
Commentary

Australian Views of Religion in Malaysia

Shirley Chappel (*REVIEW*, August 1988) describes the portrayal of Asian religions by the Australian media as typically ranging in scope from "exotic" to "fanatical, irrational and dangerous", a theme developed by Dr. Ahmad Shboul. My own experiences as an adoptive Saivite Hindu exemplify the reluctance the Australian media appears to have in attempting an accurate and unbiased representation of "foreign" religions.

Between 1976-1979 I served in the Australian High Commission, Kuala Lumpur. Following my return to Australia a series of spiritual experiences led to my adoption of Saivite Hinduism, thus terminating a prolonged period of pre-conscious agnosticism. Central to my initiation into Hinduism has been a succession of pilgrimages to Malaysia to participate in the festival, Thaipusem, a focal point in the religious life of Malaysia's 1.3 million Saivites. In essence, Thaipusem, dedicated to the Deity Muruga (also known as Subramaniam) represents the bestowal of yogic wisdom and the consequent banishment of spiritual ignorance. It attracts a variety of responses from devotees ranging from simple homage to more complex ritualistic worship. A widely accepted expression of worship is the taking of *Kavadi* (literally "burden") which may involve mortification of the flesh. Devotees who choose this form of worship must have undertaken a period of austerity thus promoting a state of ritual purity. The painless and bloodless piercing of the flesh is perceived as a joyous triumph which indicates the

temporary suspension of the physical sensations and accession to a higher spiritual plane in which contemplation of the Absolute is significantly enhanced. In general it is the seemingly gruesome outward spectacle of Thaipusem rather than the spiritual dimension that the Australian media has chosen to concentrate upon. (A notable exception is the magazine "Geo" (Volume 3, No. 4) which attempted a rudimentary spiritual analysis).

As a 'European' my decision to carry a Kavadi attracted considerable unsolicited attention from both the Malaysian and ultimately the Australian media. Whereas, however the Malaysian media has sought to describe the spiritual aspects of my pilgrimages, the Australian media, has, in general, trivialized and sensationalized both Thaipusem as a religious observance and my participation in the festival. Thus according to the Sydney "Sun" (January 1981) I was masochistically fulfilling a "vow of agony", while the Melbourne "Herald" (February 1982) had me typecast as a gullible simpleton duped into donning the Kavadi. The Adelaide "Advertiser" (February 1985) represented Thaipusem as an excessive and frenzied debauch centring upon an obscure phallic cult. My responses to these and other articles remained unpublished. Indeed, a staff member of the "Advertiser" informed me that letters from religious cranks, who by their involvement in queer religions attracted the ordure they deserved, would remain unpublished.

Perhaps however the most mephitic calumny of Thaipusem is that which occurs in Blanche d'Alpuget's novel, "Turtle Beach". It must be said from the outset of any discussion of this book that d'Alpuget seems to hold a deep seated disdain for all things Malaysian; she regurgitates many of the complacent and dismissive bromides which imbued the colonial era. Thus Asian labourers are "coolies", the Chinese are avaricious and converse with "honking" sounds, Sikhs are obese, dull and vain, Malays are randy, indolent and corrupt and possess "frog smiles", all Muslim men are to be loathed, while Tamils who talk "... as though their mouths are filled with marbles", are childlike, cruelly indifferent to others and irredeemably superstitious.

D'Alpuget's description of Hinduism is both tendentious and confused. She appears to have limited comprehension of the major Indian religious traditions, and her central Tamil character, Dr. Kanan Subramaniam, espouses a theological outlook which not only confuses Saivism and Vaishnavism, but also appears to owe more to the attenuated hybrid philosophies of New Age yuppies than to the Saivite Agamic tradition.

D'Alpuget's description of Thaipusem appears to be permeated by ill-disguised contempt and revulsion, which finds expression in inaccuracy and disdain. Thus she reiterates the hoary chestnut that Thaipusem is banned in India (presumably discrediting its celebration in Malaysia), dramatically circumscribes the role of Siva to the destruction of the Universe (Siva is represented at Thaipusem by a devotee who exudes a "... mindless concentrated malevolence," witnesses young children coerced into flesh piercing,

categorizes Kavadi bearers as examples of "... [minds working] in darkness ... [who are] nothing but an illusion of piety ...", and hears Saivite priests chanting "mumbo jumbo".) It is cautionary to note that this novel did not surface in the jingoistic racist Bulletin of a century past, but was published in 1981, and in that year won "The Age" literary award. Moreover at the time of its publication the book was lauded not only for its perceived literary qualities but also for its contribution to Australian understanding of Asian cultures and values. That "The Age", which probably represents the apex of quality Australian journalism, and which projects an image of itself as a liberal tolerant newspaper, could in effect endorse "Turtle Beach" for other than literary reasons, underscores the depth of residual ignorance, and yes, hostility, that exists in Australia both towards Asian societies and more particularly to the religious traditions which sustain those societies. Moreover, for all its tolerance, "The Age" has declined to publish either my letters or those written by other Saivites disturbed by the distortions contained within "Turtle Beach".

Dr. Shboul concludes his article with a plea for a broader framework of understanding which would enhance appreciation of differing religious traditions. I unreservedly approve his sentiments. But how can we begin to promote greater respect and tolerance when much of the media continues to confine commentary on "foreign" religions within predefined and pejorative straight jackets?

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