

Kali/Mariamamma Worship in Guyana: A Brief Overview¹

*Dr. Marcelo Moura Mello
Anthropologist & Lecturer,
Universidade Federal da Bahia, Brazil*

Between 1838 and 1917 almost 240,000 men and women from India crossed oceans and reached British Guiana.² 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*.³ 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 Sanatanists consider Kali worship devilish and as a distortion of Hinduism.



Pujarie Takechand Mangal (Bayo) praising the Mother, in front of the murti of Mariamma. Blairmont Kali Temple, June 2018. Photo by the author

In parallel, this association derives also from a process of cross-identification of Hindu practices. The legendary pujarie (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),⁴ 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 boundtime – 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’).



The altar of the Big temple, which houses the murtis (from left to right) of Saraswati, Lakshmi, Mariamma, and Durga. Blairmont Kali Temple, June 2018. Photo by the author



Two devotees and members of Blairmont Kali temple in front of the murti of the god of the sacrifice, and guardian of Mariamma, Khal Bhairo (June 2018 – photo by the author)

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 invoked⁵ 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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Currently, few Madrasis have fluency in South Indian languages, but some mantras in Tamil are widely known among devotees.



Devotee manifesting the goddess Ganga during the service (Blairmont Kali temple – June 2018, photo by the author)

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.



Young devotee picking flowers to make a maala (garland of flowers). Blairmont Kali Temple, June 2018. Photo by the author.

1. References

2. Bassier, Dennis. 1977. Kali Mai worship in Guyana: an overview. Georgetown: University of Guyana.
3. Eck, Diana. 1998 [3rd ed.]. Darsan. Seeing the divine image in India. New York: Columbia University Press.
4. Jayawardena, Chandra. 1963. Conflict and solidarity in a Guianese plantation. London: The Athlone Press.
5. _____. 1968. "Religious Belief and Social Change: Aspects of the development of Hinduism in British Guiana". *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 8(2): 211-240.
6. Khan, Aisha. 2004. Callaloo nation. Metaphors of race and religious identity among South Asians in Trinidad. Durham: Duke University Press.
7. Kloß, Sinah. 2016a. "Manifesting Kali's power: Guyanese Hinduism and the revitalization of the 'Madras' tradition." *Journal of Eastern Caribbean Studies* 41(1): 83-110.
8. _____. 2016b. Fabric of Indianness. The exchange and consumption of clothing in transnational Guyanese Hindu Communities. New York: Palgrave McMillan.
9. Look Lai, Walter. 1993. Indentured labour, Caribbean sugar. Chinese and Indian migrants to the British West Indies, 1838-1918. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
10. McNeal, Keith. 2011. Trance and Modernity in the Southern Caribbean: African and Hindu Popular Religions in Trinidad and Tobago, Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
11. McNeal, Keith; Mahabir, Kumar; Younger, Paul. 2014. "Hindu healing traditions in the Southern Caribbean: history and praxis". In *Caribbean healing traditions. Implications for health and mental health*, edited by P. Sutherland, R. Moodley, and B. Chevannes, p. 176-187. New York: Routledge.
12. Mello, Marcelo Moura. 2014. *Devoções manifestas. Religião, pureza e cura em um templo hindu da deusa Kali (Berbice, Guiana)*. PhD Dissertation in Social Anthropology. Rio de Janeiro: Museu Nacional, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro.
13. Singh, Karna. 1978. Kali Mai Puja. A Study of a Guyanese East Indian folk cult in its sociocultural context. Georgetown: Department of Caribbean Studies (University of Guyana).
14. Stephanides, Stephanos and Singh, Karna. 2000. *Translating Kali's feast. The goddess in Indo-Caribbean ritual and fiction*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
15. Younger, Paul. 2010. *New Homelands: Hindu Communities in Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, South Africa Fiji and East Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
16. Williams, Brackette. 1991. *Stains on my name, war in my veins. Guyana and the politics of cultural struggle*. Durham: Duke University Press.