but are considered to be "different." In the spatial order and in the division of

labor, the social structure is reflected and represented. By participating in the events, all actors signify their affirmation of the social order. They display, perform, feel, and see what reality is beyond any doubt. Jedayasamy is expected to appear, if all of the ritual rules are followed. Indeed, the unscathed firewalkers prove his presence. At that moment of enactment, we can speak of an aura around the temple compound, which is constituted by an atmosphere that is electrified, centered on the designated holy place, and stable. The devotees and visitors experience enormous relief as a result of the event. Music is played over loudspeakers to urge people of all ages to dance in front of the temple. This merging of interests results in the collapse of distance between devotee and deity. God is in the air that all the devotees and visitors breathe. Like in ritual activities in general, virtually all elements appear to be dispensable, except the presence of the actors and their charged space. In a modification of the quote by Böhme on pictures mentioned earlier, the ritual upon which I have focused "is in a certain sense what it itself represents, that is, the represented is present in and through" (Böhme 1993, 115). And so is the atmosphere that I have elucidated in this article.

Author

Frank Heidemann is Professor of Ethnology at Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich. His interests lie in visual anthropology, social aesthetics, the anthropology of the senses, postcolonial studies, political anthropology, and anthropological theory. Among his more recent books are *Ethnologie: Eine Einführung* (2011), *The Modern Anthropology of India* (2013), and *Manifestations of History* (2016). In addition to his ongoing work in southern India and in Sri Lanka, his current research is based in the Republic of Maldives and on the concept of "islandness."

Notes

1. I would like to thank Peter Berger, Richard Wolf, and Dick Janney for their comments. Earlier versions of this text were presented at universities in Gröningen, Zürich, and at Harvard.

2. The concept was brought into discussion by the art critique Lars Beng Larsen and by the filmmaker David MacDougall. They published independently of each other in 1999 and introduced two rather different concepts. Larsen referred to the relationship of art and viewer: his agenda was to re-view the role of the art-recipient as active participant in the artwork. This approach, like "relational aesthetics," investigates "artistic practices in reference to social relations that they initiate" (see Blouw n.d.). This approach was taken up in a blog by Benjamin Harris (2013), who argued for an understanding of "Body of Christ" according to an artistic approach.

3. In many moments the distinction between aura and atmosphere remains vague. An important temple, especially the sanctum sanctorum, possesses an aura, irrespective of human action.

4. I made a short video documentation of the firewalk in Jackanarai and uploaded it to YouTube on request of the villagers; see Heidemann (2015).

5. For the concept of truth that comes close to the emic view: "The origin of all reality is subjective, whatever excites and stimulates our interest is real. To call a thing real means that this thing stands in a certain relation to ourselves" (Schütz 1962, 207).

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