

## **Red Rice for Bhagavati**

### ***Pongala* Ritual at Attukal Temple in Kerala, India**

By Dianne Jenett

(Presented at Awakening the Energy for Change: the Black Madonna and the Womb of God, a conference at the Pacific School of Religion, June 18, 2005.)

*Diane Jenett is a core faculty member and co-director of the Women's Spirituality Program at New College of California. She has a Ph.D. in Integral Studies with a concentration in Women's Spirituality and an M.A. in Transpersonal Psychology. Her research has been published in the U.S., Europe and India where she has presented her work on South Indian goddess culture, feminist research methods, education for social change, and women's spiritual experiences.*

#### **Early Morning**

I awake in the dark, to the din of music blaring from the street, yet able to still hear the splashing of water and the scratching of the brooms on the pavement as the women of our neighborhood prepare their thresholds for the coming of the Goddess Bhagavati. A woman or girl from each house is preparing an elaborate *kolam*, a ritual drawing inscribed on the pavement with white crushed rock or rice flour. They appear to me to be fantastically beautiful welcome mats for the Goddess.

We are living in a special neighborhood, a *gramam*, composed of rows of narrow two story townhouses built in the last century by the Maharaja of Travancore for the Brahmin ritual specialists. As elsewhere in India, the Brahmins are the only caste who are allowed to serve in the temples, though Kerala had so few Brahmins that the rulers had to import them from the neighboring state of Tamil Nadu. There is a Devi<sup>1</sup> temple at one end of the street, a Shiva temple at the other, and a temple to Ganesh, or Ganapathi as he is called in Kerala, in the dead center of the street so that cars and autorickshaws have to go around it. Temple elephants take their baths outside our door. Our street is filled with the sounds of karnatic<sup>2</sup> music and Sanskrit chanting from four in the morning, the best time for vocalizing we were told, which continued until late in the evening. The

---

<sup>1</sup> The terms *Devi* (Goddess), *Bhagavati* (powerful, supreme deity), *Bhadrakali* (auspicious Kali) and *Amma* (mother) are used interchangeably in Kerala to describe the same deity.

<sup>2</sup> Classical music of South India

music this morning is celebratory because the women on our street are going to cook *Pongala*, rice porridge, as an offering for the Goddess Bhagavati.<sup>3</sup>

This is my fifth trip to Kerala as I try to understand why this small, relatively poor state in southern India has made progressive political decisions. Socialist policies and funding in education, health care and social programs give the people of Kerala a security and many of the basic qualities of life comparable to Western standards. The Goddess Bhagavati is central to life in Kerala and today is the day of her largest festival. In every Hindu caste in Kerala she is an important deity, but, in the past, the women of the upper castes would have supplied lower caste women with the ingredients to perform the *Pongala* ritual and both families would have shared the cooked *Pongala* porridge as a blessing from the Goddess. Kerala has had the most complex and restrictive caste system of any state in India,<sup>4</sup> but paradoxically, has gone the farthest and fastest toward communal equity and justice (Franke 1992, 100). Women who, fifty years ago, could not have walked down the same street together, are going to sit side by side and cook *Pongala* porridge.

As a tourist in 1987, I observed the relative equality and free agency of women as contrasted with my impressions of women in other parts of India. Kerala has strong and living traditions of matrilineality, serpent groves and the goddess Bhadrakali. This combination, combined with Malayali (nomenclature for people from Kerala, from the language, Malayalam) tolerance for religious and social diversity,<sup>5</sup> prompted me to speculate on what cultural beliefs, unique to Kerala, may have contributed to these differences. Kerala, the source of the spices for thousands of years, has been washed by wave after wave of religious and social ideas carried by traders but has never been invaded or occupied so new ideas and religions were incorporated, layer after layer into the existing culture.

---

<sup>3</sup> This description, based on fieldnotes of research conducted in Kerala in 1997, should not be taken as a complete ethnographic account of *Pongala*. A more complete study and analysis of the ritual is the subject of my 1999 dissertation *Red Rice for Bhagavati/Cooking for Kannaki: An Ethnographic/Organic Inquiry of the Pongala Ritual at Attukal Temple, Kerala, South India*. California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco. I would like to express my gratitude to Hema, Kamala, Shreemadi, Shakunthala, Asha, Leela, and all the other women who graciously extended their friendship and assistance. Limited space does not allow me to do justice to their contributions.

<sup>4</sup> Swami Vivekananda called Kerala "a madhouse of caste." In addition to untouchability between castes there was the concept of unseeability requiring persons of lower castes to call out their presence or vacate the road so that higher caste persons could avoid seeing them.

<sup>5</sup> Our tour guide was a Hindu man who had married a Moslem woman. He was working to put her through medical school. Kerala is twenty one percent Christian, twenty one percent Moslem and fifty-eight percent Hindu (Gulati 1996).

In 1993, I returned to Kerala, participating in an Earthwatch research project whose purpose was to improve our understanding of the processes that affect the quality of life in Kerala. I lived for five weeks with an upper caste Nayar matrilineal family in a south Kerala village. From at least the eighth century A.D. a substantial proportion of the population of Kerala, including some Moslems, followed matrilineal descent and lived in joint families where children were raised by a woman and her natal kin (Aiyappan 1982:204). In this system, known as *marumakkathayam*, no one left their birth homes and a man's primary responsibility was to his sister's children, not his own. The system broke up for economic and political reasons in the 1930s, but Shakanthula and her six sisters grew up living in the same house and have built separate houses on the old *tharavad* property, as the joint family house and matrilineage were called.<sup>6</sup>

There were several positive consequences for the status of women and children in this system. The mother was the most significant parent in every respect and women were indispensable for the continuation of the matrilineage, which was understood to be an indivisible combination of the people, land, and ancestors. There was no pre-puberty marriage and the marriage ritual was simple with no transfer of wealth or power as in dowry. Since women did not leave their homes, they and their children had no loss of power or status. Legitimacy, which was the main concern in the rest of India, was relatively unimportant. Females had high visibility, indeed were indispensable. The trauma of widowhood was avoided (Gulati 1996). A female, from the moment of her birth, was "perceived as the (potential) purveyor of prosperity, fertility, and good fortune. The female is an auspicious category." (de Tourill, 17)

Although joint families and *marumakkathayam* have been disassembled, effects of the older system can still be seen in Shakanthala's family. Shakanthala's daughter, Gigi, married at twenty-two, later than women in other parts of India, and returned home to her mother when she was five months pregnant with her first child. When I told her that this would be unusual in the United States, she was very concerned: "Who will give the girl and baby the massages?" In their ayurvedic system, birth is an event, which holds great possibility for healing and also for poor health. They believe that with proper care, any existing condition can be cured. Before birth and for forty-one days following, the women of the family provide the mother and baby special massages and diet. Wealth as well as healing and natal care continues in the matrilineal line. Under the

---

<sup>6</sup> Estimates made as recently as fifty years ago were that up to fifty percent of the Kerala population lived in matrilineal joint family systems known as *tharavads*.

current rules of division of property, males and females should receive an equal share, but in Shakunthala's family the women receive more property than the men and always also the natal house. In the patrilineal Brahmin system a widow is inauspicious and generally is not included in auspicious functions. Shakunthala's husband died shortly after I returned to the U.S. and, although she will not remarry, she still attends every function, wears all of her gold jewelry, and is still the center of the family for her sons, daughter, and grandchildren.

### Who and Where is the Goddess?

I had heard that each *tharavad* had a Bhadrakali Goddess, a fierce, bloodthirsty Goddess of death I had been told. Women in the West were beginning to write about Kali, using her and her iconography to put them in touch with death and renewal, their anger, the "Shadow." I kept looking for her, wondering where she was. The women did go together down to the tiny Vishnu temple in the morning and to the Shiva temple in the evening but where was this Goddess that I was so interested to find? The women didn't do anything that I could see. Where was their spiritual practice and connection to the Goddess? I came away from that first trip disappointed, certain that I had missed something.

This year, five years and six visits later, I learned from Shakanthula that the formal ritual practices for Bhadrakali are very exacting, and with the breakup of the *tharavad* no one is willing to chance that they will not be done properly.<sup>7</sup> The "power" of the Bhadrakali of the family was transferred to the local Devi temple to be taken care of by the Brahmin priests and the family has special privileges and obligations in her rituals there. "We have always believed in Devi and have had a relationship with her but she has been a family deity and it was not the practice for people to go to the temple. Devi had always been here in the family and our lives have been centered round Devi worship."

"Who is Bhadrakali I asked," expecting to hear about a fierce goddess. Shakanthula's oldest sister replied, "Not a fierce goddess, but a benign mother who cares for her children. Though she has her fiercer sides, we are not afraid. We take her to be a mother. When you go to the temples in the neighborhood you will find that the

---

<sup>7</sup> A similar transfer process for similar reasons is taking place with the ancestral *nagas* (serpents) which permits the sacred groves to be cut down.

goddesses are very fierce. The Goddess reflects our own views and our own feeling. If you go and you are very frightened that you might be punished, she will be very benign; sometimes she might appear very fierce, but really it is just the fear within our mind and thoughts within us because Devi transcends these. It is common faith in Kerala that you could deceive anyone but you could not deceive the Goddess.”

I have developed a relationship with the Bhagavati during the years that I have been coming here. I now recognize her as a mirror, a stone, a red pot, and the field of rice. I have learned to watch for the auguries, her signs and recognize the “buzzing” in my ears and heat and shaking in my body which lets me know when she is powerfully present in my life. I told the women in Shakanthula’s family that shortly after I left them I came down with chickenpox, at forty-eight, an unexpected event. “Chicken pox and small pox are both the anger and punishment and curse of Devi and the blessing of Devi.” “So would it be a blessing or a curse?” I asked. “Both because ultimately it comes from the Goddess; even a curse is a blessing. It could be either. It could have been a blessing; it is an augury of prosperity. And then did you have prosperity, were you happy?” I remembered my financial situation and the perfect and unexpected job offer. “Yes, I got a job that I wanted, it was prosperity.” “Must be Devi’s blessing. This is a very common belief.”

To further my understanding of Bhagavati and women’s relationship to her I decided to study the woman’s ritual known as *Pongala*. At the beginning of this century the majority of women had a pre-puberty ritual, a menarche ritual and menstrual seclusion. Recent scholarship in this area suggests that during these rituals the young girls became the Goddess and that many of the performance rituals done by male ritual performers for Bhagavati are recreations of menstrual rituals (Caldwell 1996; de Turreil 1996; Grahn 1993). In contrast to those rituals, which are dependent on close communities of women and flexible time, and are now rarely performed<sup>8</sup> the *Pongala* ritual at the Attukal temple has grown from a few women cooking in a field across from a small shrine, to a huge gathering of hundreds of thousands of women at a powerful and prosperous temple. Although *Pongala* seems to be an old tradition in temples in

---

<sup>8</sup> Judy Grahn and I were able to speak with three young women who had recently had menarche rituals and this material was included in her 1999 dissertation *Are Goddesses Metaformic Constructs? An Application of Metaformic Theory to Goddess Celebrations and Rituals in Kerala, India*, California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco.

southern Kerala, the incredible growth of the temple and *Pongala* for *Attukal Amma* (mother) is a contemporary phenomenon

### ***Pongala Day-***

In the past I had come to Kerala alone, but this time I invited three other women from the United States to join me. Elinor Gadon, an Indologist and my academic advisor, is well versed and well traveled in India, Judy Grahn, an internationally known poet and cultural theorist, has never traveled out of the United States, and Jean Weisinger, a photographer of people on several continents, has traveled extensively, but never to India.

In ritual preparation for this day we pour buckets of water over our heads. We have learned from our Hindu neighbors that a “bath,” a requirement before visiting the temple, always includes washing our hair. We are wearing the traditional dress of Kerala, the *mundu*, which consist of two lengths of white homespun cotton bordered in simple colors. I chose green borders with thin gold threads for Elinor and me, and Judy chose plain blood red. For this day mundus must be new or freshly washed.

Judy, who is staying on our block to do *Pongala* with our neighbors, waves goodbye to us as we start walking toward the Attukal temple in the dark. Women and girl children are setting up the bricks and pots, even though it is still dark. This will be the first time that Valiachalal Street had ever done *Pongala*, as we learned a few weeks previously when one of the women in the neighborhood had asked us to contribute toward the street decorations and sound system. We wondered if our interest in it influenced these Tamil Brahmins to break with tradition and do a ritual, which had formerly been done only by the non-Brahmins. We had watched the young boys making decorations from the leaves of the coconut palms the day before. They twisted and tied the fronds so they looked like birds. As we walk down our street the illumination from the full moon reflects the numinous white kolams and the streamers of birds. Malayalam film music and popular songs about *Pongala* blare from the speakers filling every inch of atmosphere with the excitement of the women’s festival.

We are walking the seven kilometers to the temple, and the streets and courtyards between us and Attukal temple are already filled with women. The excitement and anticipation of this day has been building in the whole city of Trivandrum for the past ten days as women from all over south India have been pouring into the city carrying their pots, rice, and firewood. They have been claiming their places for their cooking fire,

the most auspicious places being closest to the Attukal Bhagavati temple. By this morning some women have been sleeping in the streets for days. The state and city officials press every agency into service to support the hundreds of thousands of women who participate. Special trains and buses are provided and arrive packed with women. City water trucks supply the water for the women's pots. The city supplies bricks. Each pot requires three bricks for its fire and when one year there weren't enough bricks for the women they calmly began dismantling the public walls and traffic circles.

We westerners are carrying our cameras and taping equipment, drinking water and large black umbrellas to protect us from the sun while the Indian women carry firewood, rice, and pots in large bags or on their heads. The basic ingredients for the *Pongala* porridge are water, rice, and jaggery - a dark, unrefined sugar from sugar cane. Almost any woman can afford to do it, but depending on their means, they might add bananas, nuts, coconut and spices such as cardamom.

We pass the Ganapati temple; a portrait of the elephant headed god inviting us in to break a coconut to "remove" obstacles. Judy and I did this when we first arrived. Today, I turn off the wide Mahatmas Gandhi Boulevard onto the narrower residential streets leading to the temple. The vendors line the winding streets selling items reflecting the lives of women in Kerala. Stalls sell brightly colored bangles, children's toys, stainless steel pots and pressure cookers, the red dots worn on women's foreheads, *bindis*, spices, posters of gods and goddesses, silver devotional items, camphor, flowers, jasmine headdresses for young daughters and bouquets of flowers to be carried by young boys. We pass teashops, vegetable stands. The streets have been specially decorated and we pass under large arches covered with advertisements for computers and televisions. Each neighborhood that we pass through has its own decorations and sound system, some so unbearably loud we have to put our hands over our ears. Many streets have Devi shrines. In one shrine she is red, pale, formal, sitting on a cushion of luscious pink and red flowers. In another she is shiny black, piercing, and has a *mala*, a necklace of limes to cool her.

Women are filling every available space with the bricks for their fire. The houses in Kerala often have walled courtyards. On *Pongala* day, not only every street, but also every courtyard is filled with women. It is auspicious to live near the temple since *Pongala* brings prosperity. In return, each family, even Christians and Moslems, invites women into their courtyard to cook *Pongala*. It is a blessing to be able to receive the women in the name of the Goddess Bhagavati and good luck for the occupants of the

house. Every courtesy is extended to the women-both those who have been invited and those who just show up.

Dawn is breaking and the throng becomes more dense as we westerners walk toward Attukal. The narrower streets are completely filled with women and young girls all moving in the direction of the temple. Their hair is shiny and wet from their bath and from the coconut oil they use. In many parts of India women are careful to contain their hair in braids or buns. Loose hair is a sign of women's *shakti* (power) or, in some instances, madness. Many Malayali women wear their hair loose to their waist except for a tiny knot gathering the ends – only the barest containment of women's *shakti*. As they move smoothly together down the street they are holding hands, touching and stroking each other's arms.

Some women carry girls of three or four who have faces painted with intricate designs and wear conical caps made of jasmine flowers. Jean and I hold Elinor's hands so we won't get separated. I feel the physical pressure of the women crowding around me; the press of their soft bodies feels like waves lapping against me. I see a huge fire truck heading up the narrow street; it's squeezing women into the walls and window of the stores. Each woman is pushing against each other, trying not to fall, crush their children, or drop a precious bundle. I'm protected somewhat by the cushion of my camera bags and I'm taller than Indian women are, but Elinor is not and I try to bring her closer to share my space. The rough coconut husk firewood carried by woman in front of me is scraping my face and I try to protect my eyes. . I lose Elinor's hand as she and Jean disappear into the crowd. Women are screaming and falling into the ditches on the edges to keep from being crushed. Although I had been in similar crowds before in India, I am frightened, afraid that there will be a panic and that I might be hurt. . I begin to feel the proper strategy. I keep my center and relax into the crowd. The fire truck continues slowly down the street, the men in charge seemingly unconcerned. Somehow the women merge, meld together, support each other, give way to each other and survive. As we pass the fire truck the crowd thins and I see Elinor and Jean across the street, all of us shaken and upset. We are soaked with sweat from the combination of the press of the crowd and the ninety-degree tropical heat. It is only seven in the morning!

I am hungry and thirsty having not eaten since the afternoon before. Some of the women have been fasting for several weeks in preparation for *Pongala*. For some women fasting means abstaining from eating meat and having sex. Most women have



vowed not to eat or drink until *Pongala* is over. We have decided to drink water but we aren't going to eat until after *Pongala*.

As we get closer to the temple we see fewer and fewer men. The only men who are allowed near the temple on *Pongala* day are priests or temple authorities, policemen and fireman or men who have special passes-difficult to get from the temple authorities-such a reporters and volunteers to help with crowd control. Women tell me that it's important for them to do the cooking together and without the presence of men. They have one day when they aren't responsible for their husbands and families and they can be devoid of any distractions and have a concentrated mind.

As we round the corner and start down the street leading directly toward the temple, we can hear the loud booms and feel the concussions of the firecrackers. All Devi temples in Kerala have firecrackers as part of her ritual worship and women pay the priests to light them. As my friend, Asha told me, "Devi likes the sound." Bhagavati also likes blood, red silk, red flowers. She has fangs and small pox pustules, rides on a ghost, wears skulls and snakes and is loved as a benevolent mother. She is a pot, a *val*, a curved sword, and a mirror. She lives in the temple, the rice fields, in the sacred groves. In various rituals and spontaneously, women and men go into trance and communicate her wishes, allowing her to continually change.

We are meeting my friend, Hema and her daughter, Kamala who have generously offered to help us offer *Pongala*. Nearly the last to arrive in the compound attached to the temple administration building located across from the Attukal temple, how can we possibly weave our way through fifty women with their pots and paraphernalia to get to our space? "Please be careful, mind your clothes in the fire," the President of the temple urges us. Each year women accidentally set themselves or their neighbors on fire. Cotton mundus and saris are worn not only because they are traditional but also because they are safer than the new polyester variety. Each woman has about two feet between her bricks and fire and the next woman's so we are very careful picking our way through to get to our spot.

The sun is already very hot and we are in an elevated, exposed position with no shade. Many of the women have begun putting the cloths on their head to shield them from the sun. Mothers with their young daughters stream to visit the temple and old

women line the road beneath us. I have begun to recognize the community<sup>9</sup> the women are from by their dress. Those wearing plaid cotton turquoise or pink wrapped skirts and a white towel like upper cloth look like the women who break rocks beside the road and are probably from the communities which were formerly considered untouchable. Sitting beside them are women wearing mundus with gold borders, the traditional dress of women from the higher status Nayar caste. I can't tell which of the women might be from the Christian or Moslem communities but I know that some of them do participate. The mothers of these women would not have drunk from the same well, eaten in the same room, or even walked down the street at the same time, yet here they are sitting side by side together. The women are all equal before Devi, they say.<sup>10</sup>

The firewood used is from the part of the coconut tree that is the cover for the coconut flowers; most of the women have brought the wood from home. Even the most modest home made of mud usually has a coconut tree that provides cooking fuel, oil, material for mats, baskets and decorations, as well as the coconuts which are an important part of their cooking. Women wash the rice carefully, some taking as long as ten minutes for this part of the ritual. There is an expression of joy and satisfaction on the face of a young woman stuffing sticky sweet rice into wrappers of pungent green leaves for steaming, a preparation for curing headaches.

By 9:30 a.m. the pots are filled and the ingredients are readied. The heat is oppressive and there is a tension in the air. We are all waiting for the fire to come from the temple. At the smaller *Pongalas*, held in the fields to ensure rain, and in smaller temples, the priests light the first fire and then each woman lights her fire from the one next to hers. Women sit next to each other in a continuous linkage to the temple. If I can't be next to the Goddess then I can be next to a woman who is nearer than I<sup>11</sup>. Now that hundreds of thousand are participating, loudspeakers in the streets tell the women that the fire has been lit at the temple so they know when to light their own.

Kamala and some of the other women tell me the stories associated with the Devi at Attukal. The women call her *Attukal Amma*, or mother, but in none of the stories I

---

<sup>9</sup> The language describing caste and religion in Kerala has been de-emphasized in favor of the more neutral term "community".

<sup>10</sup> *Bhirani*, the Kali festival at largest and most famous Bhagavati temple in Kodungallur, has always been caste free and many of the performance rituals and dances for Bhagavati stress equality and justice. There are many factors which have contributed to the breakdown of the caste system. For an analysis of caste relationships, community ritual practices, and the rise of communism in northern Kerala see *Caste and Communism in Malabar*.

<sup>11</sup> Personal communication from Dr. Ayyappan Paniker, a noted poet and scholar.

heard is she actually a mother. In one story she is a young girl: Many years ago an old man from the matrilineal Nayar caste saw a young girl on the other side of the river. She called to him and asked him to carry her across. The man did as she asked and then went to get food for her. When he returned she had disappeared. That night he had a dream and the Devi appeared to him. She said she wanted a permanent place built for her where he would find three lines marked on the ground. The old man awoke the next morning, found the lines and built a small shrine that has grown into the Attukal temple. People who live near the temple often report seeing the Devi bathing in the nearby pond in the form of a young child.

Another story is that an old woman appeared in the field near the temple. She was very tired, she was not one of the locals, she was just resting. Poor women, who had little themselves, were so moved with human kindness that they shared whatever they had with her. They had some rice, some coconut and molasses which they put together in a mud pot, cooked, and gave to her to eat. She revealed herself as Devi and blessed them for their kindness. She said, "Whatever else might be offered to me, my most favorite offering will be *Pongala*. Because it is women who were kind to me, they are the only ones who can make it." Each year there are many stories told of old women dressed in red, who appear offering sweets, and then suddenly disappear.

A Nayar woman who works as a servant told me, "Some days she looks like a small child and sometimes she will be in the angry mood with an angry face. Sometimes she will look like an old woman. On *Aishwarya Puja* day<sup>12</sup> she will be very beautiful and charming. Sometimes the priest knows in which form she would like to be, and he will make her up in that form."<sup>13</sup>

*Attukal Amma* is also understood to be *Bhadrakali*, "auspicious Kali." Her iconography in this form is the color black or blue and she is often shown with her tongue sticking out, wearing skulls around her neck. Elaborated in many versions, the basic story is that a demon called Darikan, after undergoing arduous penance, asked Brahma to grant him the boon of invincibility. When Brahma asked Darikan if he also desired immunity from women, it was contemptuously rejected. Darikan proceeded to go on a rampage of destruction so horrible that the whole world and all gods petitioned Shiva to save the Universe. Helpless himself, he used his energy to call forth from his

---

<sup>12</sup> Full moon ritual done by women for marriage and family.

third eye a Goddess, Bhadrakali. Armed with weapons from all the gods, she battled the demon and finally killed him by cutting off his head. During the pre-monsoon hot season, performance rituals reenacting some part of this story are held in most Devi temples in Kerala.<sup>14</sup>

I hear the clanging of cymbals accompanying the long oral poem, the *tullal*, being sung by three old men who are sitting in a hut which resembles a menstrual hut I have seen in the tribal areas. This is the story of the Devi told during *Pongala* at the Attukal Bhagavati temple. -, It is from the most ancient South Indian epic, *Cilappatikaram*. It is the story of Kannaki, a woman who was wronged, both by her husband and by her king, After ripping off her breast in her grief and rage, and setting the city of Madurai aflame, Kannaki rampaged across the south of India until she died at Kodungallur, now the site of the most famous of the Kerala Devi temples. Devotees believe Kannaki to be an incarnation of Kali and Attukal the place where she rested for the night on her way to Kodungallur. At the point in the story where Kannaki rips off her breast, the priest lights the first fire in the temple.

I stand in the sun, waiting with the hundreds of thousand of other women for the moment to light my fire. The air is filled with the sounds of the women ululating<sup>15</sup>, bells are ringing, the sound of firecrackers and drums is deafening, as the fire comes down the line from the temple, passed from woman to woman. I reach over with the coconut fronds I'm holding and put them in the flames of the fire held by the woman next to me. After bending over and igniting by own cooking fire, I turn to Elinor so she can light her fire from mine. Immediately the air is filled with the smoke and heat of hundreds of thousands of coconut fires. Smoke, how do I describe the smoke? I've never experienced anything like it. It's burning hot, white, thick smoke. I try to breath through the upper cloth of my *mundu*. This seems to help some and I see that other women are also breathing through their clothes. I try to cover my eyes because I'm blinded by tears, but I have to watch the *Pongala* pot and I'm afraid that if I can't see I will get my mundu too close and set myself on fire. Somehow I am breathing and stirring and surviving this.

---

<sup>13</sup> The Brahmin tantrist at Attukal Temple said Devi is always a young girl and that he does not change her appearance to make her appear old, but several other women agreed with the informant.

<sup>14</sup> For a complete description of two of the most important performance rituals, *theyyam* and *mudiyettam* (see Freeman 1991; and Caldwell 1995).

<sup>15</sup> A trilling sound, *kurava* in Malayalam, is believed to remove all negative elements and restore auspiciousness (de Turreil, 1995, 36)

Women tell me that they feel exhilarated later and that our temperatures go up so high that it kills the smallpox and chickenpox. The wind shifts and I can breath again.

Hema hands me the rice and, using my right hand, I carefully put three handfuls of rice in the pot, one at a time. The rest of the rice is packaged in an old newspaper and I have to be very careful not to set the paper on fire as I add the rest of the rice. Our rice, because it is from the Brahmin community is white. The traditional rice in Kerala is reddish and when those pots boil the foam is pinkish red. <sup>16</sup>

I watch my fire carefully, Kamala helping me by adding just the right amount of fuel so that the rice and water comes to a complete boil. I add a few things from home. Women in California have asked me to give their requests to the Devi and I place the paper with their wishes in my fire. Creamy white foam is slowly rising up, expanding, filling the pot, now barely being contained by the lip. I want a *Pongala*, an overspilling of the foam down the side of the pot because then I know that the Devi has accepted my offering. We are all crying from the smoke, tears streaming down our faces. The wind is blowing everyone's smoke toward us and there are times when I believe I might suffocate. Finally my pot boils over and I feel the tension release in my body.

While I was trying to breath and stir my pot television cameras were on me, newspaper photographers were taking pictures and now the journalists want to talk to me. "Why did you come here to *Pongala*?" "I have been dreading this because the reasons are so complex and important to me. "I came for two reasons; my research is in women's spirituality. I had been here and had seen this before but this year I wanted to participate. I also have a personal relationship with Attukal Bhagavati.."

The journalist continues, "The way it is generally perceived here is that in the West you don't value your family. Given that background, does *Pongala* seem relevant? Because here too, we are changing."

I answer, trying to be truthful and trying to make a bridge. "Yes, we do care about our families and what is happening to them. Some women in the US are re-examining their own spiritual traditions for inspiration, but some of us are looking to older religions, religions that have the concept of a deity as a mother. We don't have that concept in the West; we don't have the concept of the Divine Feminine. Many women in the West are trying to find rituals and ways to help us to reconstruct and revision our families and our society."

This is the heart of the matter. I want to say “You still massage your babies and pregnant mothers and we have forgotten that need. You still go to the snake groves to ask for children and but are content if you only have two and both are girls. Christians, Moslems and Hindus from all communities come together to do *Pongala* for the Goddess, united in their relationship with the Goddess and their wishes for healthy and happy families. When I have shown films of *Pongala* to women in the West they are inspired.” I want a perfect vision-something simple. Instead, I have found contradictions, oppositions, and paradox. Still I can see the fundamental ideas of justice, honesty, egalitarianism and communal peace reflected in these womens’ relationship to Bhagavati.

“Because here, too, we are changing,” the words of the reporter repeat in my mind. I’m profoundly disturbed by the changes because they remind me of what I believe we have lost in the West and the consequences of that loss. As Hema says, “We are trying to change like you at the same time you are trying to find out about us.” Global communication and the new economics of the multinational global culture are bringing enormous changes. This generation of women is well educated and working outside the home while also trying to keep up the rituals that have been at the center of their family and community lives. The growing popularity of *Pongala* is perhaps a creative response, replacing the women only space lost because of the impossibility of keeping menstrual and menarche rituals in the modern world.

The reporters leave, the fires die down, we cover our finished pots with banana leaves. Some women have been tending more than one pot, perhaps for a friend who was sick or for someone who had her menstrual period and could not come. Women often meet in the same courtyards year after year and only know each other through this ritual. I am told that Devi is somewhere in the crowd because wants to cook with us. Each year hundreds of people report seeing Her, often as an old woman dressed in red. Sometimes she gives out sweets, but when people turn again she has disappeared. She could be any woman.

The women ask for something and make a vow that if it is granted they promise to do *Pongala*. If you give my son a job I will do *Pongala*. In my southern Christian tradition I was told “Get on your knees and pray, ask Him for help, beg for forgiveness.”

---

<sup>16</sup> The indigenous rice in Kerala is red and has the appearance of being splattered with a red substance, perhaps blood. Judy Grahn’s metaformic theory and ideas about *cosmetikos* would predict that either rice with the properties of red or the absence of red would be used.

The relationship of women with Bhagavati is more relational and reciprocal. If you do this for me, then I will do this for you. There is a clear understanding that if the vow to the Goddess is not fulfilled there may be terrible consequences. Women also understand that if they “feed” her by offering Pongala she can give more blessings to the community.

As part of my research, I begin asking women what they have asked Bhagavati for. Many respond, “I asked for the health and well being of my family.” As I am told this over and over again, I am suddenly aware that I am discounting what these women are telling me. I am waiting for something “bigger,” more dramatic, more “important.” I take some of the basics, like food and water, for granted and I have often dismissed “women’s concerns” as trivial. But what could be more important?

The vegetable seller asks that her family never goes hungry. Asha asks for a job. Shreemadi asks that her granddaughter do well on her school tests. Tara asks for a good husband. These women stand in the blazing heat of these fires “simply” to express their shared desire for sustenance, good education for their children, good health, jobs and prosperity for their family, good and harmonious relationships and a chance to be together and one with the Goddess – a desire I realize I fervently share. For assistance in a serious illness or financial crisis- the act to be performed is more difficult, requiring fifty-one or a hundred and one or even a thousand and one pots of *Pongala*. Fulfilling this vow often requires the help of family and friends.

I remember what Shakunthula’s sister told me when I asked if Bhadrakali was an exacting goddess. “We have a fear that if we do something wrong that we will be punished. If I cheated someone then it would be wrong. When you go to the *Pongala* you try to share everything there. There is nothing that belongs to you exclusively. So you don’t try to exclusively appropriate something that belongs you and not share it with another person. If you did, then you would be immediately given a sign of it before you reach home. “What kind of sign? I asked. “Some small disaster that you wouldn’t forget. People don’t cheat. They don’t steal. If they would take something, then double that would be taken away. The women stay there without quarrelling until they reach home. “

The women wait together for the blessing of the Goddess. Late in the afternoon the priests come out of the temple carrying pails filled with rosewater. They wear white cotton *dhotis*, which look like skirts and are like the skirts of the *mundu* but tied differently and are bare chested except for the *malis*, garlands of flowers around their necks. Using the flower of the aracanut tree dipped in the rosewater, the priests sprinkle

our pots. Immediately we gather our belongings and begin the return trip to our homes with the *Pongala* to share with our family and neighbors.

The men begin to come back. When the helicopters don't arrive to shower the departing women with flowers the men take bucket of petals, and, standing on top of the walls, they do it themselves. I am astonished. This is why I come here. What is it about Bhadrakali that gives me hope? A mere glimpse of possibilities - the slight blow of a flower petal to knock me closer to the center.



## REFERENCES

- Caldwell, Sarah Lee. 1996. *Oh Terrifying Mother: The Mudi yettu Ritual Drama of Kerala, South India*, Department of Anthropology, University of California at Berkeley, Berkeley, California.
- deTourel, Savithri. 1996. *Nayars in a South Indian Matrix: A study based on female-centered ritual*, Department of Religion, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada.
- Franke, R., and Barbara Chasin. 1994. *Kerala: Development through Radical Reform*. New Delhi: Promilla & Co., Publishers.
- Freeman, J. 1991. *Purity and Violence: Sacred Power in the Theyyam Worship of Malabar*, Department of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
- Gough, Kathleen, and David Schneider. 1964. *Matrilineal Kinship*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Grahn, Judy. 1993. *Blood, Bread and Roses: How Menstruation Created the World*. Boston: Beacon.
- Gulati, Leela, and Ramalingam. 1996. *Kerala's Women: A Profile*.
- Jeffrey, Robin. 1993. *Politics, Women and Well Being: How Kerala Became a "Model"*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Kinsley, David. 1986. *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- McKibben, Bill. 1996. The Enigma of Kerala. *Utne Reader*, Mar-April 1996, 103-112.
- Menon, D. 1994. *Caste, nationalism and communism in south India*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.
- Neff, Deborah L. 1995. *Fertility and Power in Kerala: Serpent Ritual*, Department of Anthropology, University of Wisconsin, Madison.
- Parthasarathy, R. 1993. *The Tale of an Anklet*. New York: Columbia University Press.