Kali/Mariamma Worship in Guyana: A Brief Overview

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Between 1838 and 1917 almost 240,000 men and women from India crossed oceans and reached British Guiana. As elsewhere in the Caribbean, Indians were recruited as indentured labourers to work mainly on sugar plantations, in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery. The great majority of the immigrants hailed from North India (especially from what is now Bihar and Uttar Pradesh), having sailed through the port of Calcutta (Kolkata), while far less people, originally from Tamil and Telugu-speaking districts, sailed from Madras (Chennai). As expected, diversity characterized the immigrants. In terms of religion, Hindus comprised more than 80% of them, while 16% were Muslims, and around 1% Christians (Look Lai 1993). Of course, it would be a mistake to suppose that all Hindus practised the 'same' Hinduism, a religious tradition that, by definition, is heterogenous.

A detailed history about the development of Hinduism in Guyana still waits to be written (but see Jayawardena 1968; McNeal, Mahabir, and Younger 2014; Kloß 2016a). Suffice it is to say that during indentured, central institutions from India were transformed. In plantations, a heterogeneous group of persons had to live together, in close contact – something already experienced in depots and inside the ships that crossed the Kala Pani. As a result, the caste system collapsed. Throughout the years, the creolization of Indians and their cultural practices (Cf. Jayawardena 1963) took place; in parallel, East Indians themselves promoted efforts of revitalization of their religious traditions.

It is in this context that Sanatan Dharmaraised, becoming the dominant Hindu organization in British Guiana in the twentieth century. Considered as an orthodox, Brahminic, and North Indian Hindu tradition, its emergence was influenced by missionaries from India, and it was a response to the challenges posed by reformists movements as Arya Samaj, and to the stigmatization of planters and of Christians. To legitimize itself in a society marked by Anglo-European values (see Williams 1991), this Hindu sect condemned practices morally suspicious, as animal sacrifice and spiritual possession, attaching them especially to the Madrasis, the people of South Indian descent. This explains, in part, why the worship of the goddess Kali (Kali Mai Puja) is also known as Madras religion in Guyana. Although contrasts between North and South Indians already existed in India, in the Caribbean plantations the diversity of the subcontinent was reduced, as Khan (2004) rightly posed, to a few contrastive categories. Certainly, it would be simplistic to reduce Kali Mai Puja to its South Indian origins (Kloß 2016a; McNeal 2011), since in the Caribbean “practices from varied localities and communities in India were submerged and reformulated in relation to one another” (McNeal, Mahabir, Younger 2014: 178). But it is important to have in mind that the association between Madrasis and Kali worship is, in some measure, the result of a process of differentiation among Hindus themselves – since the indentured period, the dark-skinned Madrasis are stereotyped as superstitious and backward, and many Sanatanis consider Kali worship devilish and as a distortion of Hinduism.
In parallel, this association derivates also from a process of cross-identification of Hindu practices. The legendary pujari (priest) Jamsie Naidoo stated in an interview (Younger 2010:64) that the main deity of Kali worship is the South Indian goddess Mariamma (see below), but for the sake of communicating with North Indians Madrasis resorted to the name of the goddess Kali to refer to their religious practices. From the perspective of my interlocutors, during indentureship – also referred as bound time – Indians as a whole, and Madrasis in particular, faced the prejudice and the repression of planters and Christians, something that prevented the continuity of religious practices. According to many narratives, during indentureship many children felt sick. The Old people prayed to the Mother Goddess, and she manifested herself (possessed a person) to deliver a message: on her way from India to British Guiana, she was forgotten, and to remind her devotees that her puja must be continued, she made the children sick. Since then, many temples in honour of Mariamma were built. In the last decades, other temples were founded by Guyanese that migrated in places as New York, Toronto and Trinidad & Tobago (see Kloß 2016b for the transnational dimensions of ‘Guyanese Hinduism’). Among my interlocutors, Mariamma, also called Mother, is associated both with sickness and with cure. As many priests and devotees say, Madras temples privilege the aspect of cure. In other words, the focus on healing is the major reason for the prominence of Mariamma in this religious tradition. At a weekly basis, usually on Sundays, Kali members and Guyanese from different ethnic and religious background seek relief and comfort from the effects of diseases and sickness, and from health and domestic problems in temples located across the Atlantic coastal region, especially in the region of Berbice. Under the supervision of priests, people do devotion to several deities, some of them defined as North Indians, others as South Indians. During the service, offers (pujas) of coconuts, fruits, vegetables, sweets, incenses, mantras, and, in some cases, cigarettes and liquor, are disposed in the altars, under the feet of the murtis (sculptured form of deities). Depending on the case, animal sacrifices are performed. The culminating point of the rituals is the calling up, when some deities are invoked and manifest themselves in religious experts, the marlos, whose bodies become, temporally, sites of divine agency, vehicles of cure and of transmission of oracular messages. To perform healing treatments, Mariamma and other deities, especially Khal Bhairo and Kateri, use, among other things, a branch of leaves of the sacred neem tree (azadirachta indica). The deities, as it is said, take the form of neem to heal people.

I inform readers that I have not spelt the names of Hindu deities with phonetic and orthographical consistence. I raise no objection to any other forms of spelling. In Guyana there is no absolute concordance among Hindus regarding the correct spelling of these names.

Currently, few Madrasis have fluency in South Indian languages, but some mantras in Tamil are widely known among devotees.
Despite the fine ethnographical descriptions available (Bassier 1977; Kloß 2016b; Singh; 1978; Stephanides & Singh, 2000), Kali worship, or Madras religion, still is poorly known, and highly stigmatized. As a final word, I would like to suggest not only that there is much more research to do, but that it is necessary to be more attentive to local concepts, as the concept of form (see Eck 1998). As I learn from my interlocutors in Blairmont Kali temple, Mariamma and Kali are the same and simultaneously different forms of one Supreme Goddess, which manifests itself in a multiplicity of forms to look after their children. In this way, if it is necessary to have in mind the historical transformations of Hindu practices in the Caribbean, and in Guyana in particular, the concept of form points precisely to the inherently transformative aspect of deities as Mariamma. The association between Kali and Mariamma is not an oddity, but consistent with the principle that oneness and multiplicity are inextricably related, something that can generate continuous transformations of religious practices.