The Policing of Tradition: Colonialism and Anthropology in Southern India

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COLONIAL SUBJECTS AND INDIAN TRADITIONS

In late October 1891, the *Madras Mail*[1] brought dramatic attention to the fact that "the barbarous and cruel custom of hookswinging to propitiate the Goddess of Rain, which has been obsolete for some time, has been revived at Sholavandan near Madura." The newspaper describes this event with scandalized disapproval. "The manner in which this horrible custom is carried out consists in passing iron hooks through the deep muscles of the back, attaching a rope to the hooks, and (after the method of a well sweep) swinging the victim to a height several feet above the heads of the people. The car on which the pole is placed is then drawn along by large ropes in willing hands . . . Full details of this hookswinging affair are too revolting for publication." The person swung from the hooks was selected by lot from a larger group that represented a number of the villages sponsoring the festival. Throughout the article, he (for it was always a man) was referred to as "the victim." The newspaper explains its choice of language: "Victim he may well be called, because, though he enters upon this ordeal voluntarily, the chief reason which drives him to it is the sentiment of doing good to his village."

The questions of agency that became fundamental to the moral valuation of the custom of hookswinging were much like those raised during the debate over the abolition of sati in the early years of the century. Before the outright suppression of sati, British officials were often required to attend the "rite," to assure that the "victim" was not forced either by the compulsion of family or the mind-altering effect of drugs to jump on the burning funeral pyre of her

I have given this essay in many different forms to audiences across the world and have benefitted on each occasion from comments and questions, most of all on the last such occasion, April 18, 1994. At the risk of not naming many helpful commentators, I would like to thank Lee Cassenelli, Jean Comaroff, Bernard Cohn, E. Valentine Daniel, Nancy Farriss, Marilyn Ivy, David Lelyveld, David Ludden, John Pemberton, Gyan Prakash, Gloria Raheja, James Scott, Joan Scott, Jonathan Spencer, Ann Stoler, Stanley Tambiah, and A. R. Venkatachalapathy. I owe special thanks to Janaki Bakhle, both for her questions and for her role in the rethinking of this project.

[1] October 23,1891. The Madras Mail was the largest English daily in Madras at the time.

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husband. Worried commentators often wondered whether this kind of monitoring could be anything more than a periodic check on a practice so inscribed in custom and tradition that the voluntary participation of the widow could never be properly ascertained. Besides, the condition of widowhood was itself so deplorable that the decision to jump on the pyre could, in a perverse sense, be seen as rational. Nevertheless, voluntarism as a possibility made little sense in a context where no British official could countenance, let alone approve, such a "barbarous" custom. Sati became a symbol of the backwardness of Indian civilization for the British, even as it became an issue fraught with consequence, given the general British concern not to interfere in traditional practices and customs. As Lata Mani has demonstrated, sati also provided an extraordinary occasion for the rearticulation of the tradition around the designation of, and subsequent debate over, the scriptural sanction for religious practice in early colonial Hinduism.[2] But as Mani and others have shown, the agency of women was only the pretext for other political and cultural concerns. Similarly, while hookswinging became a symbol of British commitment to civilizational reform as well as that of the crisis of enlightened colonial rule, the alleged concern about the victimization of colonial subjects worked to obscure far more salient concerns around the representation of rule and the reorganization of colonial subjectivities.

Colonial subjects, in cases such as those concerning sati and hookswinging, were constructed as victims when they were subjected to some form of custom that either threatened British rule or appeared to violate its moral foundations. Only then did their subjectivity in relation to the possibility of freedom become an issue in colonial discourse. Subjectivity presented itself as an absence; it was only there when it was totally suppressed. Many of the accounts about hookswinging suggested—against the evidence—that the victim was drugged, thus dispensing with the need to worry the issue of agency. But the newspaper account about the hookswinging episode made a far more general assertion: "It might be said that this being a voluntary act, the man submitting himself of his own free will to the torture, it does not come within the letter, and scarcely within the spirit of the law [prohibiting torture]. But it is a case parallel exactly with suttee—the victim in each case being forced to a sacrifice which the press of public opinion fixes on him or her as a duty." Even the possibility that the victim himself believes that his sacrifice is for the good of the village—specifically that it will help to bring rain and prosperity—is ignored and obscured in the discursive move that subordinates his agency to the dictates of duty. Custom is enforced by the will of the mob, what is referred to here as public opinion. And it was the public component that was

[2] Lata Mani, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India," in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989) 88–126.

particularly problematic: Individual vows that involved similar forms of self-mutilation were not at issue.[3]

Even as "public opinion" seemed to the British a quality of civil society that in India was vastly underdeveloped, the public domain existed only in the most tenuous of ways, for the most part, as a site of immense danger. At the very least, colonial officials worried about the maintenance of public order in public spaces: From the beginning of colonial rule, official sources betrayed a consistent concern about the adjudication of competing claims among groups over the right to use public space.[4] Frequently, colonial sources suggest that conflict developed when different religious or caste communities transgressed space, usually in some kind of ritual/religious procession, that was either claimed by another community or came too close to some other group for comfort. Indeed, much early colonial social classification emerged in such adjudicative contexts; and attempts to sort out the relations of "untouchable" and "caste" Hindus, Hindus and Muslims, as well as the congeries of castes such as those labelled "right-hand" and "left-hand," were frequently made in relation to spatial classification and use.[5] For colonial sociology, there could be no uncomplicated designation of a public outside of its own communal categories, though in the last years of the nineteenth century, with the steady development of nationalist thought and activity, the notion of public space loomed dangerously, and was repressed seriously, for other reasons as well. It must have been a comforting thought for colonial rulers that there might be no real Indian public, a notion that, here as in other contexts, was the result of the relentless anthropologizing of India, which served to misrecognize the social and historical possibilities for the nationalist awakening, even as it worked to reify categories of social classification.

If the public domain was a contradiction in terms, public space nevertheless preoccupied colonial governance. And even when public space did not occasion the immediate threat of violence or conflict, it required colonial order(ing). It seems clear that colonial concern was immensely heightened when an event was by some definition public, and so religious functions that took place outside of the provenance of the temple or home became objects of regulation. Hook-swinging was a particular problem not just because of its alleged barbarity but

[3] Individual vows, such as those that involved the piercing of the body in fulfillment of various pledges, were never subjected to administrative concern; however, when vows led to activities such as firewalking in public, collective, ritual events, some of the same concerns that we find in regard to hookswinging were also raised. For a superb anthropological account of different rites in Sri Lanka, see Gananath Obeyesekere, *Medusa's Hair, An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

[4] For an important account of the development of colonial contradictions around public space in northern India, see Sandria Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas in the Emergence of Communalism in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

[5] For a suggestive analysis of left- and right-hand castes in southern India and contests over space, see Arjun Appadurai, "Right and Left Hand Castes in South India," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 14:1 (1974), 47–73.

because this barbarity took place in public space with apparent governmental sanction. Missionaries viewed hookswinging both as a major distraction from their own proselytizing efforts and as a public profanation of space that colonial rule should have reserved for "civil"ized purposes. Officials were not only horrified by the event itself but also by the public character of the spectacle, which was disturbing both to their self-representations and to public order. Additionally, the fact that hookswinging appealed to the baser passions of the lower groups in society—who assembled in far greater numbers for village festivals whenever rumors circulated that hookswinging might take place—seemed every bit as troubling as the barbarism of the rite itself. Indeed, civilization itself, in every possible sense, seemed up for grabs.[6]

Colonial power constantly sought to uncover the ways in which Indian tradition worked as a form of power, asserting its hold on the agency of women, protecting other forms of power and patriarchy, and provoking Britain's own disinterested commitment to a civilizing mission even when it claimed a policy of non-interference. However, colonial power never turned its assumptions about power back onto itself, absolving itself implicitly, even as it progressively found new arenas in Indian life in which to press forward its campaign of denunciation and reform. Given colonial reliance on forms of knowledge, it should come as no surprise that the anthropological knowledge of India finds some of its first bearings in the files of administrators, soldiers, policemen and magistrates who sought to control and order Indian life according to the demands of imperial rule and what these agents of empire considered to be basic and universal standards of civilization. It is impossible to date anthropology in India: The need to understand custom and tradition began with the formation of the state from the beginning and developed with renewed intensity under the British from the early days of their rule. Since notions of custom were fundamental to the establishment of revenue systems and legal codes, much early anthropology can be read in early settlement reports and other colonial records. But in the late nineteenth century the efforts to understand custom and to rule Indian society better became linked to the development of official anthropology in new and important ways. Although this story has many genealogies, I will begin here with the controversies that were generated over whether or not, and if so how, to suppress hookswinging. In these controversies we can discern many of the underlying assumptions of official anthropology about structure and agency, custom and tradition, religion and ritual practice, as well as about the objective provenance of anthropological inquiry. In addition, we will discover some of the footnotes of colonial ethnography, along with a clearer sense of the institu-

[6] For an account of missionary responses to hookswinging, see the recent book by Geoffrey Oddie, *Popular Religion, Elites and Reform: Hook-Swinging and Its Prohibition in Colonial India, 1800–1894* (Delhi: Manohar, 1995).

tional links between anthropological knowledge and the apparatuses of colonial state power.

THE HOOKSWINGING CONTROVERSIES

I came across the newspaper account with which I opened this essay because it was enclosed in a file which initiated a series of governmental investigations and reports on the festival.[7] The government was clearly embarrassed by the newspaper's charge, motivated at least in part by missionary pressure, that even though it had been apprized of the event, it took no steps to prevent it. The subject had come up several times before, most recently in the 1850s, but those officials who looked into it had assumed that the festival was dying out on its own and that delicate issues such as the government's declared intention not to interfere in any aspect of native religious practice would be raised.[8] As investigations both in the 1850s and the 1890s soon revealed, however, there was no clear legal mechanism to suppress the ritual on the neutral ground of physical (as opposed to moral or religious) danger. Not only did the victims voluntarily submit to the ordeal (indeed, they often appeared extremely anxious to do so), they seemed to escape the hookswinging with no grievous bodily harm. As one British official noted early on in the debate, "The fact is that the objection to the hook swinging festival is of a moral, not a physical nature, and Section 144 C.C.P. can only be made applicable to it by distorting it from its original intention."[9] The stated legislation was in fact only designed to prohibit any activity that endangered the life, health, or safety of an individual.

The intention to mount the hookswinging at Sholavandan had in fact been brought to the attention of the government before it took place. The superintendent of police, the divisional officer, and an American doctor from the Madura Mission had all been asked to attend and observe the event. The most that the superintendent of police could legally do to discourage the festival, beyond expressing the moral disapproval of Government, was to warn the headmen of the village that they would be held responsible for anything untoward that happened during the festival. If the victim were to die from injuries sustained or cause injuries by falling on top of people in the crowd, the headmen could be booked under the provisions of Section 144. This warning did not have the intended effect, and the festival took place without the dire effects feared (or desired) by some officials.

The district magistrate reported that "there was a crowd of about 5,000 persons. Two hooks were passed through the muscles below the shoulder

[7] Judicial Department, Madras (Tamil Nadu Archives), Government Order (G.O.) #83, 14 January 1892.

[8] See Selections from the Records of the Madras Government, *Reports on the Swinging Festival and the Ceremony of Walking through Fire*, Madras: 1854 (India Office Library, V/23/139).

[9] Judicial Department, Madras, G.O. #1257, 7 July 1892.

blades of a Kallan. This was not done in public, but it is believed that the muscles were first kneaded or pounded to induce insensibility and prevent hemorrhage. The man himself says there was no pain. He was swung to a height of twenty feet by the hooks to a pole fixed in the centre of a car which was then dragged round the town. He was hung for an hour and a quarter. He was then lowered and given some arrack but says he had none previously. His voice was then full and his pulse strong. There was little or no bleeding. The hooks remained in their place, and he walked about among the crowd. The holes were then large enough to admit the little finger."[10] This account's tone, clinical rather than condemnatory, is different in tone from that in the newspaper. Whereas the newspaper constantly referred to the victim, we read here that the person who underwent the ordeal was a Kallan[11] and a man who was also allowed to speak for himself. The newspaper had observed that "there can be no doubt that the victim of these proceedings has been heavily drugged before the hooks are passed." But the magistrate's account claims that the hooks were inserted with surgical skill and that the man claimed to have felt no pain and had drunk no liquor before the event.

The account becomes even more clinical when we read the inserted report of Frank Van Allen, M.D., the medical man from the Madurai American Mission who had been requested to attend and describe events at the festival: "[There] were two iron hooks inserted into the skin and subcutaneous tissues, one on each side of the back bone and brought together back to back. Some blood was running down his back. I couldn't learn just how the hooks had been inserted but had heard before that a curved gouge was to be plunged into the tissues cutting down in, and then up and out and in the path thus formed the hooks were to be passed."[12] The doctor was careful to report what he had actually seen, what he had been able to surmise, and what he had only heard. Whereas the district magistrate had made the painlessness of the insertion seem irrefutable, the doctor only noted that "it is said that the parts were made somewhat insensible by slapping and pounding before the hooks were put in." The doctor reported that the man was "a splendid specimen of brute strength, though not of large frame. He was of medium or under size, stockily built and muscles markedly firm." He also observed that although the man was "evidently under strong excitement," he was "self-controlled." After describing

[10] *Ibid.*, #856, 5 May 1892. letter from J.H. Wynne, Acting District Magistrate, to J.F. Price, Chief Secretary to Government, Judicial Department.

[11] Kallan is the singular form of Kallar, a caste group of some colonial notoriety in the southern region of the Tamil country because it is associated with thievery on what was at times considered a professional basis. Kallars were in fact a major landed group that tended to reside in mixed or dry agricultural zones and had been associated in intimate ways with precolonial chiefs and their military systems. Their association with criminality had both to do with their military prowess, amply displayed in early wars with, or involving, the British, and their forms of land control and local authority, based as they were in protection systems. See my book, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

[12] Judicial Department, Madras, G.O. #856, 5 May 1892.

the events of the hookswinging in terms that were clearly the basis for the district magistrate's account, he concluded by saying that "as a physician I am much surprised . . . that the ill effects on the man were so small. No ordinary man could pass through such an ordeal without serious danger to his life."

Colonial sources seemed preoccupied with the question of pain. As we have just seen, the man swung in the Sholavandan hookswinging claimed that he felt no pain and that he was given liquor only after the ordeal. Many colonial observers mistook the signs of possession for intoxication and insisted that the swingers were either drugged or drunk. These observers sought evidence that the obvious pain such an experience would afford was obliterated by unnatural, even immoral, means and assumed all the while that the infliction of pain was both the appeal of the spectacle and the underlying basis for the horror of the rite. Occasionally, men who had been swung complained that the pain had been intense (though most often, it would seem, when an official investigation would have encouraged such a response); but the issue of possession or trance, as well as the very stark images of what was represented as "self-torture," made colonial officials and missionaries extremely uncomfortable, particularly given the overwhelming disavowal of pain as a fundamental ingredient of the experience. Pain became an index of the barbarity of the rite, even as colonial ethnography recognized (with its uneasy Christian religious sensibility) that the acceptance of pain could also be reckoned an index of devotion. Colonial ethnography also saw links between hookswinging and blood sacrifice, conjuring the horror of human sacrifice itself.[13] The determination of agency was of course inextricably mixed in with the question of pain; it seemed unlikely that any agent would willingly subject himself to extreme pain (even if now stripped away from the demand for death), thus suggesting that there were forms of coercion to be unmasked.

This issue of coercion seemed of preeminent importance. The fact that many swingers came from the lower castes suggested that the caste system itself performed the act of coercion, but in Sholavandan as elsewhere the swingers also came from higher, locally dominant, caste groups. Although many swingers seemed to have been paid for their service, thus suggesting financial coercion, in other cases swingers actually paid to swing. In Sholavandan men actually competed for the privilege of swinging, as evidenced by the casting of lots. Although there were reports that some swingers backed out at the last minute, there were many more suggesting that swingers not only vied for the right to perform but even collaborated with local authorities to escape the surveillance of British officials intent on persuading the "victims" to desist. Agency as an abiding concern had thus to be considered in light of the more generalized view about the tyranny of custom, the central enemy of both civilization and Christianity in the subcontinent.

[13] See Oddie, *Popular Religion,* 47–68; also Edgar Thurston, *Ethnographic Notes in Southern India* (Madras: Government Press, 1907), 487–501; 510–19.

Although there was a range of opinion and commentary, no British official was pleased that such customs survived—indeed, flourished—under British rule. Nevertheless, the district magistrate of Madurai thought that the only sensible solution would be to downplay the festival. As he put it, "The festival has been held for years in different places[,] and no proof or reasonable ground for belief that the operation of swinging is dangerous to the life, health, or safety of the person swung or of any one else has so far as known ever been adduced. It is no more dangerous if as much so as taking part in a polo match or an ascent in a balloon or walking on a tight or slack rope. In all these instances, the person or persons concerned voluntarily do an act in which a very considerable risk of limb and life is there."[14] The comparisons are telling. Had the hookswinging been done purely for entertainment and profit, I suspect there would have been no serious official concern. What clearly horrified the British (and, in particular, missionary opinion) was not just the act itself but that it was done in the name of religion. In spite of a commitment to avoid interference in "native religion," a commitment that had been strengthened after the Great Rebellion of 1857, such clear examples of barbarity in religious practice made the British uncomfortable. And one official even wondered whether the presence of officials and doctors at the hookswinging festivals might not be seen as sanctioning rather than discouraging the events, an echo once again of the concerns that had been raised earlier in the century around the performance of sati.

The government ignored the district magistrate's recommendation to let the festival off the hook. In fact, a number of people were worried that hookswinging would spread throughout the country, once it became clear that government did not intend to prevent it.[15] During the next several years, a series of investigations was conducted to determine whether there was sufficient cause to abolish the practice. Each district collector was requested to forward his views on the subject of suppressing the practice by legislation and to base his remarks on the opinions of local officials and citizens.[16] Although there was no specific directive, the inquiries uniformly pursued two complementary aims: to establish, first, that hookswinging did not have the proper sanction of religion at all and, second, that in any case it was performed in the name of religion only to mislead the public and subvert religion itself—that hookswinging was done for the private profit not just of the swinger but, more critically, the corrupt and self-serving temple priests. If these points could be established, there would be no need to confess disbelief and horror as the reasons for wishing to suppress the swinging, no embarassment about selecting one religious truth over another.

The inquiries turned up a wide range of opinion and concern, much of it anticipated by the earlier investigations of the 1850s. In the first investigation,

[14] Judicial Department, Madras, G.O. No. 856, 5 May 1892.
[15] *Ibid.*, G.O. No. 1321, 22–7–92. [16] *Ibid.*, G.O. 2662/2663, 21–12–93.

missionaries were particularly active in condemning the festival. For example, one G.E. Morris, the chaplain of Palavaram (a village near Madras) wrote to the local magistrate that he "disclaims all intention of wishing to interfere with the religious rites and ceremonies of the Hindoos, but he asks the permission of the Government in this instance on the grounds: 1) that this particular festival forms no part of their religious system, 2) that it involves unnecessary cruelty, 3) that it militates against public order and decency, 4) that it is an infringement of the common laws of humanity, and 5) that in this particular case it disturbed the residents in the quiet and orderly observance of the Lord's Day."[17] A subsequent letter from Morris to the Bishop of Madras went further: "But, my Lord, I cannot rest satisfied with a humble effort to protect only the Lord's Day from such horrible profanation, or to prevent a repetition of the inhuman ceremony only at this particular station; I feel ashamed of my own country, when I reflect that we have been for so many years Rulers of this Land, and have not yet caused such abominations to cease entirely in every corner of it."[18] Here, as elsewhere in missionary commentary, it seems clear that hookswinging was a particular problem: Not only did the rite frequently profane the Lord's Day, but it seems to have done so especially because it drew such an intense crowd and did so around a rite that must have been seen to have horrifying resonance with the central event of Christianity, the crucifixion of Christ. A body suspended by iron hooks must have conjured another vision for European missionaries, even as it provided significant competition for proselytizing efforts among the very groups that constituted the most successful target group for conversion, the lower castes.[19] Recall the painstaking descriptions of the penetration of human flesh by the insertion of iron hooks, the repetition of the civilizational horror of the hammering of nails into Christ's hands and feet, and the affixing of Christ's body to the cross. These are the sorts of stories that were used to collect funds for missionary endeavors to combat heathenism, generating as they did collective gasps, sympathy, and contributions in church halls and cathedrals across Great Britain.

Ironically, missionary pressure worked to legitimize upper-caste Hindu opinion, which ultimately sustained colonial efforts to denounce the barbarous rite and find justifications to discount its religiousity. But missionaries were horrified for distinctly Christian reasons. Not only did it raise the spectre of the crucifixion and invoke the sacrilege of mistaking Christ's final sacrifice, but hookswinging symbolized the sins against which Jesus struggled so valiantly. The Rev. J. E. Sharkey discounted the religious character of the event in the following terms: "There are thousands around the pagoda we visited but not one professes to have come to have his sins pardoned and removed. Many

[17] Public Consultations, nos. 35–37; 21 December 1858, vol. IV.

[18] Letter dated 27 September 1858 in *Ibid.*

[19] See Dirks, "The Conversion of Caste: Location, Translation, and Appropriation," in van der Veer, *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

have come to vend their wares, about a hundred to petition the idol for children, about seventy to offer thank-offerings for mercies received such as restoration from some illness or success in any important undertaking, and about two-thirds for amusement and for the uncontrolled commission of wickedness."[20] The denunciation of popular religion here went far beyond the particular spectacle of hookswinging and provided the basis both for a generalized dismissal of all of Hindu religious practice and for the ironic collaboration of high-caste Hindus who for reasons of their own subordinated popular practice to the more spiritual preoccupations of Brahmanic philosophy. Brahmans, many of whom had direct ritual affiliations with shrines and cults that were manifestly part of the mixture that Sharkey condemned, were frequently eager to enunciate their own civilizational genealogy of philosophical purity, thus becoming unwitting partners of missionary discourse, at least to some extent. But in the context of the official enquiry, both missionary horror and high-caste disdain came up against British colonial concern not to agitate the natives. Although it refused to prohibit the festival outright, the government expressed its strong hope that the festival would gradually die out on its own.

The inquiries of the 1890s followed the same general pattern as earlier investigations, though the range of responses revealed greater differences of opinion. At the same time certain anthropological assumptions about ritual practice at the village level, as well as the provenance of Hinduism as a religion, seemed to have taken deeper root in official circles. As before, some officials echoed missionary opinion by noting their sense of scandal at the continued allowance of such a barbaric spectacle. And those opinions that justified intervention took the view that the festival had no religious sanction whatsoever. Despite these opinions, most officials took the government's point of view that the law would not support intervention, which would be counter-productive at the very least. In 1854, before the Great Rebellion, the government had encouraged local magistrates to take an active role in discouraging the holding of the festival: "The best method of discouraging this objectionable practice must be left to the discretion of the different Magistrates, but the right Honorable . . . Governor in Council feels confident that if it be properly explained that the object of Government is not to interfere with any religious observance of its subjects but to abolish a cruel and revolting practice, the efforts of the Magistracy will be willingly seconded by the influence of the great mass of the community, and, more particularly, of the wealthy and intelligent classes who do not seem, even now, to countenance or support the Swinging ceremony."[21] Even years after the Great Rebellion of 1857, the Government took a much more narrow view of interference. It sought anthropological justification for prohibition and persevered in making

[20] Quoted in Oddie, *Popular Religion,* 175–84.

[21] Extract from the Minutes of Consultation, Public Department, Madras, 18 February 1854.

a sharp distinction between religious freedom and ritual excess but repeatedly stopped well short of definitive action.

Some of those consulted by the government in 1893 did in fact admit that there might be some religious basis to hookswinging. R. Fisher, a private citizen in Madurai, wrote that "the festival or practice is a religious one, and closely connected with religious ideas . . . to bring rain, and appease the goddess from bringing smallpox."[22] But British officials mention this explanation with surprising infrequency, even though a number of other files in the Judicial Department suggest that local villagers had expressed genuine anxiety about the consequences of not performing the festival properly. For example, in 1858 the temple headmen of Abisekapuram had signed a written promise that they would discontinue the hookswinging festival.[23] However, in the intervening years they had noticed that the festival had been held in other places and reported that "the goddess was angry, their cattle constantly got sick and died, they had no proper rains or crops for years and that they had their taxes to pay."[24] Indeed, there seems to have been a marked correlation between the performance of the festival and the outbreak of drought. Nevertheless, such concerns found little sympathy and almost no notice in the official inquiry, except in so far as there was a tacit acknowledgment that outright prohibition might engender serious opposition.

Perhaps the most theologically speculative suggestion came from the Collector of Nellore: "Fear of the unknown and timidity are almost universal conditions of thought among ordinary Dravidian natives, and consequently their first impulse to meet any difficulty is to offer a sacrifice. This is the basis of the whole of their natural religion."[25] This view seems to summarize a general nineteenth-century European view of primitive religion.[26] Some other officials tried a bit harder to understand the ritual basis and meaning of hookswinging. One reported a mythological basis, citing a story about Viswamitra and Vasishta in which hookswinging took the place of human sacrifice. Another official recognized that forms of penance were regularly used in religious vows. As evidence for this view, P. Sivaramma Ayyar, a Smartha Brahman and the deputy collector of Tinnevelly, opined that "the practice of hookswinging, no doubt, originally had its origin in that branch of the Hindu yoga philosophy named hatha yogum which was resorted to by certain Hindus with a view to acquire control over the mind by practising certain physical

[22] *Ibid.*, G.O. No. 2662/ 3—21–12–93. [23] *Ibid.*, G.O. 1418, 27–8–90.
[24] *Ibid.*, G.O. 990, 25–5–92. [25] *Ibid.*, G.O. 2662/3, 21–12–93.
[26] This is a view that is echoed in large part by Geoffrey Oddie in his recent book on hookswinging (*Popular Religion*, 1995). After dismissing those critics of colonialism who merely focus on colonial sources rather than the truths available in them, he emerges with an analysis that could have been developed without any of the sources. His book, which I came across just in the final stages of preparing this essay, provides some useful, mostly London-based, sources for the analysis of hookswinging but exemplifies the historiographical problems suggested throughout this study.

positions and observances causing bodily pain. . . . But like so many Hindu customs, what was once a practice of bodily torture performed in private for a certain purpose has degenerated into a public exhibition of a cruel and barbarous description."[27] Having thus provided a textual gloss for the very acts of penance that elsewhere were described so disparagingly, he then dismisses the enactment of what had once been a genuine religious impulse as a degraded event now subverted by publicity stunts and profiteering.

Even if the victims of hookswinging were on occasion seen to have been motivated by the purest of religious motives, for the most part the rite was seen as barbarous and the reasons for its enactment predicated in tyranny and profit. Whatever disparate voices were collected in the investigation, it is clear that the official inquiry could not accord religious legitimacy to the ritual act. As stated by the Collector of Chingleput,[28]

> It is, in my opinion, unnecessary at the end of the nineteenth century and, having regard to the level to which civilization in India has attained, to consider the motives by which the performers themselves are actuated when taking part in hook swinging, walking though fire, and other barbarities. From their own moral standpoint, their motives may be good or they may be bad; they may indulge in self-torture in satisfaction of pious vows fervently made in all sincerity and for the most disinterested reasons; or they may indulge in it from the lowest motives of personal aggrandizement, whether for the alms they might receive or for the personal distinction and local *eclat* that it may bring them; but the question is whether public opinion in this country is not opposed to the *external acts* of the performers, as being in fact repugnant to the dictates of humanity and demoralizing to themselves and to all who may witness their performances. I am of opinion that the voice of India most entitled to be listened to with respect, that is to say, not only the voice of the advanced school that has received some of the advantages of western education and has been permeated with non-Oriental ideas, but also the voice of those whose views of life and propriety of conduct have been mainly derived from Asiatic philosophy, would gladly proclaim that the time had arrived for Government in the interests of its people to effectively put down all degrading exhibitions of self-torture.

This statement expressed the conviction that civilization in the nineteenth century had reached such an elevated point that the moral relativism of an earlier and indiscriminate kind could no longer be tolerated. Though he dismissed the motives of those involved with ceremonies such as hookswinging, the Collector also appealed to enlightened Indian opinion. These are the voices to which the Collector would listen; all others would be suppressed. While on the one hand it is easy to place this belief in the ascendency of enlightenment values in the self-confidence of late Victorian England, it is clear that neither these views nor this kind of predicament have vanished a century later—an issue to which we will return in the final section of this essay.

For the most part, the Indian voices sought and heard by the British agreed totally with them in their condemnation of ritual practices such as hookswing-

[27] *Ibid.* [28] *Ibid.*

ing, if for somewhat different reasons. The Indian voices were mostly those of Brahmans and upper-caste Hindus who had, with the British, redefined a proper and autonomous domain of religion while actively participating in Governmental actions that permitted this autonomy. P. C. Ananthacharlu, a prominent citizen of Bellary, directly subscribed to official opinion when he wrote to the Collector to say that "as observed in para 8 of the letter of the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, the practice has no religious sanction or obligation among Hindus, and has almost died out in this Presidency." A. Sabapathy Moodeliar, a leading merchant in Bellary, wrote to the Collector, Robert Sewell, that "the individuals who promote such practices do generally belong to the backward classes and to the less-educated portion of the community. The advanced and more intelligent classes have no sympathy with such movements. . . . The intentions of Government in really religious matters are well understood,—and any active steps which Government may take in such matters will be rightly appreciated by the community generally." The government is here also seen as expressing the wishes and even representing the sympathies of the upper classes. And P. Rajaratna Mudaliar, deputy collector and magistrate of South Arcot, wrote that "education has made rapid strides and even the common people have come to look upon anything that is not countenanced by Government as something which they should not take a pleasure in doing." Informed opinion reads rather like institutionalized sycophancy, since the government is now accorded the legitimacy and moral example of a proper Hindu state. The acting subcollector of South Arcot, Mr. Harding, was certainly correct when he wrote that "the leaders of Hindu society being the educated men would welcome the repressions of these survivals of pre-Arian savagery." After all, these leaders had provided the textual bases and moral support for these very repressions.[29]

Some officials were aware of the partial nature of the inquiry. The district magistrate of Tanjore conceded that "it is a fact that the men whom we consult, and whom alone we can consult in a formal manner, have as little sympathy with the practice as we have ourselves, and the frequent remark that the practice has no religious sanction is only true in so far as the Hindu religion is concerned . . . the people who attach importance to it, and the men who allow themselves to be swung, are not Hindus save in name, and as their sole idea of religion is propitiated it is idle to suppose that in absolutely prohibiting the practice we would be doing no violence to religion or, if the term be considered more applicable, superstitious feelings." But this insightful analysis—with its clear sense of Hinduism as a clearly identifiable set of religious practices and precepts—was only a preface for his condemnation of the temple priests who exploited primitive superstitions for their own gain. The district magistrate of Kurnool noted that "although such an observance is

[29] All quotes in this paragraph are from *Ibid.*

not enjoined in the hindu sastras, yet its resuscitation appears to me to be a species of religious revival, and intended to attract large crowds and create religious enthusiasm. The victims may be drawn from the ignorant and degraded but they are not the originators of the movement." Here, the generous attribution of religious meaning to the festival is again followed by an attack on the priests who took advantage of these popular religious sensibilities.

The judgments about popular religious practices were thus made both by the British and upper-caste Hindus who shared a distaste for far more than the barbarous examples of self-torture under discussion here.[30] These judgments often emerged from extensive descriptions and analyses of Indian religion, part of a developing anthropology of Indian tradition that one reads in the files of the Judicial and other departments. E. Turner, the district magistrate of Madura, claimed that, "as far as I have been able to ascertain, the practice [of hookswinging] has no special religious significance. It is, however, part of the Tamasha at certain festivals held at certain localities at certain seasons. At these festivals it is customary for the lower classes and especially the Kallers to worship the Goddess Mariyammal. The great idea is to put the Goddess into a good humour and get her to interfere in cases of outbreaks of smallpox, scarcity of rain, etc. The Goddess, it is thought, likes to have as much tamasha as possible during these festivals and as hookswinging brings together a large crowd of worshippers the Goddess is pleased with the practice and is likely to be angry if the custom is discontinued. . . . The practice has nothing to do with the hindu religion. The higher castes look at it with abhorence as a barbarous custom. But the masses in this district are Hindus only in name. What may be called Devil worship pure and simple is the real religion of the crowd."[31] Hinduism itself is being defined as a religious system that should properly be consistent with Brahmanic beliefs and practices. While these remarks have clearly not yet been scientized by the purer descriptive efforts of later ethnographers, they represent the mixture of anthropological and official knowledge that oriented perceptions and judgments in the myriad of governmental interactions with Indian society.

Most of the speculations about the actual ritual basis and justification of the hookswinging festival were made within the context of predicting how much trouble would be provoked if the practice were suppressed. Aside from the pragmatics of suppressing the practice, the central justification for it—and about this official British and Indian elites were in agreement—was the assertion that the priests were manipulating the whole affair. The bias against priests (who in the case of Mariyamman goddess temples were invariably non-Brahman) was powerful and consistent, aligning British and Brahman sentiment even as it provided an ironic basis for the anti-priest arguments that

[30] For a helpful account of the rise of bourgeois morality in nineteenth-century Britain, see Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986).

[31] G.O. 2662/3.

the anti-Brahman movement appropriated only twenty years later (and were used then against Brahmans as representative of the priestly class). Virtually every negative statement about hookswinging contains a criticism of priests. P. Rajaratna Mudaliar of South Arcot wrote that "the only classes of people who attach any importance to this mode of worship are those that are called Poojaries in the Chingleput and South Arcot District. These generally are fond of reviving the practice because of the income they derive therefrom there being a larger gathering on such occasions than when the worship is carried on in an ordinary manner." E. Turner added, "On ordinary occasions hookswinging merely adds to the gains for the priests and the managers of the festival." P. C. Ananthacharlu of Bellary attributed the recurrence of the festival solely to the large annual income derived by the Managers of Durga temples. And J. Sturrock, the deputy magistrate of Tanjore, wrote that "the priests and managers of Hindu temples . . . encourage the practice for the sake of gain."[32] All these statements, as well as some of the statements quoted earlier, are clear in ascribing the motive of profit to the priests. The attribution of the profit motive worked to discredit the priests but also to disparage local religion. Superstition, unlike genuine (or scripturally mandated) belief, was both the product of, and the occasion for, manipulation. The priests were seen first and foremost as manipulators and were accorded absolutely no legitimacy. When limited attempts were made to hold certain people responsible in the event of injury, it was the priests and village headmen who were to be monitored and not the unwitting victims who were swung high on hooks. Victims were victimized not only by custom and tradition but by the men in the middle who simply made money out of the naive religious sensibilities of the masses. And the linking of custom to the self-interest of priests and others who made money out of custom worked both to desanctify custom and to justify paternalistic intervention and investigation on behalf of the masses.

For the most part, British officials and Indian notables agreed that, however desirable the suppression of hookswinging might be, it would be unwise to legislate its abolition, relying instead on moral persuasion and official disapproval. Nevertheless, the Madras Missionary Conference strongly advocated outright abolition. In a memorial dated November 13, 1893, it recorded that "this practice is barbarous and revolting; and that its public exhibition must inevitably tend to degrade and brutalize the community among which it takes place."[33] The missionaries particularly cited the festivals conducted in Sholavandan and written up in great detail in Madurai and Madras newspapers. Although the government refused to abolish hookswinging and essentially concluded that Section 144 of the Indian Penal Code could not be applied to do so, individual magistrates did occasionally use their power to prevent

[32] *Ibid.* [33] Quoted in *Ibid.*

hookswinging from taking place, perhaps as a response to the pressure mounted by the missionary conference. In June 1894, L. C. Miller, the acting district magistrate of Madurai, decided on his own authority to prohibit the annual hookswinging in Sholavandan.[34]

THE MEANINGS OF HOOKSWINGING

Miller's intervention in Sholavandan occasioned a great deal of protest from local residents. A petition with close to 1,000 signatures was presented to the government, in which it was argued that the villagers should have been allowed to conduct their normal ritual festivities.[35] Interestingly, the signatories included representatives of a great many castes including Brahmans (Aiyars), upper-caste non-Brahmans (Mudaliars and Pillais), as well as Kallars, Maravars, Valaiyars, Paraiyars, and Pallars. The petition was well written and argued, and it appealed clearly and cogently to the concerns and assumptions of governmental officials. For example, the hookswinging festival was glossed as a proper ritual, or *ootchavam,* to make it look as if it had a Sanskritic genealogy and high religious justification. The petitioners went on to argue that no physical harm had come to any of the men who had been swung, "even though in the natural course of events it is impossible that the man should not be grievously hurt." Instead of asserting that the concerns about the physical welfare of the swinger were misplaced, the petitioners used the lack of injury to the participants as a way of supporting the religious merits of the penance. "Your humble Memorialists attribute this most remarkable state of things in the selected man coming down from the pole in full consciousness and without any serious injury whatever, to the act of the Almighty, in whom full belief is placed not only by the selected man, but by the whole mass of worshippers who attend the festival." The petitioners further reversed the arguments of the missionaries that the exhibition served only to "degrade and brutalize" the community by suggesting that "this act is calculated to inculcate in the minds of the ignorant masses in a practical manner that firm faith in God and God alone, and full belief in his Divine Revelations, cannot but bring home to the believer the greatest amount of happiness and prosperity." The petitioners were clearly writing with full knowledge of the dominant missionary and colonial discourse, though they also invoked the more standard argument—with all of its internal contradictions—that the swinging was performed to promote the prosperity of the community at large, noting that, since they had begun to celebrate this festival in 1890, "the seasons were more favourable, the crops more abundant, the mortality less appalling, and the dire diseases less virulent."

[34] This petition is enclosed and translated in Judicial Department, Madras, G.O. No. 1284, 27–5–94.

[35] *Ibid.,* G.O. No. 2627, 2–11–94.

The petition then objected to the brutal suppression of the hookswinging festival. In telling this story, the petition made a number of interesting claims. Some claims directly echoed fragments of official British opinion. For example, the petitioners noted that the government permitted far more dangerous events, such as "balloon ascents, parachute descents, circus feats, horse racing, etc." Other claims seemed to subvert this very point, by including fire walking, as also "the compulsory shaving of a young Hindu widow's head under which other circumstances would amount to grievous hurt, being a permanent disfiguration of the face according to the I.G. code."

Perhaps the most interesting claims relate to our earlier discussion of the agency of the swinger. The petition stated that "the said Malayandi who had been worshipping in the temple having been inspired by the Goddess Mariyamman to have the hookswinging festival, and being in a state of 'Aveesam' (in a state of unconsciousness of his real self got therefrom), besmearing himself with ashes and carrying a copper plate in his hands containing bits of lighted camphor, and went round the temple to make the holy Pradakshanam, saying that Goddess has come to him and inspired him to have the hookswinging festival performed." The petition then specified that Malayandi was in an "unconscious and uncontrollable state of mind, for which he was not responsible." While he was in this vulnerable state the police arrived and carted him off to jail. What the petition had thus established was the religious character of the hookswinging; the swinger was said to be in a state resembling possession (*caamiyaattam*) which both absolves him from responsibility and sacralizes his person. Indeed, the petition implied that when a worshipper is possessed, his agency becomes that of the deity itself, clearly invoking a different discourse of victimage, agency, and responsibility than would normally be considered relevant in colonial debates. The discourse of the petition appeals both to the transvalued nature of religious action during hookswinging and the potential culpability of the swinger to police action. In more general terms, the petition intended to invoke a sense of legitimate religious practice and, in the colonial context, correctly represented hookswinging as a legitimate extension of Sanskritic religion through the use of terms such as "ootchavam," "pradakshanam," and "aveesam." The logic of the petition was thus multiple because it employed arguments that both appealed to and no doubt mystified the British, made legitimating claims that involved a large range of religious understandings and forms, and demonstrated the strategic character of subaltern agency in the colonial situation. Far from being paralyzed by their lack of choice under the weight of custom, these subaltern petitioners could not only speak but write. In the face of colonial efforts to anthropologize the meanings of custom, the petitioners deployed tactical appeals to colonial reason while making strong, polyvocal claims for their own.

The government did not intervene on behalf of the petitioners, though in the end, for reasons that had nothing to do with the arguments in this particular

petition, governmental officials did decide that Section 144 provided a rather flimsy basis for the outright prohibition of hookswinging. So although in an indirect sense they might be seen to have won their argument, though for only the very short term, the petitioners began to lose control over the meaning of the event in their very engagement with the official apparatusses of governmental regulation. What might be called the petition wars of the nineteenth century ranged widely in subject matter, concerning such matters as land and irrigation rights, customary law, local taxes, and management rights in temples, to mention only a few. But all these controversies worked to secure colonial discursive hegemony over the taxonomies, legitimacies, and meanings of local social action.[36] Although they did not actually use all the correct forms and idioms and clearly resisted others, the petitioners for the most part attempted to appeal to the legitimating conceits of official colonial discourse.

It is difficult to recognize some of the shifts that took place because we assume that colonial categories had always been in place. For example, the categories of, and more particularly the rigid separation between, low popular and high classical religion, were produced in colonial contexts such as the one described above. Indeed, the petition does not represent a more accurate or authentic understanding of popular religious practice than the colonial version because the petition was necessarily imbricated in colonial discourse, but it can still be read as a measure of subaltern agency. After all, the petition was written specifically to persuade colonial officials to allow the hookswinging to continue. But the uncritical belief that colonial sources can shed light on precolonial meanings when read through conventional interpretive lenses is as problematic as the faith in anthropological intuition that confers the ring of truth to standard interpretations.[37] Colonial sources constituted a truth regime both for official knowledge and, as I will go on to demonstrate, the conventional wisdom of early professional anthropology as well.

Nevertheless, the petition reveals that certain elements of the ethnographic location of hookswinging in south Indian society raise questions about colonial views and provide the basis for critical and oppositional readings of colonial sources. First, the issue of agency that was so fundamental to colonial discourse turned out to be conceptualized in terms which related to the ritual logic of divine possession and the instrumental effects of ritual action, in part because of the specific salience of possession and trance to any event such as hookswinging and in part because of the need to argue against the criminal culpability of either the swingers or their impresarios, as the priests and temple managers were regarded. The colonial obsession with agency was no doubt seen as peculiar, but the petition clearly reveals that it was also significantly connected to official attempts to find fault, round up the culprits, and

[36] See my argument in "From Little King to Landlord: Colonial Discourse and Colonial Rule," in Dirks, ed., *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992).

[37] For an example of this view, see Oddie, *Popular Religion.*

assess criminality (the significance of which we will come to later) as well as barbarism. Second, the clear separation between Brahmanic and non-Brahmanic domains of religious life is challenged by the fact that the petition was signed by many upper-caste members of the village and that it was distinctly possible (even if not fully plausible) to construct a Brahmanic gloss on and justification for hookswinging. Nevertheless, the clear assumption in the governmental files was that Brahmans and other members of the upper castes would have had nothing to do with such barbaric rites. The upper-caste consultants and informants for the British were, at least officially, complicit in the reading of hookswinging as non-Hindu and barbaric, even though many of these same consultants probably had multiple ritual connections to "popular" ritual practices. Indeed, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, Brahmans who still lived in rural areas in the Tamil country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often had village deities considered to be "low" such as Aiyanar and Mariyamman for their tutelary deities. Although many Brahmans would have kept some distance between their own ritual practices and popular events such as hookswinging, it was also the case that most Brahmans worshipped in temples in which hookswinging was performed and in which animal sacrifices and other "low" ritual forms were regularly practiced.

The heavy recruitment of Brahmans into colonial administration and the not unrelated alienation of many Brahmans from their local rural roots had facilitated a high level of tolerance for and participation in "non-Brahmanic" religious activities and created the basis for increasing collaboration between certain Brahmanic precepts and Victorian morals during the nineteenth century. Upper-caste notions of respectability and religious scruples became increasingly Anglicized, as Brahmans and other high castes were clearly incited by circumstance and conventions of colonial acceptability to define more strictly, and exclusively, the provenance of "Sanskritic" and "Brahmanic" domains. Less ironically than in the instance in which Brahmans helped to fuel the criticism of priests, it was this very privilege that helped to create the basis for the generalized antipathy against Brahmans that fed into the anti-Brahman movements of the twentieth century.

The meanings of hookswinging were thus transformed in rather complex ways during the nineteenth century. The debate over hookswinging played an important role in constituting certain notions of agency and free will as fundamental to the evaluation of local ritual practices and in redefining the relations between Brahmans and peasants and between Sanskritic and popular religion. And it was precisely because upper- and lower-caste Hindus were incited to participate in these debates that both were drafted into a colonial discourse that touched far more than the attitudes of a number of British administrators. In the past, these acts of public devotion had on occasion been supported by kings through tax-free inam land grants; increasingly in the nineteenth century, the swingers were paid either by the festival organizers or were encouraged

to believe that private vows would most efficaciously be fulfilled by participating in these more public events. Whereas kings had once sanctioned and supported these events, colonial rulers now disapproved of them. Whereas agency had once been multiply constructed around notions of kingly sovereignty, collective interdependence, social forms of (often oppressive) power, and complex technologies—and social relations—of trance and possession, agency was now the index of individual criminal culpability. And whereas religious customs had been shaped by historical forces in which local power had been so closely associated with institutions of local ritual, custom now became the object of new forms of knowledge, control, and classification. Even if the meanings of such intimate experiences such as fear, pain, and belief may never be fully understood, we can be sure that they, and certainly the contexts in which they took place, could not have been totally exempt from the transformations we have surveyed here.

In the end, the governmental reversal of L. C. Miller's action to suppress hookswinging was temporary. Finally, in August 1894, a hookswinging performance in the village of Bheemanaickenpolien on the outskirts of Trichinopoly led, it seemed, to a fatality. It was alleged that a fever that killed one of the swingers was the result of the suppuration of his back wounds. A report circulated in late September of the same year proclaimed that sufficient evidence had been garnered to prove that hookswinging could in fact be abolished on the basis of Section 144, given the lethal consequences demonstrated in the above-mentioned episode. The hookswinging debate was over.[38]

CUSTOM AND COERCION

When it became clear that the hookswinging victims were victimized less by corrupt managers and greedy priests than by their own belief, British officials believed in turn that tyranny resided as much in the dictates of custom as in those who manipulated it for their own ends. As we have seen, this is not to say that the British ever conceded very much to the world of custom—indeed, they continued to seek evidence of manipulation and oppression and sought to defend the gullibility of all who had been designated victim—but custom was the unsettling ground on which the alterity of the colonized resided. Custom also worked to resolve the issue of agency oppositionally by creating a world in which agency and individuals did not exist, thus simultaneously disparaging the traditional world as uncivilized and heralding European modernity as the only haven within which agency was possible and individuals could achieve proper autonomy. Agency can thus be seen as a profoundly problematic category precisely because it disavows the possibility of consent—or anything resembling purposive individual action—outside of particular cultural worlds while using this condemnation as the pretext for dismissal, surveillance, and control. Even when consent was monitored and debated, it was

[38] India Office Library, Madras Judicial Proceedings, P/4621, September 24, 1894.

never really thought that sufficient evidence could exist to document it in the contexts in question: sati, hookswinging, firewalking, and so forth. But the focus on consent and agency worked to mask the coercion of colonial power itself, its capacity to define what is acceptable and what is not, what is civilized and what is not, and why it is that the extraordinary burden of knowledge and responsibility is arrogated by the colonizer. Colonial forms of knowledge continuously disavowed their own interests while compelling the knowledge of custom as if it were a neutral mechanism to protect the colonized. Within a world dictated by custom, agency was held out to be a tantalizing promise of freedom, but it was held out by a colonial state that used the term to adjudicate the difference between criminality and barbarism, certainly not to open up any genuine opportunities for freedom of choice.

Even as custom became the site on which the British displaced their own regulative power, custom also became something that was changed and transformed most when it was held to be both totalizing and invariant. And in the case of the ritual forms and socio-religious categories that surrounded the hookswinging controversies, we can detect significant change that was a direct result of colonial intervention. What the eminent contemporary anthropologist, M. N. Srinivas, has characterized as "sanskritization," a natural social process in India that involved the emulation of Brahmans and Brahmanic social customs by upwardly mobile groups, was in fact officially legislated over and over again in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[39] This legislation was the result of British officials using Brahmans as informants and regarding Brahmans as the carriers of high culture. Not only were practices such as hookswinging not voluntarily dropped, they were actually constituted as examples of low ritual practice that should be prohibited if possible and at the very least officially discouraged. In certain temples in south India, the customary practice of widow remarriage within certain castes was discontinued after the government took over the management of temples and outlawed the use of these temples for rituals not deemed to have support from the *sastras*.[40] In countless other examples, governmental officials—British and Indian alike—used government agencies that were meant simply to manage and protect instead to legislate newly defined codes of conduct that were part of the colonial construction of appropriate Hindu practice. The great debates over the agency of victims in such arenas as hookswinging served not only to miss but to obscure a far more fundamental result of colonial intervention in

[39] See M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

[40] The particular example comes from Pudukkottai: see Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993). For other examples, see Franklin Presler, *Religion under Bureaucracy: Policy and Administration for Hindu Temples in South India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), and Arjun Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict in South India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

India—the continual reinvention of the subjectivity of the colonized by and through the technologies of colonial rule.

Regulation and knowledge always went together in the history of British colonialism in India. Forms of knowledge were produced by regulative contexts and concerns, even as the parameters of intervention and regulation were constituted by the kinds of knowledge that colonialism produced. Regulation and knowledge thus collaborated in the fixing of tradition, by which I mean both the stabilizing and the repairing of a canonic sense of what had always been done. The effort to fix tradition in the context of hookswinging was certainly not a new activity. From the years during which it first began to collect information about India, the colonial government was concerned to determine how custom dictated the lives of ordinary Indians in regard to the rights to land, labor, and agricultural resources; practices related to marriage, kinship, and caste; and the whole array of social facts that became part of the codification of customary and criminal law. Even though custom could vary radically from place to place, even occasionally from time to time, the essence of custom as it was constructed was that it was fixed, that it reproduced itself through its own inertia. Although it seemed to refer to a single set of social practices and principles, custom steadily became a trope for a society which was outside of history and devoid of individuals.

The specification of Indian custom was never a neutral activity, whether it was related to the allocation of land rights or the management of a temple or charity. Under the conceit of simply following custom, the British both changed it and reified it. With a little help from British rule, custom could now be reproduced through the force of law, with consequences that were as extensive as they were deep. Generally, if custom proved troublesome in the context of British rule, it was only because the British thought they had not gotten it quite right or because discrete customary practices competed against each other in new colonial contexts such as that created by the commercialized land market. But when custom appeared to challenge British rule, or less dramatically, when custom violated the general principles of civilized morality, the British then believed they had to modify the usual practice. The decisions about the authenticity of various customs were administrative judgments that were espoused in the guise of anthropological debates.

Missionaries, whose proselytizing success was confined almost entirely to the lower castes, collaborated in the reformist impulse by providing detailed accounts of local popular customs in terms consistent with their own desire to combat the residual hold of culture over the epistemic terrain of their conversion efforts. The agnostic position of many of those who held positions of governmental authority ironically served to legitimate certain forms of intervention, since the government was adamant in representing itself as committed to a policy of non-interference. Traditions could be legitimately reformed if they were demonstrated to be inauthentic. The measures for authenticity

were usually based on a set of Brahmanically defined norms, which were articulated within the context of British administrative judgments that tended to exacerbate the opposition and fixity of what subsequent generations of anthropologists have labelled as great and little traditions. British rule came upon the death of Indian kings, and the ascendency of Brahmans was predicated both on the displacement of kingly authority by the British and on the strategic alliances forged between colonizing and colonized elites.

Governmental debates about activities such as hookswinging thus sought to identify the proper place of tradition in popular social and religious life at the same time that these debates reconstituted the terms by which tradition was identified and evaluated. It was not so much that tradition was invented as that a new operational category for it was constructed. This new sense of tradition created a hierarchialized relation between folk and classical tradition and accorded primacy to the classical tradition in certain contexts of discomfort or dispute.

Although they made arbitrary decisions about what was properly traditional or customary and what was not, the British in India ironically shared with Eric Hobsbawm a comfortable sense of the need to differentiate between authenticity and inauthenticity, between genuine and invented tradition.[41] They even shared a sense of the moral implications of debating the relative plausibility of different specific customs or traditions. The nineteenth-century colonial writers whose arguments have been analyzed here debunked the priests who defined hookswinging as proper tradition in much the same way that Hobsbawm debunks states and elites. The arguments are made differently: Most colonial writers used measures of universal moral sensibility as well as Brahmanic notions of how to delineate proper Hindu traditions, but they shared with Hobsbawm an outrage against the pursuit of private interests under the banner of ritual and ceremony.

My aim in making this point here is to suggest, against much of the spirit of the Hobsbawm and Ranger volume, that the effort to historicize tradition and custom is not necessarily the same as finding particular histories for traditions that we then presume to authenticate or deauthenticate, for that was precisely the kind of move that colonialism enabled. When it debated Indian tradition, colonial discourse installed certain versions of custom over others, sustained certain forms of discourse that became increasingly hegemonic (as for example in the petition wars), and displaced Indian subjectivity and agency in relation to everything but its own enlightened presence. Colonial discourse also concealed its construction of categories—such as those concerning low and high religion, or Brahmans and non-Brahmans—that in the end survived

[41] See the argument in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). See my longer critique of this position in "Is Vice Versa? Historical Anthropologies and Anthropological Histories," in T. McDonald, *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

much longer and with much more important consequences for Indian social life than, as one example, the specific issue of whether or not hookswinging should be suppressed. In the colonial situation, moral discourse and reformist ideology thus concealed the forms (and effects) of the hegemonic power that the colonial state itself exercised.

The British displaced their own politics into such domains as custom and tradition, simultaneously endowing them with new meanings and applications and absolving themselves from the recognition that power was being deployed by them rather than by the fixity of the hold of the past, seen as custom or tradition rather than history. But increasingly, the norms of custom were established by official anthropologists who claimed scientificity and neutrality for their discipline even as they worked directly for the state apparatus of colonial rule. By the late nineteenth century, anthropology became the discourse in which the policing of tradition was transformed into the knowledge of tradition.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE POLICE

Anthropology in southern India emerged directly out of official projects that collected and interpreted information about Indian social life. Most of these official projects—like those concerning hookswinging, sati, or even subjects such as torture—were directed towards the possibility of reform, and it is illuminating to look back and discover that the footnotes for anthropological writing at the turn of the century refer to the same official reports we have just been reading, reports about practices that many in government wished to suppress.

Ethnography in Madras began formally with concerns about criminality.[42] In 1893 Frederick S. Mullaly, a senior official in the Madras Police, was appointed the first Honorary Superintendent of Ethnography for the Madras Presidency.[43] Mullaly's principal qualification for the job was his publication in the previous year of a book entitled,[44] *Notes on Criminal Classes of the Madras Presidency.* He wrote his book at the suggestion of the Inspector-General of Police in the hope that it "may prove of some value to Police Officers who are continually brought into contact with the Predatory classes." The construction of entire castes by the British in colonial India as "criminal castes" was part of a larger discourse in which caste determined the occupational and social character of all its constituent members, but what is noteworthy here is that the concern with criminality continued, directly as well as indirectly, to be central to the development of anthropology in Madras for many years.

[42] For a longer account of Mullaly, see Dirks, "Reading Culture," in J. Peck and E. V. Daniel, eds., *Culture/Contexture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

[43] Public Department, Madras, G.O. No 6/6A, 10–1–93.

[44] Frederick S. Mullaly, *Notes on Criminal Classes of the Madras Presidency* (Madras: Government Press, 1892).

In 1901 the government of India resolved to support a scheme to carry out an ethnographical survey of India. At that time H. H. Risley was appointed director of Ethnography for India; and Edgar Thurston, superintendent of the Madras Museum between 1885 and 1908, was appointed as the superintendent of Ethnography for the Madras Presidency.[45] Risley himself, who had previously been the census commissioner for India, saw anthropology as having two central aims: first, to construct a catalogue of customs and, second, to make a meticulous record of physical characteristics. He amply shared Thurston's enthusiasm for anthropometry. Risley's advocacy of anthropometry, along with his theories about the relation of race and caste, were clearly fundamental to the definition of the ethnographic project in turn-of-the-century colonial India. If custom was a preoccupying concern in early Indian anthropology which directed attention towards the social body, anthropometry sought to locate the scientific study of man in the biological body. In the Indian context this was particularly fruitful both because the caste system had an endogamous character and because notions of individuality were thought to be undeveloped: Bodies within a certain group all shared, and produced, a fundamental unity. Thurston also noted the importance of anthropometry for criminal identification, which is why he was frequently called upon to deliver anthropological lectures to the Madras Police.[46] In the last years of the decade, anthropometry began to yield other means of criminal identification, such as fingerprinting, which was initially developed in Bengal, that had all the advantages of anthropometry, with none of its difficulties.[47] Fingerprinting quickly established itself as the universal system of criminal identification. In the technologies of policing, as in many other areas, the empire served as an important laboratory for the metropole.

The replacement of anthropometry by fingerprinting did not lessen Thurston's commitment to collecting the physical measurements of Indian sub-

[45] Public Department, India, G.O. 647/26 June 1901.

[46] In the early 1890s the Bertillon system of using anthropometric measurements had been adopted first in Bengal, then in Madras. The idea was to identify habitual criminals who moved from place to place and shifted their identities. In India, the Bertillon system was applied according to conventions set out by the colonial sociology of criminal castes. The basic operational principle was that "only members of criminal tribes and persons convicted of certain definite crimes" should be so measured (Judicial Department, Madras, G.O. 1838, 9–9–93). Since most crimes were committed by circumscribed groups of people, anthropometry seemed to be the perfect means to apprehend the principal suspects. As E.R. Henry, the Inspector-General of Police in Bengal put it, "With anthropometry on a sound basis, professional criminals of this type will cease to flourish, as under the rules all persons not indentified must be measured, and reference concerning them made to the Central Bureau." Nevertheless, there was residual concern that measurements varied not only from measurer to measurer but from measurement to measurement. The instruments were costly, the course of instruction was lengthy, the statistics were hard to classify, and the measurement process itself was time-consuming.

[47] Fingerprinting was considered error-free, cheap, quick, and simple; and the results were more easily classified. By 1898, Henry wrote that "it may now be claimed that the great value of finger impressions as a means of fixing identity has been fully established" (Judicial Department, Madras, GO No. 1014, 1–7–98).

jects. During the first decade of the twentieth century, Thurston worked systematically to structure his ethnographic survey along the lines set down by Risley, collecting a myriad of ethnographic details and extensive archives of measurements, all arranged according to the different castes and tribes in the presidency. As suggested throughout this article, Indian subjects were not only organized by, but contained in, their castes or tribes, which determined the cultural, economic, social, and moral characteristics of their constituent members. Individuals only existed as empirical objects and exemplary subjects. The ethnographic survey ended in Madras when Thurston completed his seven-volume work, *The Castes and Tribes of Southern India,* which had entries on more than 300 caste groups listed in alphabetical order.[48]

I comment here instead on a long ethnographic work that Thurston published in 1906 while he was in the middle of his labors for the survey. This work, entitled *Ethnographic Notes in Southern India,* consisted of a series of essays, some previously published in the *Government Museum Bulletin,* on a variety of subjects which Thurston thought held intrinsic interest. This work is an example of how ethnographic subjects were constituted when caste was not the organizing category for anthropological inquiry. The book begins with two long essays, the first on marriage customs, the second on death ceremonies, that look like compilations of material that had been collected on a caste-by-caste basis. Caste seems slightly less important in the third essay, on "omens, evil eye, charms, animal superstititons, sorcery, etc.," since the ethnographic material is presented as instances of a general set of beliefs and practices. But in the subsequent chapters the organizing principle is no longer the conventional frame of caste, and the subjects no longer seem to be standard anthropological fare. The fourth chapter is entitled, "Deformity and Mutilation"; the next, "Torture in Bygone Days," is followed by such other chapters as "Slavery," "Firewalking," "Hookswinging," "Infanticide," and "Meriah Sacrifice." If the caste-by-caste entries in the volumes of Thurston's ethnographic survey focus on the social (which for the British in India was synonymous with caste), these essays instead focus on the body.

The essays can be seen as the critical link in the genealogy between official anthropology and the kinds of investigative enquiries and reports that this essay analysed earlier. The chapters are in large parts encyclopedic collections of official material generated by the colonial interest in suppressing practices such as hookswinging, slavery, and torture. In his introduction to his volumes

[48] Thurston, *The Castes and Tribes of Southern India,* 7 vols (Madras: Government Press, 1907). The entries on each caste range in length from one sentence to seventy-five pages and include such salient ethnographic facts as origin stories, occupational profiles, descriptions of kinship structure, marriage and funerary rituals, manner of dress and decoration, as well as assorted stories, observations, and accounts about each group. Naturally, Thurston also included the results of his anthropometric researches, which he said were "all the result of measurements taken by myself, in order to eliminate the varying error resulting from the employment of a plurality of observers."

on the castes and tribes, Thurston wrote that he had followed the scheme recommended for completing the ethnographic survey in which he was instructed to "supplement the information obtained from representative men and by their own enquiries by 'researches into the considerable mass of information which lies buried in official reports, in the journals of learned Societies, and in various books.' Of this injunction full advantage has been taken, as will be evident from the abundant crop of references in foot-notes." But it is in the *Ethnographic Notes* that we can see the extraordinary extent of the connection between official colonial reports and official colonial ethnography.

The essay on hookswinging, like most of the other essays in the volume, is in fact little more than a compilation of the kinds of writings on the custom examined above. The hookswinging essay begins by quoting the Government Report of 1854 and notes that in 1852 two men had been killed during the celebration of the festival in Salem district because the pole from which they were suspended had snapped. Thurston does not always moderate his language, for he refers to the ritual as a "barbarous ceremony" and quotes indiscriminately from commentators as various (and as contemptuous of Indian customs) as Abbe Dubois and Sonnerat. Aside from the general narrative style and the lack of any specific argument about suppression, there is little to distinguish this ethnographic chapter from the accounts that Governmental officials themselves produced. What is different, of course, is that, although there is no moral or legal argument about the suppression of hookswinging, virtually all of the material was generated, as we saw, out of this concern and was initially narrativized as part of an argument within the context of governmental debate. The absence of argument in Thurston's account has the effect of representing the account as scientific (as do all of Thurston's credentials, and the entire framework of the book), despite the fact that it can be seen that this representation works to conceal the nature of the genealogical connection between the work and its sources. In ethnography, the once-compelling stakes of official debate seem to disappear altogether.

I am not arguing that Thurston attempts to conceal his sources; in fact, he is far better than many colonial authors in providing footnotes and references. Furthermore, he is in total agreement with Risley that one of the tasks of the ethnographer is to digest the massive accumulation of material in governmental reports and then to present it in clear and systematic form. Thurston was himself a government servant and saw no contradiction between science and government in the task of accumulating anthropological knowledge about India. The relation of knowledge and rule is not simply a colonial fact but one that was actively celebrated in such colonial projects as the ethnographic survey. However, it is easy in retrospect to lose sight of the genealogies of the relations between knowledge and rule; and those who read Thurston's treatise on hookswinging may never know the historical context in which his footnotes were produced. And for contemporary students of Indian society who

still consult Thurston for information on practices such as hookswinging, as I did when I began this research, there is little to signal the colonial character of what is still considered to be canonic anthropological knowledge.

Indian anthropology was in fact born directly out of the colonial project of ruling India. On the basis of the writings of Mullaly and Thurston, the latter author undoubtedly the most important official ethnographer in Madras during colonial times, we can see that the key texts of early anthropology were not simply being produced in the context of colonial projects but were the culmination of what had been a long series of colonial projects to rule and reform India. Far from conveying cultural relativism and epistemic neutrality, in other words, anthropology began its career in India as colonial judgment. The ethnographic survey itself was born directly out of the census, an important early apparatus of colonial rule. There, as well as in the above example, we can see how anthropology, in its genealogical connections to colonial governance and policing and also in its development as a separate and scientific discipline, conferred new forms of legitimacy to the administrative texts that we examined above, and played a significant role in the history of colonization.

BARBARISM AND CIVILIZATION

In demonstrating that "caste," "religion," or other similar categories were refigured by colonial rule, my project here and elsewhere[49] has been to uncover and underscore British implication in the production of those aspects of Indian tradition that in postcolonial times have been seen as the principal impediments to genuine progress, if not full-scale modernity. I have argued that India's encounters with colonial modernity have produced much of its tradition and have thus attempted to shift the usual burden of this kind of analysis and assessment from India's essential past to its historical connection to empire. However, inasmuch as this is an historical project, it also has a range of serious implications for the present. In examining the multiple genealogies of this history of the present, we must acknowledge some intractable difficulties, once we go beyond the assessment of the effects of the hookswinging debates, however dramatic they were.

Whether or not hookswinging constituted grievous harm of a sort that can be usefully compared to sati, we can hear the echoes of the debate about sati in the contestations and interpretations presented above. In some ways, hookswinging is "good to think" precisely because it is less unambiguously horrible than sati or, to shift to another colonial scandal, clitoridectomy. We can chart the construction and development of a reformist colonial discourse that seems clearly in the service of missionary and more general Victorian values that only rarely evidenced convincing concern about other similar practices, except when concerns of state or mission intervened. Even as we unravel the

[49] See my "Castes of Mind," *Representations*, no. 37 (Winter 1992), 56–78.

discursive web around the rituals and the inscribed meanings of the events referred to in the hookswinging debates, we also must be aware that when we do shift to other contexts, where the stakes concern, for example, women's lives and bodies in far more pernicious respects, we could easily chart similar critical readings. Ashis Nandy and Veena Das have been severely critical of the liberal critique of sati, suggesting that these arguments, which became mobilized against the so-called ritual renaissance of sati in Rajasthan during the late 1980s (even though they hasten to point out that they are very much against these murderous events), were strictly colonial in character.[50] In pointing out colonial genealogies for the moral denunciation of certain practices that seek the legitimation of cultural authenticity, are we condemned to forsake, or licensed to evade, the issues, and the responsibility, of moral judgment—to choose, in other words, between the positions of the colonizers and those of the colonized?

Although there is no particular need at the end of the twentieth century to deliver any resounding judgment on the practice of hookswinging, it is worth commenting on some parallels between the late-nineteenth-century debates over hookswinging and the more recent debate that continues to attract attention across the globe, in this case, the debate over clitoridectomy in Africa. That debate effectively began when missionaries denounced the practice and attempted to seek official suppression on the one hand and native support, particularly among converts, for renunciation on the other. But, as in many other missionary initiatives, the discursive use of clitoridectomy generated a good deal of local resistance and produced an enhanced cultural and nationalist value for the practice, a development that Jomo Kenyatta acknowledged when he devoted a large portion of his anthropological monograph on Kenya to a description of the cultural salience of the clitoridectomy initiation rite. The right to perform clitoridectomy also became mixed in with the rise of nationalist resistance, in particular with the "Mau Mau" revolt.[51] Susan Pederson has recently pointed out that European liberals found themselves in the awkward (though in some ways predictable) position of defending clitoridectomy if they were to be seen in support of Kenyan nationalism.[52] Far more recently, activists such as Alice Walker have, doubtless unknowingly, resurrected missionary and colonial discourses in the moral campaign against the horror of clitoridectomy.[53] One has only to think of recent editorials by Arthur

[50] See Ashis Nandy, *The Savage Freud and Other Essays on Possible and Retrievable Selves*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 32–52; Veena Das, "Strange Response," *Illustrated Weekly of India* (February 28, 1988), 30–32.

[51] See Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962).

[52] Susan Pederson, "National Bodies, Unspeakable Acts: The Sexual Politics of Colonial Policy-making," *Journal of Modern History*, 63 (December 1991), 647–80.

[53] See Alice Walker and Pratibha Parmar, *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993).

Lewis in the *New York Times* to accept that nineteenth-century arguments about the unacceptability of certain forms of moral relativism in the face of fundamental enlightenment values, such as that put forward above by the Collector of Chingleput, have by no means disappeared and can be mobilized in the service of causes that have far larger constituencies than the particular forms of moral rhetoric employed.

Horror has the uncanny capacity to obliterate the quotidian. It seems to many of us that it is not simply easy but even necessary to become passionately committed to causes such as the abolition of sati and clitoridectomy. Unfortunately, such causes have both problematic historical genealogies and contemporary uses. While they purport to address universal issues of violence and human rights, the very horror of these events also works to obscure other forms of violence, such as those embedded in colonial and postcolonial relations more generally. Without succumbing to a position of loose moral relativism, it is worthwhile to note that debates do not simply arise because horrible events take place; hundreds of atrocities escape being reported, let alone receiving sustained international attention, each day, from dramatic cases of genocide to the everyday forms of violence against women, children, and other subaltern groups. It would seem necessary at the very least to examine how certain kinds of events become the basis for grand civilizational debates. Sati may be no less horrible because it served colonial claims for a civilizing mission in India, but reactions to the debate have to be placed in relation to the uses of the debate.

When critics point out the colonial genealogies of some moral debates, they do so to point out the ways in which cultural issues still carry the weight of history, even if they may then differ radically about the meanings of that genealogical burden.[54] As an historian of colonialism and of anthropology, I have been particularly concerned, both in this essay and in other work, to suggest a variety of connections between then and now—between the origins of anthropology and its current concepts, between the discursive formations of colonial thought and the way in which discourses about East and West continue to mobilize images of alterity, exoticism, even barbarism. This means neither that there are no major differences between then and now nor that historical critique need abjure the difficult and complex contemporary realities of moral predicaments. When giving this article orally as a paper I have frequently been asked to take a stand on hookswinging, as if somehow I have evaded my moral responsibility by raising an issue that I have then left unresolved. My reply is that this is a colonial question that cannot be answered as if we confronted an abstract universal puzzle. First, I believe that we need

[54] For example, while I understand why Nandy points out the colonial character of postcolonial condemnations of sati, I do not accept that this should constitute the primary basis for a critique of the positions taken by the secular intellectuals whom he holds in such disrepute (see Nandy, *The Savage Freud*).

to ask why such questions are asked at particular times, by particular people. Second, I would insist that, from my present historical and intellectual location, it would seem far more important to engage in reflexive disciplinary critique than in forming a moral evaluation of ritual practices in India in the nineteenth century. Indeed, what has worried me primarily in this study is the historical logic of displacement, whereby the policing and proselytizing practices of the colonial state were justified by the identification of barbarity and normalized by the professionalization of anthropological knowledge at the turn of the century. I have been concerned to chart the ways in which civilizational crises expose the cracks of civilizational self-representation—how one form of violence can be used to mask other even more worrisome forms of violence.

If I have suggested connections between colonial debates and current conundra, it is not just because the language of moral judgment so frequently carries with it the historical logics of an unsavory past. I would suggest that a radically historicist critique must identify the obligations as well as the limits of judgment; in this latter regard, we must accept that the places where we locate our politics have to do with politics of location itself. Politics, along with the moral judgments that animate political action, change when they move from place to place as well as from period to period. To accept the logic of the politics of location is not to abandon morality altogether but to suggest that even universal judgments have particularistic histories. The same is true for the forms of knowledge that we inherit and transact; they are necessarily shaped by the very forces of the past that we seek now to change and to transcend. Hookswinging may no longer be the pressing issue it once was, but its effects live on. They live on in India around the reconstituted categories of popular and elite religion, proper Hinduism, the priesthood, and in forms of civilizational defensiveness and pride; and the hookswinging debates have resonance not only for contemporary debates over sati but also in relation to the recent rise of communalism and fundamentalism more generally. The effects also live on in anthropology (and colonial history) as well, where the collision of cultural relativism and universal value, as well as the uneasy relationship between beliefs in objective knowledge and concerns about historicist critique, continue in many ways to occupy the forefront of disciplinary debate. Hookswinging may no longer seem a scandal, but we still have scandal enough, wherever we choose to look.