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Rivalry, Reliance, and Resemblance

Siblings as Metaphor for Hindu-Christian Relations in Kerala State

Abstract

In Kerala State, South India, approximately one quarter of the population is Christian, many of whom claim a religious heritage nearly two thousand years old. This article focuses on a tradition, prevalent in the highly Christianized Kottayam district in Kerala, in which local lore and festivals associate Hindu patron deities and Christian patron saints as siblings. The relationships of these interreligious sacred sibling pairs, described alternately as contrary and cooperative, provide an apt metaphor for the complex communal relations between their Christian and Hindu devotee communities. This relational ambivalence is challenged, however, by unambiguous religious rhetoric that argues for an irreparable disparity between Christianity and Hinduism, or else for the negation of the boundaries that distinguish them. As this genre of sacred sibling associations presently appears to be on the wane, I also explore the tensions inherent in ethnographic enthusiasm for, versus native dismissal of, such traditions.

Key words: Hindu-Christian relations—sacred—sibling folklore—Keralite
Christianity—institutional religion—local religion

ANAND PATWARDHAN'S recent film, *Father, Son and Holy War*, documents, among other things, north Indian communal violence at its worst. In one compelling scene, an annual temple festival procession in Ahmadabad makes its customary passage through a Muslim neighborhood. Hindu male devotees of Kṛṣṇa walk alongside their elaborate float shouting praises to their god along with what appear to be taunts directed at the surrounding neighborhood. While the narrator tells us that this annual procession is often a site of violence, angered Muslim onlookers throw rocks at the vociferous Kṛṣṇa devotees, while armed police, who later claim that they "have no other choice," fire bullets into the increasingly unruly crowd.

I open with an image of north Indian communal confrontation during a religious festival as a means for beginning my portrayal of a similar yet very different phenomenon taking place in Kerala, South India.¹ There also, religious events provide forums for celebrating devotees' ties with sacred figures and also for acting out underlying interreligious relations within a pluralistic setting. But the focus of this article will not be to revisit well-publicized communal conflicts, which continue to erupt in various regions in India. Rather, it will offer interpretations of and reflections upon interreligious harmony displayed in the festivals and folklore of India's southwest. I begin with the more commonly depicted image of Indian communal violence in order to more starkly frame this portrayal of communal harmony, virtually ignored by much of national and international media and big-time filmmakers.²

For the most part, the following article will offer reflections upon the relationship of siblings, the designation many Keralite Christian and Hindu devotees traditionally use to affiliate saints and deities with one another. I will argue that these familial ties present a useful means for describing, metaphorically, themes in communal relations between these two religious traditions.³ The qualities of rivalry and reliance endemic to sibling associations make them appropriate symbols not only for saint and deity relations of legend but also, more tangibly, for the flawed yet ultimately peaceful asso-

ciations between Hindu and Christian devotee communities. The potential ambiguities implied by the sibling motif are regularly challenged, however, in the totalizing claims of official religious rhetoric prescribed by some Hindu and Christian religious professionals. These interreligious prescriptions tend either to make the boundaries between the two traditions arbitrary or else to posit that they are irredeemably estranged or separate. I argue that the communal connections implied by local sacred sibling tales provide a more satisfactory depiction of the relational complexities between Kerala's Hindu and Christian communities, which have been "living under the same roof" for nearly two thousand years.

This article will also address a separate set of related issues that arise during the *telling* of these stories. Here, I refer to a performative message—in the form of prefaced disclaimers—that consistently emerges when a North American ethnographer, with tape recorder poised, is the audience. Unlike the messages of communal harmony conveyed through the text of the sibling tales, this performative message reflects inherited troubled relations from a colonial legacy.

COMMUNAL IDENTITY WITH THE SACRED

The idea that sibling associations between village saints and deities reflect a similar type of earthly relation between devotee communities finds support in the cross-culturally recognized notion that local sacred figures and communal identity are often inextricably bound. Using examples from different regions in India, Frederique MARGLIN describes villages' identification with certain goddesses as perceived in such a way that the eruption of factionalism within a village potentially causes a dangerous imbalance to the goddess's body. The body of the goddess is simultaneously represented by the earth within the bounds of the village as well as by the villagers themselves (1990, 126–27). Richard BRUBAKER describes a similar phenomenon and notes that, as a result of this kind of identification with the Tamil goddess Mariyamman, the efficacy of her village festivals are often dependent upon total community participation or the exclusion of outsiders, or both (1979, 130–31; see also MARGLIN 1990, 127).

In European Christian traditions, Caroline BRETTELL likewise describes festivals honoring saints as providing forums for groups to "define and reinforce community identity" (1990, 59). For village emigrants, festivals provide a means by which villagers can return home and reassert their association with a local patron saint and his or her devotees: "They time their summer vacation in conjunction with its celebration. The saint, in short, is a symbolic representation of their identity" (BRETTELL 1990, 60).⁴ In a setting similar to the one Brubaker describes, William CHRISTIAN notes

that Spanish religious officials and group expectations strictly enforce local participation in saints' processions as well as the correct observance of vowed days carried out in honor of the village saints. Furthermore, an imposition of fines and public humiliation are occasionally meted out to those guilty of non-participation (1981, 58–59).

Akin to the north Indian festival tensions described above, communal identification with a European patron saint during festival celebrations likewise creates a potential means for devotees to act out intercommunal conflicts.⁵ Timothy MITCHELL asserts that, given the strong bond between a community and its saint, it is “a small wonder, then, that a patronal festival can include real skirmishes between locals and outsiders as an unprogrammed side effect of the festivities” (1988, 36). Christian notes that Spanish regional shrines that attracted more than one village were often sites where altercations “broke out around boundary disputes, stray animals and common lands.” In an attempt to deflect these kinds of flare-ups, processions by different villages were often arranged on different days.⁶

RELIGIOUS HARMONY AND DISCORD IN KERALA

In contrast to the prevailing climate of interreligious cooperation in Kerala today, Susan Bayly describes a nineteenth-century breakdown in relations between Syrian Christians and Hindus for which she credits British missionary-colonizers. In short, Bayly argues that this collapse in communal relations was a result of English misunderstandings of shared customs traditionally carried out between Hindus and Christians. More specifically, the British misinterpreted the practice in which church and temple members of the village provided funding or materials for the celebration of the other community's religious festivals and/or the building of sacred structures. While this ecumenical patronage apparently played a part in establishing Hindu and Christian rank in society and reflected a healthy affirmation of the allegiance between the communities, the British interpreted it as outright extortion—solely on the part of the Hindu community. Identifying with and wishing to “protect” Christians from such “inappropriate” activities, colonial authorities harshly punished Hindu communities for their perceived deviance. The restrictions and penalties imposed upon Hindus—and the “aid” offered the Christian community—set into motion a series of events that reflected seriously disrupted relations between the two religious groups (BAYLY 1989, 281–89).

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, animosity between Hindus and Christians reached their height, articulated most visibly during festivals honoring patron saints and deities. According to BAYLY, confrontations erupted most commonly over the logistics of festival proces-

sions or the performance of religious music outside rival temples or churches (1989, 313). During the early twentieth century, a Syrian Christian described annual religious festival processions as providing opportunities for Hindu and Syrian celebrants to march past one another's shrines "howling, screaming and crying out obscene words" (BAYLY 1989, 294). One of the worst clashes occurred in 1891 when the Malabar Pūram festival and Easter coincided, precipitating fierce rioting throughout the region. According to BAYLY, where once these occasions were opportunities for "the sharing of rites and regalia... they now provided a focus for the expression of exclusive communal identities" (1989, 313).

Today, while Kerala's church and temple festivals continue to express distinct communal identities, they are most commonly identities that are not antagonistic toward nor even disconnected from communal "others."⁷ The contemporary performance of religious festivals almost always, to some degree, symbolizes relationships that have changed radically from the days of direct British influence. Most fundamentally, in contrast to Bayly's description of the earlier troubled communal relations, contemporary Christian and Hindu festivals are not "exclusive" events, in that a variety of communities from both traditions will most commonly be in attendance.

In stark contrast to Bayly's portrayal of communal mayhem unleashed at the Pūram festival nearly one hundred years ago are the traditions currently in vogue at Thrissur's Pūram festival.⁸ Prominent members of society, including a fair share of Christians and Muslims as well as Hindus, are chosen for the prestigious task of feeding the temples' elephants coconut buds. This is done as an offering to the particular temple deity, who rides on the animal's back, performed in front of a vast crowd of onlookers as the elephants make their way from one end of the procession route to the other. Rather than being an exception to the rule, this kind of interreligious support—of both temple and church festivals—is an acknowledgment of communal interdependence prevalent throughout Kerala society today.⁹

SACRED SIBLINGS AND THEIR FESTIVALS

Local sibling ties between patron saints and deities, articulations of contemporary interreligious cooperation, likewise emerge during festival events in Kerala.¹⁰ The festival tradition of rooster sacrifice at St. George's church in Puthapally (no longer in practice on the church grounds) is such an expression. In this village, where locals commonly claim a sibling tradition between the saint and the goddess Kālī who is patron of the nearby temple, devotees describe the sacrificial offering as being performed on behalf of sister Kālī, who enjoys the blood of fowl. The meat portion of the sacrifice is left, in turn, for her brother, St. George.¹¹ In Manarkad, locals tell stories that

relate a similar gastronomical expedience between the village temple goddess, Kaṇṇaki, and her designated sister, Mary, patron saint of the church down the road. Although there are no recent traces of fowl sacrifice at the Manarkad church, elderly villagers remember a time when they were an integral part of the church festival tradition. As in the exchange between St. George and Kālī, tradition has it that the goddess Kaṇṇaki negotiated with her sister for the blood to be fed to her bloodthirsty bodyguards or *bhūtagaṇgal* (singular, *bhūtagaṇam*), while the meat was left for Mary. At both Manarkad and Puthapally churches, proof of the presence of the bloodthirsty sister (or her entourage) was based upon reports that no blood was spilled during the festival sacrifice.

A more common earthly manifestation of sacred sibling ties during festival events takes place during processions honoring the saint or deity. Manarkad's Mary and Kaṇṇaki processions are one pair of examples, among many, that provide a striking contrast to the well-publicized animosity and danger of Indian festival processions, described above.

During Kaṇṇaki's December festival, when she rides out into the village on an elephant accompanied by her oracle (*veḷiṅṅappātu*) and ceremonial band, both Hindus and Christians pay their respects to the goddess by giving her offerings. Likewise, when Mary's *raza*, or procession, winds its way through Manarkad streets in September, those whose homes line the route, whether Hindu or Christian, greet the saint by decorating their entrances with tender coconut leaves and lighted oil lamps (*nilavilakku*) or candles.

A particularly significant sign of the Manarkad goddess's ecumenism occurred thirty-five years ago during her April Pattā mudayam festival. During this celebration people traditionally dress up as Garuḍa and perform a dance standing on a chariot pulled by a special rope called a *ṅāṭu*. If all goes according to plan, devotees position themselves so that they are able to pull the *ṅāṭu*, bringing the chariot in procession from the main gate to the temple. Yet during this particular festival, according to an elderly member of the Hindu community,

the chariot bearing the eleven dancers refused to budge from the main gate. Even an elephant was put to the task but to no avail. Then the oracle of the *devī* (*veḷiṅṅappātu*) went into a trance. Through the oracle, the *devī* asked for her Perumphayathu family, which is Christian. The members of the family were brought on to the scene and when they joined in to pull the *ṅāṭu*, it moved. Since then, at every Pattā mudayam festival, a member of this family touches the *ṅāṭu* before it [the procession] starts.

A senior member of the Perumphayathu family asserted that, although it was once specified that a family member touch the *čāṭu*, it is now acceptable for any Christian to touch the chariot before it can be pulled. In any case, he did not feel as though this was a particularly urgent matter, since “every Christian in this area will take part in the festival of the temple.” As devotees consider it a blessing to touch the chariot, he reasoned that there will invariably be Christians among the many who are struggling to and occasionally successful in touching the *čāṭu*.

SIBLING RIVALRY AND SACRED SPATS

In spite of innumerable examples of public festival practices reflecting themes of familial harmony and cooperation, story line details involving sacred siblings often provide a more realistic view of such relationships—that is, of their potential indelicacies or rivalries. In Manarkad, an anecdote told by an elderly Hindu gentleman offers an explanation for flaws in village temple and church ritual paraphernalia. The large crack in St. Mary’s church bell is attributed to the fact that its tolling was so annoying to Kaṇṇaki in her neighboring temple that she angrily damaged it. In retaliation, Mary put a crack in the rare right-spiraled conch (*samkhu*) that temple officials blow during her Hindu sister’s *pūjā*. In Piravam where locals consider the Three Magi, patrons of the village church, to be friends of Śiva (not siblings in this exception to the rule), a similar type of “neighborly quarrel” between them resulted in damaged property. As related by a Syrian Catholic middle-aged gentleman:

On certain days, flowers typically used by Hindus [*tuḷasi* and *četti*] were found in the church. This was considered to be an insult to the kings. In retaliation, the Magi threw frankincense into the Hindu temple. One day, the Magi found that oil offerings for the church (to light the lamps) were missing, so they kept watch at night to see who was stealing it. During their vigil they found out that Śiva was the culprit. The kings became angry and hit Śiva with their scepter. Thus one arm was severed and the other was broken in two.

A story involving St. Sebastian and his sister from the local temple in Thodapuzha more specifically suggests jealousy or rivalry between sacred figures. This story was narrated by a Syrian Catholic man, my neighbor’s brother, over a sumptuous meal of water buffalo and assorted curries prepared by his wife:

During the annual St. Sebastian festival, there is a procession from the

chapel to the church in which the statue of St. Sebastian is a key figure. It is said that the statue refused to move forward one year. The statue itself was supposed to have perspired with the effort. Suddenly, people in the procession heard a big sound. It seemed that invisible obstacles were thus removed and the procession was made clear and moved on. People from the temple at this time rushed to the spot of the procession and explained that the loud noise that was heard was the *devī* being thrown into the pool. The story is that the *devī*, as the sister of St. Sebastian, wanted him to be with her and not go to church. There was thus a tussle that St. Sebastian had won by pushing her into the pool.

A Puthapally story about siblings Kālī and St. George likewise reflects competition between siblings not only through the community's interpretation of experienced events, but also through the actions that devotees chose to take based on their understanding of the relationship between their sacred patrons. As proposed by the Syrian Orthodox middle-aged professor who told me the story, this community's course of action, which takes place during a smallpox epidemic, reflects the Hindu notion that when one god becomes angry or destructive, another is sent in to prevail over the calamity and set things right. As a former resident of the village of Puthapally, he referred to this story as being a part of his childhood memories:

As it was believed that the smallpox was brought on by Kālī's anger, the members of the community, both Hindu and Christian, decided that they should appeal to St. George for their release from the disease. They conducted a procession, complete with drumming, music, and prayers, to which they marched all along the village roads. That night, when the people were all in bed, it is said that the sound of horse hooves could be heard. The next morning, the disease had vanished. Word of this incident became well known, and so worship of St. George grew beyond the Orthodox Christian community, especially among Hindus.

INDEPENDENCE AND COOPERATION BETWEEN DEITY AND DEVOTEE

As intimated by these last few stories, the well-being of the community itself (in terms of its members' physical health and ability to perform rituals) may rely significantly upon positive interdynamics between sacred siblings. Rather than simply portraying saints or deities as tending only to their respective religious communities, local stories often associate the sibling duo's relationship with the well-being of all concerned—Christians and Hindu alike. These sibling stories, which portray the well-being of the larger

community as being dependent upon peaceful saint-deity relations, express most vividly the connection between the sacred and earthly realms. A Syrian Catholic man in his fifties provided an example of this genre of sacred sibling stories through a tale of Manarkad Mary and Kaṇṇaki engaged in yet another sisterly spat:

These two females are generally on good terms. One day, however, when there was a procession for one of the figures, the two did not look at each other. One of them, I think it was the *devī*, became offended because she was not acknowledged by the other. Following this, there was an epidemic of chicken pox. The temple oracle (*veliččappātu*) cast his divining shells (*kaṇṇaṭi*) and found out the reason, which was that the *devī* was offended by the other. Because the people were affected by the quarrel, the two sisters needed to come to a reconciliation and thus today they are friends again.

A Syrian Catholic priest outside Ernakulam relates a similar situation in which broken relations between sacred siblings—this time in Kannur—result in calamity. According to Fr. Anthony, a Hindu tradition enacted during St. Sebastian’s annual church procession involves the opening of the main temple doors so that his sister Kālī can greet her brother as he passes by her domain. Four to five years ago, village members of the R.S.S., a “fundamentalist” Hindu political party, decided that this local tradition of Hindu-Christian relations had gone far enough. As a tangible symbol of their position, they convinced temple officials to keep Kālī’s doors closed during St. Sebastian’s annual jaunt. Following that year’s procession, a number of misfortunes occurred in the Hindu community. As a result community members reasoned, with support from the *pujārī* (ritual specialist) at Kālī’s temple, that the goddess was angry for being kept from her customary viewing of her brother and was therefore seeking revenge by causing trouble. Convinced that interreligious exchange between sacred figures was more to their benefit than exclusivity, the temple resumed its yearly practice of opening its doors to the passing Christians and their saint.¹²

An example of mutual reliance between the human and divine realms that further demonstrates the well-being of sacred figures as depending upon human action, involves—once again—the Three Magi and Śīva (under friendlier circumstances). According to Piravam tradition, the four gentlemen made their acquaintance and built their friendship during their travels to Piravam from a distant place.¹³ Upon reaching the impressively wide and deep Meenachil River, they became distraught at the prospect of having to get to the other side. As luck would have it, a Nair gentleman

named Chalissery Panikkar soon came paddling by on his boat and kindly ferried the four men and their belongings to the other side. The Three Magi Church and Śiva's temple in Piravam commemorate Panikkar's generosity by annually offering his descendants gifts—a tradition that is still carried out today. Also, a Panikkar family member is required to light the church *nilaviḷakku* oil lamp before the Magi festival procession can begin.

RELIGIOUS EXCLUSIVITY AND ITS PROPONENTS

As mentioned in my introductory remarks, the totalizing perspectives of interreligious relations that challenge local conceptions of rivalry and reliance include one that argues for religious exclusivity. Providing an interesting forum from which to discuss this perspective (largely held by religious specialists) are the experiences of a young Hindu woman, Renuka,¹⁴ who acts as a medium for Sr. Alphonsa, a Keralite nun currently being considered for Vatican canonization. Renuka's prophetic abilities, transmitted by Sr. Alphonsa, began at a young age after she experienced a miraculous cure attributed to the healing power of this deceased nun. Her fame is such that large numbers of clients, Hindus, Christians, and Muslims alike, regularly come to her house for consultation. The ecumenical nature of Renuka's clientele attests to the fact that a good many people have little difficulty with the idea that a Christian "saint"¹⁵ is making use of a Hindu woman as a conduit for her communication. There are others, however, who are troubled by this interreligious combination. When I paid a visit to her family's home in Thrissur, Renuka told me that Hindu *sannyāsins* occasionally visit her home and try to convince her that she should not, as a fellow Hindu, pray to Christian saints. More commonly, however, she receives visits from local nuns who contend that she must convert to Christianity. The sisters at Alphonsa's convent in Bharananganam have also tried to convince Renuka to convert to Christianity and, furthermore, to become a nun like Sr. Alphonsa. Although she has no intention of doing so, Renuka does not consider such propositions insulting but rather an affirmation of her life and relationship with Sr. Alphonsa.

Renuka also recalled more drastic measures to set her straight taken by Catholic nuns and priests, which she described with a mixed sense of amusement and annoyance. She described one such occasion, occurring soon after her childhood cure, involving a skeptical and meddlesome local priest:

Every day my mother keeps a flower on the place where Alphonsa was found. One day, I told my mother that I too would like to keep a flower. Then two flowers were kept in that place. The next day we saw that the

one which was kept by me remained fresh while the other dried up. We went and informed some of the Sisters in the nearby convent. One of the priests from there came to our house. He was a bit suspicious. Without anyone noticing, he took one petal from the same flower and sneaked it to the back of the picture. Then he went away. On the next day, when he returned, he saw that the petal had dried up but the flower remained fresh.

Another example of the more drastic or invasive measures meant to set Renuka and her family straight was related by Renuka's mother. As she described it, some nuns from a nearby convent warned her and Renuka that if their family did not convert to Christianity they would be cursed. The elder woman subsequently panicked and seriously considered conversion. Responding to her mother's fears, Renuka prayed to Sr. Alphonsa and was told by the saint that there was no reason to convert to Christianity and, furthermore, that they should pray that the sins of these people be forgiven.¹⁶

Back in Bharananganam, I reported to my research collaborator, Sr. Josephina, that I had made a trip to visit Renuka. She said that she knew about the young woman but added that the church did not officially endorse her as a medium. This lack of ecclesial sanction reflects the fact that members of the hierarchy are uncertain as to whether Renuka's messages are truly transmitted from Sr. Alphonsa or from some other source not necessarily holy. As Sr. Josephina reasoned, "It's hard to know who is genuine and who is mentally unstable." But, always ready to keep an open mind, she did not want to rule out the possibility that the Hindu woman was communicating with Sr. Alphonsa in spite of ecclesial skepticism. Citing examples such as Joan of Arc and Galileo, Sr. Josephina spoke of individuals who presented great threats to the institution but later were accepted or even, in the case of Joan of Arc, declared a saint. In any case, Renuka seemed to Sr. Josephina to be "a sweet, pious girl, no doubt." Reflecting for a moment on the often-cited slogan for religious unity in Kerala, "God is One," Sr. Josephina summed up her ambiguous stance on the matter: "I know that God is One, I'm just not sure if He's at the temple or not."

"GOD IS ONE": ARGUMENTS FOR RELIGIOUS UNITY

The notion that "God is One," popularized in Kerala by the Hindu saint Sri Narayana Guru, is key to the rhetoric of religious unity that can at times blur distinctions between traditions. Although this view in many ways opposes that of religious exclusivity, it can reflect a similar lack of ambiguity and complexity in contrast with local traditions of rivalry and reliance. Although noble in its support of religious harmony, an extreme position that argues for

the unified “nature” of all religions tends—as do prescriptions for religious exclusivity—to essentialize religious categories. Both claims potentially rob communities of particular histories and identities as well as the individual and group agencies necessary for their production.¹⁷

Although espoused by some Christians, the blurring of religious distinction is primarily a Hindu prescription carried out in its most radical form by religious professionals. An astrologer in Kollam, whom a number of Christians and Muslims commonly visit for consultation, explained that he recommends devotion to saints for his Christian clients, yet does this only because it is their faith. In spite of the religious distinctions that he must make for his patrons, he does not see any difference between the saints and the deities—all are equally efficacious. After reflecting upon this ecumenical pantheon of equals, the astrologer flatly asserted, “I don’t see any divisions between religions, all are one.”

Although many lay Hindus—and some Christians—likewise negate religious boundaries, their comments to this effect are more often conveyed with a degree of reservation. Although some people may regard religious distinctions as arbitrary in theory, they admit to the ways in which they are, in practice, very real. In Renuka’s family *pūjā* room (a place to honor the family’s chosen deities), for example, her mother foregrounds the pictures and figures of Hindu gods and goddesses with the traditional Hindu oil lamp (*nilavilakku*). Conspicuously placed in front of Alphonsa’s picture, however, is a candle, something customarily associated with Christian devotion. This is done in spite of the understanding that this family shares (as does Alphonsa through her messages to Renuka) that “God is One.”

During a conversation with a young *pūjārī* and a lay gentleman friend of his in his sixties outside the Manarkad *devī* temple, I learned that the connection between Mary and Kaṅṅaki had to do with the sacred females’ shared Brahman family lineage. While the *pūjārī* officiating at the temple left the story at that (implying that the sisters are “one” not only in terms of a common religion but in caste and family heritage as well), his friend offered a different rendition of the *pūjārī*’s story. The layman bemoaned the fact that, in spite of the sisters’ unity, the separate religions as practiced by their adherents are a lived reality.

(Pūjārī) It’s a belief [that Mary and Kaṅṅaki are sisters] that is quite accepted traditionally by the local people. There were two Brahman family homes (*illanga!*¹⁸) called Ochimattathy Cherumutta *illanga!*—they’re cousins, both with the same names. They were sons of two sisters. These families each worshiped their own family’s sister, and it was understood that one of them was the St. Mary of the Manarkad Church

and the other the deity of the temple.

(Friend) Both families actually worshiped a single power but later it was separated into Hindu and Christian. At first, these families knew that both powers were one, but when people began to be connected to Christianity, there came a great rift between the two sisters—the great rift of religion. As time passed by, because of their religion, they were looked upon as two although they were actually one.

Although I found Hindus in Kerala to be more supportive than Christians of ideologies arguing for the existence of interreligious unity, my introduction to this position occurred while I was visiting a Orthodox Syrian cathedral in Kottayam. Because it was my first opportunity to see an Orthodox church from the inside, I was fortunate to be accompanied by a priest who graciously agreed to lead me on an extended tour. As we were finishing our rounds, I approached Fr. Varghese with a few questions about Kerala's tradition of Syrian Orthodoxy. As I had just recently arrived in Kerala, I was interested in knowing the ways in which Hinduism influenced his tradition but was uncertain whether this kind of a question would be an affront to a Christian priest. After I made several feeble attempts at delicately approaching the subject, Fr. Varghese finally understood my question and announced with great pride, "I am a Hindu!" After momentary confusion concerning who he actually was and in what religious building we really were, I gained my composure and continued our discussion. Fr. Varghese explained that the prevailing culture for everyone who resides in India, regardless of their religion, is the same, "We are all Hindus in India," he said.¹⁹ While he prays to a Christian god and someone else may follow a Hindu god or Muslim god, all are performing rites and practicing rituals that are essentially Hindu. This kind of thinking, argued Fr. Varghese, may be unpopular among Christians and Hindu extremists but it is absolutely necessary for the future harmony of the country: "We must all think of ourselves as one if our nation is going to survive."

LOCAL NARRATIVE AS HONEST PORTRAYAL

While religious or cultural oneness may be one answer to potential communal unrest, the notion that familial loyalty or communal reliance can compensate for inevitable differences—as portrayed by local sibling stories—appears to present a more widely acceptable solution. Allowing for the "individuality" of separate communities, sacred sibling tales suggest the ways in which communal histories are intertwined, thus portraying a more

realistic sense of communal interdependence. BAKHTIN's description of popular festival images as honest in contrast to the contrived prescriptions generated by "officialdom" likewise supports the notion that local traditions typically reflect a certain lived reality. Where official discourse often speaks of eternal and immutable truth, popular culture "makes a mockery of such arrogant claims" (1968, 212). This non-official expression becomes, according to BAKHTIN, "a basis for an authentic and deep realism" (1968, 211). From a Marxist perspective, Frederic Jameson likewise argues that narrative, regardless of what may seem to be private subject matter (or abstract as in the case of sacred sibling stories), is inextricably connected to political realities.

In JAMESON's first chapter of *The Political Unconscious*, he argues, however, that the correlation between political reality and narrative is not necessarily that of parallel meanings; instead, narratives are often "symbolic resolutions of real social and political contradictions" (1981, 80). He sees the task of interpreting narrative as a dreamed resolution to lived contradiction to be "particularly appropriate for folk genres—thus reaffirming their marginalized status. Affirming without seeing the narrative for its subversive strategies is useless, however" (1981, 86).

While in many cases Jameson's formula may hold true, the "subversive" element of Kerala's locally-produced sibling stories, as I have been arguing, is precisely the reverse of what Jameson describes. These tales do not represent the resolution of a lived contradiction but, rather, the honest complication of officialdom's ungrounded tendency toward one-dimensional "resolutions." This particular trend toward dreamed "resolutions" (reflecting perceived contradictions) suggests that communal relations in Kerala are not, in the cases I have provided, being contested at the local level as anticipated by Jameson (as they were during the time of British rule) but rather at the clerical or official religious level. Jameson's position that economic deprivation or political subordination inevitably lie at the root of societal contradiction—and its narrative resolution—thus needs to be questioned. While producers of the sacred sibling genre are likely to be economically or, at least, politically disadvantaged in comparison to religious officials, communal contradictions appear to be felt by the more privileged of the two groups. Nevertheless, I feel it is important to maintain Jameson's notion that the dreamed resolutions of narratives can act as diagnostic tools, aiding the recognition of societal contradictions or tensions—something to which I shall return shortly.²⁰

Following Jameson's appeal for the political relevance of narrative and Bakhtin's argument for the honesty of local traditions, it is crucial to make mention of one particular set of political realities voiced quite succinctly through the telling of sibling stories. Denying this performative layer its

“say” would mean an avoidance of “an especially rich focus for the relationship between oral literature and social life” (BAUMAN 1986, 2), or, as described by BAKHTIN, “the double-voiced and even double-languaged representation of another’s words” (1981, 341). Also—conveniently—it would allow me to evade the ever-present need to scrutinize my status as an outsider in an ethnographic setting.

POLITICS AND THE PERFORMANCE OF SACRED SIBLING TALES

The performative message to which I refer, repeatedly expressed as a prologue to tales of sacred siblings, is typified by the statement, “Of course, you know that no one actually *believes* these stories.” The meaning behind this performative prologue that attempts to discredit sibling stories is no doubt varied. One significantly political layer of meaning was spelled out to me by an Orthodox Syrian middle-aged gentleman who insisted he relate a story of his own before acquiescing to tell me the “silly stories” I wanted to hear. His story of choice involved another young woman from New York, a missionary, who comes to visit Kerala for a short while. Upon returning to New York she reports to her church authorities that the backward folk of Kerala are in need of her help. She describes traditional Malayali eating habits—in which people sit on the floor and scoop up food using bare hands and banana leaf “plates”—to convince them that these primitives indeed require domestication. As a result of her appeal, she is given the necessary funding to return. Aghast at the story, I assured Dr. Joseph that I was indeed appalled by this woman’s audacity and, furthermore, by her complete misunderstanding of cultural differences. He thus kindly proceeded with the stories I had requested.

Although I was able to “convince” Dr. Joseph that I was indeed not one of those imperialistically ignorant foreigners about whom he reads in the newspaper, I was not completely convinced. Had his perceived divide between us really been diminished through my assurances and, related to this (and even more unsettling), was I entirely unlike the other irrefutably demeaning woman from New York who knew what was “best” for Keralites?

The perceived divide between myself and potential storytellers is, I believe, brought into focus through Keralites’ disdain for sibling tales as articulated through their performance. Concerns about the stories’ lack of literal truth, which no doubt contribute to what appears to be their current decline, likely get magnified by my presence as an audience member. I suspect that there are some significant ways in which I represent “Western” modernist forces privileging rationalism and positivism, which the storytellers understand as having little time for poetic or mythic discourse. My

repeated reaction to such disdain was to leap to the defense of poetic narrative traditions as being worthwhile reflections of Kerala's uniquely peaceful pluralism. In part, this defense emerges from my postmodern scholarly efforts at decentralizing and deprivileging the same "literal truth" with which I am unwittingly associated. Through native insistence upon empiricism and my counter-insistence to the contrary, we seemed to be turning (or twisting) some of the ideological tables of the colonial project.²¹

In spite of the twisted ideological tables that our exchanges suggest, there are ways in which the problematic colonial epistemology that allows for the construction of easy distinctions (such as modernity/tradition, empiricism/aesthetics, and West/East—or East/West) has not been entirely dismantled and is shared by all concerned. Similar to the totalizing prescriptions discussed above, the frame of thought that emerges during our debates about literal truth is a part of the same framework that has traditionally essentialized communities on both sides of the colonial divide. And, as Frederic Jameson's theorizing suggests, it represents a "dreamed resolution" to lived contradictions. The contradiction to which these imagined, dichotomizing "resolutions" speak is the legacy of troubled relationships between cultural communities not yet resolved. As posited by Kamala VISWESWARAN, the fact that ethnographical misunderstandings occur and, as a result, epistemological shifts still require recommendation, "marks decolonization as an active ongoing process—incomplete and certainly not one to be memorialized as past historical moment" (1994, 113).

THE WANING OF A GENRE AND THE PERSEVERANCE OF A TRADITION

Amid the crossfire of cultural negotiation, the possibility that sacred sibling tales are indeed dying out is evidenced by the fact that Malayalis over sixty are most likely to know story-line details—and are least likely to disclaim them. In spite of this trend, the use of the sibling metaphor as a way to describe interreligious human relations seems to be alive and well. When on the topic, Keralites quite commonly and proudly declare, "We live like brothers and sisters." A Malayali Baptist gentleman named John offers a typical explanation for Kerala's state of peaceful pluralism during a train ride conversation:

We understand that although people have different beliefs, we eat the same food and have the same hopes and dreams. We live like brothers and sisters here. There is no reason to discriminate or hate people for their different beliefs. Education means that politicians cannot sway us like the people up north. We recognize that their efforts are about political power and not truth.

Also recognizing that communal relations are not perfect in Kerala, John notes that some political parties are “particularly appealing to the unemployed youth,” deriving success by promoting religious exclusivism.

The message that John and other Keralites deliver, echoing that of local sibling tales, hints that while the stories themselves appear to be on the wane, the meaning behind them remains. Kerala’s Hindu and Christian (and Muslim) communities are living in many ways like siblings—not perfectly but, for the most part, ultimately in peace. The forces that are causing traditional tales to fade therefore seem to have little to do with the communal reality that they reflect, and more to do with shifting perceptions, among other things. Amid the various shiftings, Keralites manage well enough to express communal rivalries and their ultimate reliance upon one another through ordinary events and conversation—in spite of the tendency for religious rhetoric to simplify and in spite of my (newly tempered) desire for poetry.

NOTES

1. This paper is based upon research conducted in Kottayam district, Kerala, from January to November 1994, made possible by the American Institute of Indian Studies Junior Research Fellowship. An earlier rendition was read at the American Academy of Religion Conference in Philadelphia, November, 1995. Many thanks to Ann Gold, Sue Wadley, and H. Daniel Smith for their moral and intellectual support and for their careful reading. Thank you also to Bill Preston, Krishna Krishnakumar, and B. Krishna Kumar for sharing their valuable reflections and editorial advice. This paper would not have been possible if it were not for the many storytellers in Kerala who kindly shared their anecdotes and candid opinions with me. I am especially appreciative of advice and assistance given to me by Mrs. Sumathy and General P. M. Menon, Dr. Alexander Raju, Rev. Abraham Vellamthadathil and Sr. Florence. Naturally, all oversights and shortcomings are my own.

2. Also ignored, especially by the international media, is the intercommunal cooperation that is carried out in the more volatile regions of north India (See KUMAR 1988). In *Father, Son and Holy War*, Patwardhan also tries to emphasize the ways in which the lower classes get especially hurt by communal violence and how they work together to rebuild their damaged existence. The seemingly abstract issues of religious dispute do not “belong” to these people, whose concerns revolve more around the challenges of daily life.

3. This paper deals only with sibling connections between Hindu and Christian sacred figures, although there do exist, to my knowledge, a number of Muslim-Hindu and Muslim-Christian associations as well.

4. During the larger festival occasions I attended in Kerala, I commonly met up with Malayalis who had emigrated to the U.S. They also timed their trips home to coincide with the village festival of the patron saint or deity.

5. My use of the term “communal” to describe European disputes between communities is a deliberate mixing of categories. In *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North*

India, Pandey discusses the fact that the term “communalism,” generically referring to associations between communities, is primarily reserved for references to aggressively antagonistic interreligious relations within the Indian context. Pandey argues that although European history has had its fair share of intercommunity and interfaith aggression, scholars and politicians do not utilize the term “communalism” and its associations with irrationality in this non-Indian context (PANDEY 1990, 7). Rather than deal with the problematic word “communalism” by deleting it, I question and extend its accepted meaning, by using it “out of context.”

6. For more on the subject of European festival tension see also CHRISTIAN 1981, 118; RIEGELIAUPT 1973; THOMAS 1971, 27, 28, 40.

7. Muslim support of Hindu and Christian festivals and religious structures (and vice versa) is certainly not unknown in Kerala, although commonly less overt than Hindu-Christian exchanges.

8. Known for its grand procession of elephants from various temples around Thrissur and the competition of colored umbrellas in the center of town, Thrissur Pūram is typically flooded with people from all over South India and figures prominently in tour-book photographs of Kerala.

9. This relational shift likewise supports the argument common in current postcolonial theorizing that imposed imperial structures (such as resentments generated by British misinterpretations) are often not as deeply entrenched as they appear (see BHABHA 1985 and SAID 1993). When referring to present-day relations between Christians and Hindus, Bayly likewise appears to overestimate the extent to which British rule has had a lasting effect on Kerala’s communal relations (BAYLY 1989, 463).

10. While disputes between Hindus and Christians have clearly eased since the early part of this century, troubled relations between Christian groups have not. For a discussion of the Jacobite and Orthodox schism in the Syrian church in Kottayam and a comparison between the perspectives of the laity and the Church hierarchy, see VISVANATHAN (1986).

11. Puthapally St. George church is one of the several Kottayam district churches that are a battleground for Jacobite and Syrian Orthodox claims for ownership. Because of their inability to come to a settlement, the government, since 1972, has had to step in as a neutral party and manage its finances. With the advent of government control, rooster sacrifice was banned on the church property. Today the ritual continues, but on the grounds of local residents’ homes.

12. As implied by sacred sibling stories, relations between Hindu and Christian communities are not always perfectly harmonious. Religiously motivated political groups in Kerala such as the R.S.S., the Muslim League, and the Congress Party occasionally become forces for interreligious division. Nonetheless, full-blown violence is currently a rarity—something for which many Keralites express great pride.

13. I was never told the exact “distant place” from which the Magi and Śiva travelled. Another tale of sacred traveling companions involves the sisters Kurumba Bhagavati in Kodungalur and Mary from nearby Chalakutty. As told to me by a middle-aged Hindu woman, the two began their journey in Mukambika, southern Karnataka, and eventually made their way to their present locations. Upon their arrival, the locals recognized their divinity and installed them in their respective places of worship.

14. This name, like many of the others used in this article, is a pseudonym.

15. I use the term “saint” reservedly here because Alphonsa is not, as of yet, officially canonized. Nevertheless, she is approached by her devotees as a figure equal in stature to a saint and is often referred to as such.

16. Providing a similar juxtaposition between local interreligious relations and official

reactions to this are the separate studies carried out by Harman and Hudson regarding sacred sibling narratives and festival practices in Tamil Nadu. Local tales in Madurai describe the relationship between two major temple gods, Viṣṇu and Śiva, as brothers-in-law. This relationship gets acted out, on the local level, during the month of Citra, when the two temples conduct their annual festivals. Viṣṇu and his festival entourage travel to where Śiva will be marrying his sister, Parvatī only to discover that his future brother-in-law has mistakenly given him the wrong date. Incensed at the insult, Viṣṇu does make the entire journey to Śiva and Parvatī's temple and after offering *darsan* to his devotees, returns home. What is understood by local devotees as an annual display of fraternal ambivalence is understood by temple officials, on the other hand, as separate festivals (and festival processions) carried out under the auspices of entirely separate celebrations (HARMAN 1989; HUDSON 1996, 1982, 1977).

17. In his book about the construction of communalism in North India, Pandey likewise describes the rhetorical essentialization of Indian culture by British colonizers and Indian nationalists. He notes that these two groups, although arguing for opposing causes, commonly supported the notion of an Indian cultural "essence" that precluded the complexities of history. Colonists described the Indian culture as essentially irrational and divided, as witnessed by communal discord. Nationalists, on the other hand, argued for the essential unity and rationality of Indian peoples that stood *in opposition* to the irrationality of communalism (PANDEY 1990).

18. *Illangal* is the Malayalam plural for the singular *illam*.

19. Life-cycle rituals and festival details shared by Christians and Hindus are many. There are indeed many ways in which the resemblances between the two traditions as they are practiced in Kerala are quite striking—although theological interpretations may differ.

20. Moreover, I do find useful Jameson's notion that economic and political issues are prime motivators for societal contradiction. Indeed, many of the arguments among the religious hierarchy in Kerala (including intrareligious squabbles) appear to be economically or politically motivated.

21. See Jean LANGFORD (1995) for a similar ethnographic dilemma during her study of Ayurveda in India.

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