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LEARNING DEATH RITUALS FROM SCRATCH
The search for meaning and recognition of Hindus on Réunion*

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ABSTRACT. After holding Catholic funerals for three to four generations, some Reunionese are learning how to perform Hindu death rituals. As French citizens of Indian and other origins in the French overseas department of Réunion, Reunionese Hindus conduct death rituals which reveal a search for meaning on different levels. Death rites can help the bereaved in coping with an irreversible loss, as they can help the deceased's soul in finding its final resting place. At the same time, death rituals also require Reunionese Hindus to make ritual choices in the context of the island's religious diversity, which extends to Catholicism and various ancestral religions. The relationship between Reunionese reorientation projects directed at India as a source of ancestral religious knowledge since the 1970s and claims to have Hinduism recognized as a religion by Reunionese society and the French state connects questions about religion and trans-local relations with questions about the making of religious minorities. Combining the material and sensory aspects of death rituals with the discursive level of people's life stories and organizations provides multi-layered perspectives on the relationships between religion, trans-local processes and social recognition.

Introduction

David, a Hindu priest, and his assistant were creating what looked like a piece of art on a sandy beach on Réunion, with the blue sea in the background, early in the morning.[1] They drew a rectangle with several meters of string and thin lines in red, yellow, white, black and brown powder. It had five 'doors' in its sides, each of which would later be opened by fire. At each corner of the rectangle was a clay pot decorated with blades of grass. In the middle of the rectangle, on a small mound, were two copper pots con-

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1 All personal names are pseudonyms which correspond to each person's gender and to the origin of their actual names (Christian/European or Hindu/Indian). The fact that most Reunionese Hindus of the elder generation have Christian names reflects the historical situation of Réunion, where parents were not allowed to give their children Indian first names.

taining coconuts and decorated with strings, leaves and flowers. Several meters further back, family members and friends stood watching the preparations. While they knew little about the meaning of the elaborate ritual construction, they knew it would take some time and had come prepared. They had set up two tents to protect themselves from the sun, and they had placed plastic chairs in the sand so that people could sit as if in a sort of theatre and watch the performance. Two had brought cameras with them. The family had brought soft drinks, homemade *achard* (vegetable pickle) and homemade *rougail dakatine* (peanut chutney) to spread on baguettes. They knew that the sun would grow stronger, and that people would feel hungry and thirsty.

The preparations were for a *kalmadi*, a ritual that concludes the first period of mourning and impurity on the sixteenth day after death as part of a series of Hindu mortuary rites.[2] No one laughed, no one cried. The atmosphere was calm and I sat there with the others. At times the wind carried David's words in our direction, and at others we heard only the rushing of the sea in front of us or the rustling of the trees behind us. People talked in low voices; they seemed serious, although not too much. They all waited patiently for the ceremony to really begin.

About two hours later, in the middle of the ritual, I noticed how clumsily the seven children were performing the ritual acts for their deceased father, Bruno. The oldest son was in his forties, the youngest daughter in her twenties. Before each step, they looked at the assistant priest with questions in their eyes. Aware that not all participants knew about the proceedings or the meanings of Hindu rituals, David had started by giving a sixteen-minute explanation of the ritual, stating that its purpose was to integrate the deceased's soul into the universe. Now the assistant priest gently guided the children through the ritual acts, sometimes correcting mistakes. When washing their hands over bricks, they helped each other and exchanged advice. The assistant priest corrected them when they moved the incense in circles the wrong way. When the son had to pass rice balls under his arm to the priest, the assistant priest corrected his way of turning the hand several times, and finally seemed satisfied. When one of the daughters walked the wrong way, she laughed apologetically, but did not seem especially embarrassed about it. It was a scene where ancestral rituals were being learned on site, through practice. The children did not practice religion regularly, but they knew that it would have meant a lot to their father to have Hindu death rituals.

Toward the end of this ritual at the edge of the sea, the atmosphere became increasingly lively. Throughout the ritual, the deceased's children had had a few moments of cautious laughter and tears, and now, as it was drawing to a close with a ritual bath in the sea, the children's voices grew louder, their movements quicker. The fact that they had chosen to wear old, somewhat unfashionable leggings, shorts and T-shirts in contrast to the other attendees, who were well dressed, indicates that they had been

2 'Kalmadi' (pronounced [kalma'dī], and also called 'karoumadi' [karuma'dī] or 'karmadi' [karma'dī] on Réunion) corresponds to Tamil 'karumāti'.

given a rough idea about the proceedings of the ceremony, namely that these would include taking a bath and leaving their clothes behind in the sea (Figure 1). When they changed out of their old, wet clothing, which they threw into the sea, and into fresh white clothes, which shone brightly in the sunlight, they seemed to be conscious of having accomplished an important act. One cousin said with relief: 'Voilà, the work is done'. He also explained to me that the two weeks of 'eating vegetables' – as he called the ritual fast that does not allow the consumption of meat – would end later that day.

Figure 1: Bathing in old clothes in the sea before changing into white clothes. Réunion 2015 (photo: N.L.)

Death rituals are universal and yet culturally, socially, and personally specific. Arnold van Gennep's ground-breaking conceptualization of death rituals as rites of passage (1981) still finds acknowledgement today. As van Gennep demonstrates, death rituals are rites of passage through which the status of both the deceased and the bereaved changes. While the deceased transgresses a liminal phase before being integrated into the realm of death and afterlife, the bereaved go through a liminal period of mourning before adopting their new social roles, for example as widow. However, notions of death and afterlife are diverse. Frank Heidemann (2020) suggests that funerals are like fingerprints: discernible through their form yet different in detail. Reunionese death rituals reflect a situation of religious diversity, wherein ritual choices are about a search for meaning, origin-conscious self-positioning, and recognition.

Reunionese Hindus are French citizens of Indian and other origins living on Réunion, a French overseas department and remote region of the European Union in the Indian Ocean. Reunionese society is the outcome of multiple strands of migration to this previously uninhabited island. Due to the colonial situation of ethnic mixing (*métissage*) among people of African, Madagascan, Indian, Chinese, French and other origins who came to Réunion as slaves, indentured labourers, traders and colonizers, as well as other migrants, most Reunionese have ancestors from various parts of the world. Religious practices on the island developed in the context of economic difficulties and under the strong domination of the Catholic Church, with little contact with places of origin. This led to what Reunionese commonly refer to as 'double religiosity', which includes Catholic and other religious practices. Réunion became a French overseas department in 1946, but for several decades, social conditions remained far behind those of Metropolitan France. Only in the late 1960s and 1970s did some socially aspiring Reunionese start reorientation movements, which were mainly driven by an interest in ancestral religions. Favoured by the decline of colonial hegemonic power in many parts of the world and by French politics of decentralization, Reunionese society allowed greater institutional and social recognition of both creole culture and ancestral cultures. Reorientation projects by Reunionese of Indian origins included the acquisition of Hindu religious knowledge from India and negotiations over how to deal with different forms of knowledge.

After holding Catholic funerals for three or four generations, some Reunionese are now learning how to perform Hindu death rituals. However, such ritual choices do not necessarily exclude one another, as Reunionese Hindus can also conduct both. The *kalmadi* exemplifies how Reunionese Hindus try to attribute meaning to death rituals and how they deal with what some perceive as a situation of 'missing' religious knowledge after a long phase of sparse contact with India. Although a similar scene of learning how to conduct a *kalmadi* could have happened in India because of the complexity of the ritual, and although rituals generally involve concerns about their correct performance, which is usually based on how they are assumed to have been conducted in the past (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994), the way that Reunionese Hindus perceive their lack of religious knowledge and how priests and religious associations deal with this situation is specific to the Reunionese context and similar to other postcolonial contexts. As Burkhard Schnepel emphasizes, 'the politics of cultural heritage in the postcolonial Indian Ocean world is very often more about discontinuities, ruptures and turning points than about unbroken tradition and continuity' (2019:10). In many parts of the world where colonialism led to the transformation or loss of forms of knowledge, revivalist movements engage in projects of postcolonial 'unforgetting' (Bhatia 2017). By repeatedly emphasizing the (forced) forgetting of religious and cultural knowledge under colonial circumstances, such initiatives call for the unforgetting of these forgotten traditions to rebuild dignity and pride. Some Reunionese Hindus actively engage in such learning projects by acquiring religious knowledge from India, even though the

knowledge may differ from the actual practices of their ancestors. They thus produce the heritage that they refer to not only by going back in time, but also by relating to a different place (cf. Schnepel 2019:11).

However, Reunionese Hindus' attempts to relate to India as a place of ancestral knowledge are less about creating a sense of belonging to India, and more about their self-positioning in Reunionese society. Priests benefit from the situation of a perceived lack of knowledge in that they can earn recognition as experts and increase their social status. Religious associations take the quest for knowledge to the level of a more institutional struggle for recognition, which they seek from Reunionese society and from the French state. As such, their relating to the past by emphasizing 'forgotten' knowledge is as much about their outlook into the future, namely their wish for recognition. While France does not allow a religious census, my interlocutors usually estimated the number of Hindus or people of Indian origin at around thirty percent of Réunion's more than 850 000 inhabitants. This percentage may represent a generous self-assessment, especially by Reunionese Hindu associations which work toward recognition of Hindus as a religious minority. The fact that religious and ethnic categories are often conflated in these estimations makes the percentage even more problematic, and both Hindu religion and Indian origin are difficult to define as categories in Reunionese society because of people's diverse religious orientations and rich *métissage*. Whatever the percentage, though, Hindu religious activities are very visible in public, and in the narratives of some religious associations, Reunionese Hindus appear as an important minority in the making.

The relationship between the reorientation projects directed at India as a source of ancestral religious knowledge since the 1970s and the aim of achieving recognition for Hindu religion from Reunionese society and the French state connects broader questions about religion and trans-local relations with questions about the self-construction of religious minorities. One of these questions is how people negotiate religious practices and identities in contexts of (im)mobility with regard to the different audiences that grant recognition, including the adherents of other religions, societies, and states. Combining the material and sensory aspects of death rituals with the discursive level of people's life stories and organizations provides multi-layered perspectives on the relation between religion, translocal processes and recognition.

My insights into these questions are based on twelve months of anthropological fieldwork on Réunion in 2014/15, followed by five weeks in 2017, with participant observation and biographical interviews as the main methods. Participant observation at wakes is a particularly intense sensory experience. The almost silent murmuring of attendees, punctured by the high-pitched outbursts of a troubled, bereaved wife, combined with the smell of death in a warm room, produced lasting impressions recorded in my written and mental field diaries. I also remember my host grandfather listening daily to a radio channel on which, four times a day, a monotone voice recited a long list of the names of those who had recently died on the island. Fortunately, only three deaths oc-

curred in the distant kinship and closer social network of my host family in the course of the year, and I attended two *kalmadis* and two Catholic funerals. In the following three sections, the *kalmadi* serves as an example illustrating how the bereaved, the priests, and religious and cultural associations respectively render death rituals meaningful.

A KALMADI *FOR A DEVOUT FATHER*

The *kalmadi* is a complicated ritual with many intricate details. As Isabelle Clark-Decès notes, the *karumāti* ritual in Tamil Nadu is also highly complex and has so many different meanings that no one can offer an absolute and conclusive interpretation or explanation (2007:81–101). Conducted on the sixteenth day after the death, it is part of a series of Hindu death rituals that on Réunion also include, but are not limited to, rituals during the wake, inhumation or cremation, and on the first, eighth and forty-first days and one year after the funeral. This series of rituals, which is not necessarily performed in its entirety, is followed by ancestor worship. Especially the annual *semblani*,[3] which is usually held on All Saints' Day (November 1), is very important to many Reunionese. Although most Reunionese Hindus are of mixed descent, most have at least one Indian ancestor who came to Réunion as part of large movements of workers that the colonial sugar industry required. Nearly 10 000 Indian slaves were brought to Réunion between 1674 and 1830, and over 110 000 Indian indentured labourers came to the island between 1829 and 1881 (Fuma 1999:8–37). In contrast to colonies with high numbers of North Indian immigrants like Mauritius or Trinidad, most Indian indentured labourers on Réunion came from South India. During the *semblani*, Reunionese Hindus mostly honor those ancestors born on the island, as they often do not have enough knowledge about the ancestors who came from India three or four generations ago. Even though many Reunionese Hindus worship their ancestors during the *semblani* without having conducted a *kalmadi*, and although David, the priest, focused in his explanation on facilitating the entry of the deceased's soul into the universe with Shiva's approval, the *kalmadi* is also about allowing the deceased to become an ancestor and uniting the deceased's soul with the ancestors (cf. Clark-Decès 2007:91, Knipe 1977).

The need for ritual guidance and explanations during the *kalmadi* partly results from the scarcity of occasions on which Reunionese can see the ritual performed. Only certain families conduct it, and usually only the close family takes part. As in the *kalmadis* that I attended, in a *karmadi* that Jean Benoist observed on Réunion in 1975 the priest gave explanations and guided the son of the deceased.[4] When seventy-nine-year-old Gabriel attended a *kalmadi* with me, he told me that it was his seventh.

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3 The creole term 'semblani' (pronounced [sãmbla'nī]) corresponds to Tamil 'cāmpirāṇi' (English 'benzoin') and on Réunion denotes both resin-based incense and ancestor worship.

4 Benoist himself uses the term 'karmadi' (1998:182).

The need for ritual guidance and explanations also stems from the situation of the bereaved, who are in a state of shock, sometimes unable to deal with their irreversible loss and often wanting to perform a final service for the deceased. In contrast to other life-cycle rituals, like 'Tamil baptism' (as the name-giving ceremony, Tamil 'nāmakaraṇam', is often called) and marriage, death rituals are usually anticipated less. Bruno, for whom the family performed the *kalmadi* described above, died half-expectedly at the age of sixty-nine. Gabriel received a phone call that his nephew had had a heart attack after a high-risk operation. Later the same day, a second phone call announced his death. Even though the family had been aware of the risk of the operation, and Bruno had planned his funeral with David, the priest, some time ago, his wife and children had to do a lot of emotional work and organize several things, including making it possible for Bruno's wife to receive his pension. Bruno's family also clearly attempted to render his death rituals meaningful by doing their best to perform the rituals as correctly as possible. This included trying to personalize his wake two weeks before the *kalmadi*.

As Bruno had been a devotee of Shiva, his body was laid out in front of a yellow cloth gate and a large wall-hanging featuring Shiva in a room with the image of a dancing Shiva on the wall and a small shrine featuring images of Shiva and his son Ganesh. A cassette of "Om namah Shivaya" (a mantra dedicated to Shiva) played continuously in the warm, pungent room. Family and friends waited for David, some crying, some talking in low voices. Especially the daughters of the deceased, who took it in turns to sit next to the body, looked devastated. In the room, where devotion to Shiva was very tangible, all the relatives and neighbours made the sign of the cross as they arrived before sprinkling water over the body. Only Gabriel's family, whom I accompanied, prayed with joined palms. David arrived around four hours later. In between the prayers, he spoke briefly in Creole about the deceased and his devotion to Shiva before inviting us to sing "Om namah Shivaya" together. He added encouragingly that many of us would know this song, as it was often sung in the nearby temple. Then, after the body had been heaved into a coffin, as French law does not allow cremation without a coffin, Bruno's children tried their best to follow the ritual instructions. Bruno's son struggled to break open a coconut for the first time in his life. The priest and his assistant then showed him how to walk around the coffin five times, counter-clockwise, carrying and sprinkling incense, water and rice. Afterwards, the daughters were instructed how to do three rounds, before it was the turn of Bruno's widow, grandchildren and other relatives. Gabriel, an uncle of Bruno, and a very calm and discreet person, patiently waited until other, more distant relatives, had finished their rounds without paying him the respect he should have received as an older and closer relative. After a final five minutes or so for people to say their good-byes and throw flowers, the coffin was closed. The priest drew three lines for Shiva on it before it was carried to the car that was to take it to the crematorium.

Later, at home, Gabriel said: 'Now, he has left'. While Gabriel did not mention that others had unknowingly ignored him when approaching the coffin, he told me re-

signedly that one relative had taken incense with the spoon that was intended for taking water: 'He acts like an expert, but he doesn't know anything'. The following day, Gabriel complained in a half-annoyed, half-resigned way that Bruno's children had not yet invited him formally to the *kalmadi*, the ceremony by the sea. Usually the priest should give them a list of things to do, which includes making phone calls to invite people to the *kalmadi*. How could he then know whether he should fast the usual number of days with them or not, Gabriel sighed. 'If they do eight days, I'll do it with them. If they do sixteen days, I'll do it with them. You have to do it together. But if they don't tell me anything, I'll take a bath and go to the temple'.

Gabriel's concern was with the notion of impurity which is attached to the family members of the deceased for a certain period of time during which they cannot go to the temple. Each time family members, me included, returned from a funeral rite, we washed ourselves at the water tap in the courtyard before entering the house again. While the closest family members usually end the state of ritual impurity a year and a day after the death, more distant family members like Gabriel can take a ritual bath after shorter periods. After Bruno's death, different family members chose to fast for three, eight or sixteen days. Gabriel advised me to take a bath in the sea so that I could attend the temple rituals the following week.

There was a lot for me to learn in attending death rituals, including with respect to clothing. During funeral services in churches, I had observed that people wore Western clothes, with white the most prominent colour, followed by black, and less often other colours. Similarly, most people had come to Bruno's wake at his home in black and white Western clothes. I therefore asked whether I should wear white on the day of his *kalmadi*. However, my host-grandmother, Gabriel's wife, answered that the colour was not important – what was important was that I wore a *punjabi* (an Indian dress combination of trouser, tunic and shawl). Even though both the wake at the deceased's home and the *kalmadi* by the sea were Hindu rituals, the family associated Western and Indian clothing, respectively, with these two occasions and their respective locations. The introduction of Indian clothes, which Reunionese Hindus usually wear only for Hindu events (wearing Western clothes in their day-to-day lives), is part of the recent project of orientation toward India.

Some weeks later, another death in the wider family occurred. Patrice, the deceased, was the brother of a Hindu priest. 'Maybe another chance to see a *kalmadi*', I noted in my field diary. 'No, a Catholic funeral', I added several hours later. One day later, I joined the family for a Catholic funeral service in the neighbouring church. Sixteen days later, I joined the same family for a *kalmadi* by the sea. In contrast to Bruno's family, who did not usually practice Hinduism but had conducted a *kalmadi* without a church service for their father and husband, a Shiva devotee, Patrice's family, who were deeply involved in Hindu practices but respected Patrice's wish to have a Catholic funeral, chose to do both Catholic and Hindu death rituals. Both families organized Hin-

du rituals during the wake. In contrast to Bruno's body, which was cremated in one of Réunion's two crematoria, Patrice's body was buried in the cemetery without cremation.

Instead of undertaking classifications of assumed religious entities, I prefer to emphasize that the Reunionese discourse generally associates the combination of Catholic funeral, burial, and *kalmadi,* as conducted for Patrice, with the local concept of 'double religiosity', which is widespread on the island. Without exact knowledge of the caste backgrounds of Reunionese Hindus' ancestors, due to changed family names and *métissage* in the colonial period, or of the number of Christian (including Catholic) immigrants, it is difficult to say exactly where the practice of burial stems from on the island. It may come more from low-caste or Dalit traditions of burial in India (Clark-Decès 2007:128, Schömbucher 2010:485), from Christian practices that Indian immigrants conducted before they migrated, or from the adoption of Catholic practices on colonial Réunion. In the colonial period, Indian indentured labourers were allowed to continue some of their religious practices. However, the Church sought to prohibit Hindu ceremonies, which Catholic priests claimed were pagan and even infernal (Prudhomme 1984:318). Furthermore, French assimilation policies often included Catholic baptism. Even after Réunion became a French overseas department, the Catholic Church remained powerful, and Indian religious practices were often highly stigmatized, two important themes that Reunionese Hindus often evoke today. The reorientation movements of the 1970s were accompanied by an association of Hinduism with higher social status. While some Reunionese, often aspiring middle-class devotees, see a need to leave their 'double religiosity' behind in favour of Hinduism, others continue to perform diverse practices. Some of those who choose Hinduism over Catholic double religiosity, a decision that is also supported by the Catholic Church, look down upon those who continue to go to Church for their life cycle rituals, such as baptism, first communion and marriage. However, I have also met some who make the conscious decision to continue to perform both 'religions'. As much as the first see their decision in favour of Hinduism as an origin-conscious reaction to colonial pressure to adopt Catholic practices, some of the latter perceive their decision to continue both practices as a self-confident reaction to those who urge them to choose one religion, and as a way to claim pride in locally created practices. Rather than undertaking classifications myself, I am here referring to people's perceptions of different religiosities. Furthermore, the different approaches to the local concept of double religiosity do not represent two opposed groups of people. They merely are two tendencies among diverse approaches to different religious practices on Réunion, which also include Chinese, Madagascan, African, and other practices in this creole society.

The ways in which Reunionese Hindus render death rituals meaningful reflect the importance not only of Réunion's religious diversity, but also of sensory experiences during rituals and of religious explanations. While Bruno wished that Hindu death rites would be performed for him, he was also aware that Hinduism did not matter much to most of his children. Some family members emphasized that, because the chil-

dren were not particularly interested in Hinduism, the ceremony during Bruno's wake was a small affair. Normally it would also have included drums and pipe music. Furthermore, these family members pointed out that his *kalmadi* was very short, lasting only from 6:30 to 11:30 a.m. by the sea and finishing in the temple at noon. By contrast, they considered Patrice's longer *kalmadi* more normal. After carrying out the ceremonies by the sea and in the temple, we reached Patrice's home for a first *semblani* at 2:00 p.m. As Clark-Decès (2006) shows by documenting changes to Dalits' participation in funerals in Tamil Nadu, different ways of performing death rituals create different emotional experiences, especially through their sensory dimensions, and thereby produce different meanings. Even though Bruno's wake and funeral cortege did not feature drum and pipe music and his *kalmadi* was considered small in scale, and even though his children were unfamiliar with these rituals with their complicated bodily movements, the rituals became intensive bodily and emotional experiences for the mourners. The development from the concentrated yet moved way in which the children did their best to perform the rituals as correctly as possible to the relieved smiles and laughter after having accomplished the ritual acts seemed to suggest not only that they underwent several emotional stages but also that they felt their performance of these rituals was important. Furthermore, after the explanations provided by David, the priest, the children understood that the deceased, in accordance with his belief, needed their help to be allowed by Shiva to reach heaven. From being the father's wish at first, the death rituals, it seems, became even more meaningful to the mourners through the emotional experiences and explanations.

Through their explanations, Reunionese priests add meaning to rituals not only for the bereaved, but also for Reunionese Hindus in general. Presenting Hinduism as a knowledge-based religion also serves to justify Hindu practices as being at least as meaningful as the dominant Catholic practices, which is similar to other post-indenture contexts. Although the socio-historical circumstances of post-indenture contexts differ, for instance in terms of the regional backgrounds of Indian immigrants (for example, coming more from North or South India), their percentages of the post-indenture populations (presenting a majority or small/significant minority), and the state forms of the post-indenture societies (for example being an independent state or an overseas department), there are some similar themes and questions when it comes to death rituals and self-positioning. In his autobiographical novel, "The enigma of arrival", V.S. Naipaul narrates his experience of his sister's dying in Trinidad while he was in England, and how he returned to Trinidad to attend her 'ceremony of farewell' (2011:373–387) together with her family. When her cremation took place in Trinidad, Naipaul, still in England, consecrated some time to think about his sister with the help of photos that he spread out on a table. This highly personal way of remembering his sister was a meaningful act for him. Several days later, he attended the post-cremation funerary rites in Trinidad, which he describes from the perspective of a participant observer. Although religious rituals had not been important to Naipaul's sister and her family, her husband

and son paid great attention to the complete performance of her death rites. As with Bruno's death rites, the priest in Trinidad guided the son through the complicated acts. Naipaul's nephew seems to have focused with as much concentration as Bruno's son on following the instructions and listening to the explanations. Similar to Reunionese priests, who sometimes compare the meanings of Hindu practices with Catholic practices to legitimize them as meaningful, the priest in Trinidad compared Hindu with Christian and Muslim beliefs and scriptures to justify them in contemporary Trinidad. Furthermore, echoing the importance of 'sharing' religious knowledge on Réunion, an expression I have often heard from Reunionese priests and practitioners, the priest in Trinidad talked about 'sharing' the Gita (Bhagavad-Gita, a Hindu scripture). The nuanced way in which Naipaul writes about the ceremony of farewell for his sister in Trinidad reveals a gap between the priest and the family. His nephew and brother-in-law ask questions which reveal their lack of knowledge about Hindu notions of death and afterlife and which remain largely unanswered. Furthermore, Naipaul writes about the priest in a rather distanced way, including revealing that he himself does not understand the moral of a story that the priest tries to tell. He also describes how the conversations after the ceremony included relatives talking about the historical immigration of Indians to Trinidad, wherein unrelated historical events were interwoven into a narrative. Naipaul's writing suggests that even if 'we', by which he seems to refer at once to the bereaved, to Trinidadians of Indian origins, and to humankind in general, do not know the details of history and rituals, we can render them important. History and rituals are meaningful as long as they are meaningful to us. Naipaul's narration reveals how ritual specialists play important roles in the search for meaning after death, and at the same time how people can render rituals meaningful for themselves. In the context of perceptions of lost knowledge and postcolonial unforgetting on Réunion, I have observed complementary yet different roles of Indian and Reunionese priests.

Indian and Reunionese priests and knowledge-based rituals

The questions of having or not having religious knowledge, and what kinds of knowledge, are ubiquitous on Réunion. They reflect a search for meaning, as well as Reunionese Hindus' felt expectations of having knowledge about their origins, which are linked to claims for recognition, both institutionally and in terms of social status. Indeed, the growing acceptance of Hinduism on Réunion in the second half of the twentieth century was partly linked to the social mobility of some Reunionese Hindus. After the colonial sugar industry declined, Réunion was left without any significant economy. Although it became a French overseas department in 1946, the 1950s and 1960s were still characterized by social disillusionment, increasing unemployment and an understaffed health system (Combeau 2010). It was only in the 1980s that French socialist governments introduced a social welfare system. As a result of their attempts at

decentralization, in 1982 Réunion gained the status of a *région*, with greater authority in decision-makings, particularly in the areas of infrastructure and education. While only a few Reunionese of Indian descent had attained middle-class status through commerce and the acquisition of land in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, access to education after the island became a department promoted greater social mobility (Marimoutou-Oberlé 2008:136–137). With growing economic, political and social success, Reunionese of Indian descent have spread throughout the island's society, taking on positions ranging from agricultural and factory workers to middle-class businessmen and bureaucrats, or even highly educated economic and political leaders. French socialist governments also gave greater value to local culture, including the Creole language, and became more open toward turns to ancestral cultures (Gerbeau 1997:53). It is in this context that some Reunionese Hindus started reorientation projects directed at India. This led to several Brahmin priests coming from Mauritius and India to officiate in some of Réunion's temples.

While most of these Brahmin priests had been born and trained in India, becoming a priest as a Reunionese presents an alternative career in many senses. Without a caste system on Réunion (due to the historical context of *métissage*), becoming a priest depends largely on receiving the recognition of devotees. Without a standardized Hindu educational infrastructure on the island, knowledge acquisition relies on individual initiatives. Only men can become priests on Réunion; women have to find yet more alternative paths to turn their projects of learning into careers. While some men work as priests full-time like David, others have other jobs as well. In their life-stories, many Reunionese priests present their taking up priesthood as an alternative path to achieving success in their lives.

When Reunionese priests share religious knowledge, what is important is as much the social transmission of knowledge as the knowledge per se. Priests establish and nurture their social networks by conducting and explaining rituals, as well as by listening to devotees' problems and helping them in times of need. The importance that Reunionese priests attribute to providing practitioners with explanations and to the social relationships they create with them stands out compared to some of the Indian priests on Réunion. This is apparent in how the *kalmadi* scene, which I started to describe above, continued.

Although one cousin said with relief: 'Voilà, the work is done', in fact we were not yet done. Without the Reunionese priest David, we went directly from the sea to a nearby temple. In contrast to David, who had given explanations about what he was doing both in the family's home and by the sea, the Indian priest who performed the ceremony in the temple interacted little with the family and did not give them any instructions about what to do. When the Indian priest asked who was going to sing a devotional song, the widow replied that no one knew such a song. At the end of the ceremony, some of the elder family members knew that the tradition was for the son, whose head had

been shaved on the beach, to lie down before the elders. Some of the elders also knew that the tradition was to give the son some money. Others did not.

When we arrived back home and were sitting together on the veranda, the conversation not only included worries about Bruno's son, who already had a drink problem and, it was feared, would now fall into a sort of limbo. The family also talked about David, the Reunionese priest, and I was asked whether I had understood his explanations. Before I managed to reply – I was still thinking about a comparison David had made of Shiva with the president of the republic, and I felt the need to listen to my recording of his speech again to make sure that I had not misunderstood a number of his expressions in Creole –, everyone agreed that his explanations had been very good.

Contrary to Clark-Decès' observation in Tamil Nadu that mourners not only discussed amongst themselves how to perform the *karumāti* as correctly as possible, but also scolded the Brahmin priest for not doing it right (2007:100–101), all the participants in the two *kalmadis* I observed on Réunion depended on and respected the knowledge of both the Reunionese and Indian Brahman priests. However, the different ways in which the Reunionese and Indian priests engaged with the ritual participants reflect their different social positions in Reunionese society. Whereas the Reunionese priests give their explanations in Creole, I have only rarely seen Indian priests, whose mother tongue is Tamil, giving explanations, and that in broken Creole. Most Reunionese speak French and Creole, and only a few try to learn Tamil as part of their reorientation projects involving India. They do so mostly to be able to recite prayers, without necessarily understanding the meaning of the words. There is thus a considerable language barrier between Reunionese devotees and Indian priests. In addition, Reunionese priests can relate more to Reunionese practitioners' social lives than Indian priests, who largely live in a separate social sphere. While some Reunionese show respect for Indian priests and their ritual expertise or speak about them with compassion, especially given their lonely lives away from their families in India, other Reunionese complain that Indian priests do not explain what they are doing. This claim often goes hand-in-hand with accusations that these priests demand too much money from devotees, taking advantage of naïve Reunionese. By contrast, Reunionese priests often have close social relationships with their practitioners. These different roles of the two kinds of priests reflect the complex relationship between the aim of some Reunionese Hindus of practicing a global religion and the importance of local social relationships.

Priests are important actors in negotiations regarding Indian and local religious knowledge. These negotiations include different discourses on the 'newness' of certain traditions. During both *kalmadis* I observed, Reunionese priests performed the rituals on the beach, whereas Indian Brahman priests performed their rituals in the temple. Martin, a Reunionese Hindu in his forties who conducted the *kalmadi* for his mother, told me that going to a 'big temple' had not been part of the *kalmadi* until very recently. The notion of 'big temple' refers to a common differentiation between 'big' and 'small' temples on Réunion, 'Big temples' are ones that have been built or renovated in South

Indian architectural style in urban areas, and in them Indian Brahman priests have performed exclusively vegetarian rituals since the reorientation movements. By contrast, 'small temples' are ones built in Reunionese architectural style in formerly rural areas near the sugar-cane plantations, and in them Reunionese priests perform rituals that often include animal sacrifices. In contrast to the innumerable small temples, there are about seven big temples on the island, depending on what counts as 'big'. Although Reunionese temples generally have many divinities, there is a tendency for most small temples to be dedicated to the deities Karly, Marliemmen and Pandialé, which are the Creole names for the goddesses Kālī, Māriyammaṉ and Tiraupati. Most of the big temples focus on Mourouga (Muruga ṉ), who requires vegetarian Shivaite worship, even though some of these temples had sacrificed animals to Karly before their renovation.

Martin links the practice of going to a big temple during the *kalmadi* to the recent introduction of the notion of *vaïkoundam* (Tamil 'vaikuṇṭam'), which refers to the celestial abode of Vishnou (Viṣṇu), where the soul of the deceased should go. According to Martin, the soul of the deceased can only enter the *vaïkoundam* when prayers are offered to Shiva, Vishnou and Brahma, whose veneration takes place in big temples. Martin dates the practice of going to a big temple as part of the *kalmadi* to an even more recent date than the 1970s. By contrast, Gabriel showed me pictures of how he performed *kalmadi* for his mother in 1973 and went to a big temple where a Mauritian priest performed the rituals. In Martin's view, the Reunionese have lost the ability to perform a *kalmadi* and are having to relearn it. Gabriel, however, has the bodily memory of how to perform the actions of a relative of the deceased during *kalmadi.* This does not mean that he did not learn this anew. He is aware that the 'Tamil path', as he terms it, is something that he has chosen out of the various possibilities that his ancestors from different parts of the world would allow him to pursue in a Catholic-dominated society. And he has counted the seven times he has participated in a *kalmadi.* But, instead of emphasizing the newness of the ritual, he was one of the few family members present at Bruno's wake and *kalmadi* with experience of how to perform certain ritual acts.

The *kalmadi* thus illustrates how the discourses of some Reunionese Hindus about having lost religious knowledge run in parallel with the importance of embodied ritual knowledge. The ways in which the *kalmadi* becomes meaningful to Reunionese Hindus include bodily experiences, bodily routines, and learning about religious concepts such as the *vaïkoundam.* In addition to dealing with death, death rituals become sites where Reunionese priests and practitioners attempt to embellish the image of Hindu religion in Reunionese and French society both aesthetically and through explanations to increase the social status associated with it. Some activists take these attempts further by trying to institutionalize death rituals as part of their struggle for recognition of Hinduism.

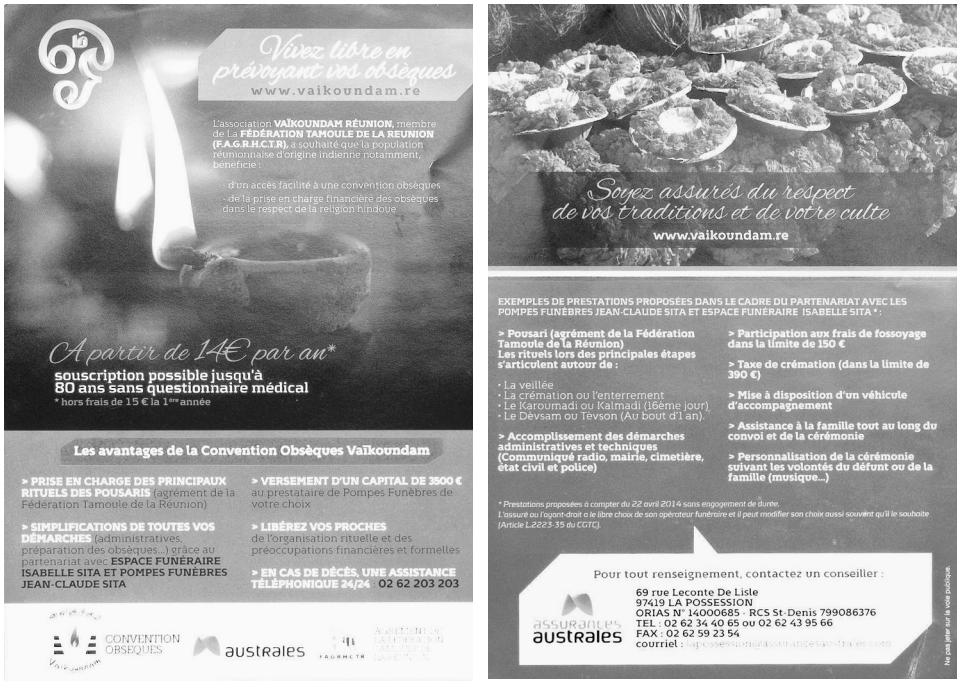
A FUNERAL ORGANIZATION FOR A RELIGIOUS MINORITY

While officially the laicist French state claims not to recognize any religion, the Reunionese case demonstrates that it does indeed grant different levels of recognition to different religions. The distribution of public holidays and other examples reflect the historical dominance of the Catholic Church, and efforts that several groups undertake to claim recognition as religious minorities reveal the need to adapt to certain criteria in order to be recognized as such. The creation of associations is part of such self-fashioning as a religious minority and enables groups to negotiate with the state. The Fédération des Associations et Groupements Religieux Hindous et Culturels Tamouls de La Réunion (in short Fédération Tamoule) was founded in 1971 as an umbrella organization of several religious and cultural associations to work towards the recognition of Hindus by Reunionese society and the French state.

Members of the Fédération Tamoule presented their work to me as a continuous struggle for recognition. From the conversations I had with them, I understood that, in addition to the institutional aspects of recognition, their struggle was as much about the social status associated with Hinduism. The social status of Hindus in Reunionese society is complex due to the widespread *métissage*, religious diversity and conflation of religious and ethnic categories. Reunionese Hindus are present in all social classes. Although many live in difficult social conditions, the economic and social success of a number of Reunionese Hindus has contributed to an improvement of the image of Hinduism in Reunionese society. To put it bluntly, this image has developed from being accused of being a form of sorcery to being increasingly attributed the status of a world religion and admired for its aesthetics. The federation's efforts to achieve this improvement in social status include retrieving knowledge from India in order to claim adherence to a recognized religion and developing an educational infrastructure in order to perform a knowledge-based religion, including an annual calendar and radio and television programs.

The foundation of a funeral organization, Vaïkoundam Réunion, in 2014 shows how the Fédération Tamoule has developed an approach that combines the aims of promoting education and achieving recognition. Back in 1976, the prefect granted the right to cremate corpses as one of several of the Fédération's demands, which also included granting visas for priests from Mauritius and India, offering an additional meal as an alternative to beef in school canteens, and teaching the Tamil language. It took until 1989 to have the first cremation on the island, and a second crematorium was built in 2008. However, the number of cremations and Hindu death rituals was still low several years later. The Fédération's members assumed that many people wished to have Hindu funerals but instead chose Catholic ones because the Hindu funerals were too complicated and expensive. The Fédération therefore created Vaïkoundam Réunion in partnership with an insurance company and two funeral parlours. In exchange for annual premiums, the insurance company organizes the funerals administratively and pays

for various goods and services, including the coffin, the cremation and the priest's fees. The advertising flyer promises respect for the client's specific religious tradition, and it lists four principal death rituals which the insurance covers: the wake, the cremation or burial, the *kalmadi* on the sixteenth day after the death, and the ceremony after one year (Figures 2–3). Complementing their educational approach, and in order to advertise the new initiative further, the Fédération Tamoule provided explanations of the funerary rites on each month's page of their 2015/2016 calendar (the year 5116 of the Kali Yuga calendar), which was for sale in Réunion's 'Indian' shops.



Figures 2–3: Front and back of a flyer of the funeral organization Vaïkoundam Réunion

Despite the Fédération Tamoule's dedication to what they perceive as part of their struggle for recognition, the creation of Vaïkoundam Réunion has had little impact on death rituals on Réunion. Bruno's and Patrice's *kalmadis* in 2015 were not conducted through Vaïkoundam Réunion, although the priest, David, is one of the licensed priests that insured clients can choose among. The Fédération Tamoule presents Vaïkoundam Réunion as a solution to the excessive fees asked by the priests, and one member of the Fédération told me that even the authorized priests do not advertise Vaïkoundam Réunion too much because their work would be more closely controlled by the company, and because the priests could charge more if they conducted a *kalmadi* privately. By contrast, Bruno's wife told me that David did not charge any money for Bruno's *kalmadi*

apart from the cost of materials. In 2017, a member of the Fédération informed me that, with around five hundred members signed up for the funeral insurance, the initiative had had only limited success. He attributed this to the cost, which at first sight is higher than that of other insurances. Nevertheless, he was relieved that everything had worked out perfectly after the first insured client died.

My observations on the rather unsuccessful attempt to promote a funeral insurance that considers religious specificities presents a snapshot in time from 2014 to 2017. Without knowing whether interest in institutionalizing Hindu death rituals might decline or increase, I see the federation's initiative as exemplifying how death rituals on Réunion are about more than dealing with a person's death. For some, death rituals are also about performing the identity of a religious minority in the making. These Reunionese Hindus aspire for recognition on both the institutional level, such as by creating a funeral organization to facilitate Hindu death rituals, and on the social level, by creating awareness of Hindu death rituals as meaningful and beautiful rituals and thereby contributing to Hinduism's social standing.

Death, remembrance and unforgetting

Death rituals reveal different levels of people's search for meaning. In the socio-historical context of Réunion, with its diverse ancestral backgrounds and the historical importance of the Catholic Church, conducting Hindu death rituals is not a given. Choosing Hindu death rituals may have different levels of importance to the deceased and the bereaved and may entail a conscious decision not to have a Catholic funeral, or to have both. The performance of bodily movements, which the priests render symbolically significant through their explanations, can turn Hindu death rituals into emotional and meaningful experiences. Aesthetic experiences and explanations add meaning for the bereaved in that, through performing death rituals, the bereaved understand themselves to be doing something important for the deceased and for themselves. In addition, the performance of knowledge-based death rituals is also important for Reunionese who take pride in Hinduism as their ancestral religion and feel the need to justify their religious practices through explanations of their meaning. This becomes especially apparent in the case of those who perceive themselves as leading a struggle for recognition after a time of epistemic violence. Even though religious associations voice their struggles for recognition in terms of institutional recognition by the French state, the explanations that Reunionese priests share with their devotees and the efforts that the associations undertake to facilitate the conduct of Hindu rituals and to institutionalize religious education are just as much about the social status associated with Hinduism in Reunionese society. In this way, death rituals include various dimensions of loss and remembrance. Besides helping to turn deceased loved ones into ancestors who can be remembered, these rituals can be mobilized as part of a politics of unforgetting.

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