THE MATERIALITY OF DIASPORIC IDENTITY: HINDU TEMPLES IN TRINIDAD AND MALAYSIA

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Religious structures are common forms of material culture in the landscapes of most parts of the world. As such, they can be analyzed as conscious, collective, public expressions of a people's religious and cultural identity; particularly if the group in question is a minority. In this study, the building and rebuilding of Hindu temples in Trinidad and Malaysia are analyzed in terms of the conditions of migration, the colonial social environment and postcolonial political environment for each group. Trinidadian Hindus have chosen localized transformation in architectural styles with a contemporary flowering of the Hindu presence in Trinidad, while Malaysian Hindus have chosen traditionalism with a contemporary revitalization of rebuilding existing temples according to classical prescription.

Introduction

Expressing one's ethnic identity as a minority community in a plural society is achieved in a multitude of ways. Much of the academic literature on the subject focuses upon political, social, economic and cultural contexts and behaviors. Some of these behaviors result in concrete expressions, such as foodways, musical systems and art, while most others are less tangible in form, such as political behaviour and religious beliefs. A less common form of research in this area is the analysis of religious material culture in the landscape as a means of assessing the collective identity of a minority community.

Sullivan (in P. Lewis 1994: 82) notes that people and the buildings they create express each other within and without, and that buildings can be used as an index to a community's identity. In addition, Pierce Lewis (1994: 84) goes on to explain that people's houses, like culture itself, springs from the past. Thus, migrants are likely to carry their ideas about proper house types with them to their new home, and one can trace the persistence of their culture through time and space by observing continuity or discontinuity in the kinds of houses people build.

In this paper, I propose that Hindu temples, like houses, reveal much about the communities that build them in Trinidad and Malaysia. As public, material expressions of religiosity in the landscape, temples are imbued with issues of collective intention regarding identity and community cohesion. For the Hindus of Trinidad and Malaysia, temples are laden with social, political and religious meanings that reflect generations of tension and negotiation within the community in counterpoint to the dominant social and political milieu in which they live. In this project I formulate a typology of temple forms in Trinidad and Malaysia, and

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I track the history of building and rebuilding in order to illustrate the synergistic relationship between people, their identity and their landscape.

Method of Study

My primary objective is to investigate the evolution of the form and function of temples in diasporic Hindu communities.[1] More specifically: how do the temples function for devotees?; how do the physical attributes of the temples reflect the collective choices of Hindu communities over more than a century of presence in former British colonies?

A combination of academic literature research and field work in the form of a structure survey was the primary means of collecting data for this study. Work in Trinidad (eastern Caribbean) began in 1984 with a preliminary study, and a full survey of temples on the island in 1985. Since then I have returned to Trinidad in 1988/89, 1993/94, 2003 and again in 2009 for follow-up studies. In 2003, I specifically resurveyed a random sample of the original field survey and also found new temples along the way. Work in Malaysia (southeastern Asia) began in 1993 with a feasibility study, and a full survey of temples in the state of Pulau Pinang (the colonial name is Penang & Province Wellesley – in northwestern, peninsular Malaysia) in 1994. Given the large size of Malaysia, the state of Pulau Pinang was selected for study because it is one of the oldest areas of settlement by Hindus since British contact in the region, and it is representative of the Hindu community at large. Since then, I have remained current with political, cultural, and religious events important to Malaysia's Hindu community. Finally, visits to villages in the central part of the Bhojpuri Hindi speaking region (between Varanasi and Patna) and Tamil Nadu (from Madras to Madurai) in India during the summers of 1988, 1995, and 2005 completed the fieldwork. They represent the dominant regions of origin for Trinidad's and Malaysia's Hindus respectively.

Both surveys generated a mass of architectural, demographic, historical and site/situation data on 186 extant temples in Trinidad and 140 extant temples in Malaysia. In both cases, large scale topographic maps (1:25,000) were used and every road was systematically driven to identify temples. When a temple was located, informants were easily found and interviewed about the history, usage and meaning of the temple. In addition, I observed and noted structural and site/situation features. Finally, supporting data and documentation was acquired in local libraries and government offices.

Building Temples

People invest spiritual, emotional, social and physical resources into their places of worship. For Hindus, this entails the karmic benefits of helping to create and maintain a place of worship, as well as the personal relationship they may evolve with a particular deity. Social organization provides the network of human resources

available for creating and sustaining a place of worship, thereby establishing grounds for the collective negotiation of a temple's spiritual integrity (even if worship events are individual experiences). Finally, the availability of physical resources and the culturally traditional selection of certain resources for the building of temples temporally grounds the spiritual, emotional and social realities of a worship event.

Establishing a temple at a specific site necessarily demands a particular resource base, notions about how and where to build, and meeting the spiritual needs of the local community. Thus, one would expect to see temples that resembled those in the homeland erected within a reasonable amount of time from the onset of migration. Over the years the needs of the Hindu community and the level of tolerance of the dominant culture would preclude the expansion of temple sites and the manner of building temples. Rebuilding or renovating temples, often by replacing a structure with a new one, becomes a viable option as communities re-invest in their socio-religious infrastructure and their collective identity. Trinidad's Hindus have largely chosen transformation, while Malaysia's Hindus continue to choose traditionalism as a guiding principle in the temple building and re-building experience.

Hindu Temples in Trinidad[2]

Hindus represent approximately 18% of Trinidad's population in 2011; a number that reflects a relatively recent decline in the proportion of Hindus in the total population. For over a century, Hindu Indians were approximately a quarter of the total population, and they have always been the largest religious group within the Indian population since the indentureship period.[3] Their presence in Trinidad's landscape is largely represented through their places of worship, and they have several kinds of places for worship. These include *puja* (ritual offering) rooms in their homes, as well as shrines and temples. Some shrines are associated with local supernatural beliefs, but in most cases Sanskritized[4] deities are the focus of worship at all types of ritual centers. Temple building in Trinidad emerges through several stages in form and material. Changes in material parallel closely those for homes and other types of structures among all Trinbagoans; i.e. from thatch roofed, wattle and daub structures to wooden structures to concrete ones today (J. N. Lewis 1983). Changes in temple form and function reveal changes specifically associated with Trinidad's Hindu population.

According to Collens (1888), Hindu migrants depended on holy books, plants and small statues of the deities (*murtis*) that they brought with them. Since folk deities are generally propitiated under trees throughout India, it is safe to assume that Hindus in Trinidad continued this practice from the earliest time. Eventually, home shrines gave way to specially constructed traditional-style temples of northern Indian vernacular styles in the house yard or garden. The earliest known temples in Trinidad were erected by the 1860s and were mainly of bamboo or wattle and daub construction with a thatch roof, which I designate as *simple traditional* temples

(Figure 1). By the 1880s more substantial structures were established in "clay brick" and stone, which I designate as *traditional* temples (Figure 2). Traditional temples are relatively small, square and always have a *sikhara*, or dome that enshrines the deities.

Figure 1:   A Carat Palm Temple in Trinidad (2003 Photo by Author)

Figure 2:   One of the Earliest Temples Built in Trinidad (1880s). The Wooden Section to the Right was Added Later and Today it is Behind a Wall. (1988 Photo by author)

During the 1920s a new temple type was introduced and locally called the *koutia*. In India, the word and architectural form are multi-faceted in significance. According to Rana Singh,[5] the term derives from the Sanskrit, *kuti*, which means a hermitage of a great sage in Vedic times. It is also a vernacular (Bhojpuri) term that refers to a temple compound (more commonly called *matha*) or to the structure that houses the person (*pujari*) who takes care of day to day maintenance and ritual requirements of the temple. In Trinidad, the *koutia* took on the function of an assembly hall, when it was added to a traditional temple (see Figure 2 again) during the visits of itinerant Hindu holy men from India. Eventually it became a temple in and of itself, though it is difficult to determine exactly when and where this took place. *Koutias* are rectangular, rather than square, and have a flat, shed roof or low-angle gable roof (Figure 3). They rarely have domes, except in some cases where a decorative one has been added to the front porch.

The *koutia* temple evolved into the Trinidadian temple by the 1950s. The addition of a dome in the back of the structure where the deities were enshrined successfully merged the traditional form with the *koutia* (Figure 4). Thus, the Trinidadian form is rectangular also, with a raised platform and dome at one end and the rest of the structure extending away from it with space to seat several hundred people in the larger versions. Trinidadian temples always have a dome and an assembly hall attached to the domed area. Thus, the traditional congregational style of worship emerged (*satsang*) as a significant part of religious life in

Figure 3: A Koutia Temple in Trinidad (1988 Photo by author)

conjunction with a transformed sacred space. It could function simultaneously with the traditional pattern of individual and family worship within the same physical space.

While it would appear that Hindus are merely mimicking a Christian model for group worship, there is much evidence to show that the emergence of the Trinidadian temple is more complicated in its origins. Adapting to life in a Christian and Christianizing colony requires the deployment of all possible resources, including the many forms of group worship practiced in the homeland. Open air events in the villages included large scale rituals around holy days in the calendar, festivals for specific deities, or simply gathering to sing *bhajans* (religious songs) at home or at a sacred site. Moreover, some south Indian temples always have a *mandapa* (hall extending from the *vimana* –domed enclosure of the deity), while a hall for an audience has been in existence since medieval times in northern and eastern temples of India (Biswas 1980). The transformation of the *koutia* into a temple, and the emergence of the Trinidadian temple, certainly have some resemblance to Christian churches, but they also draw upon deep roots from the homeland. Hindus in Trinidad, like those of Guyana, maintain rituals and relationships with mainly north Indian, Vaishnavite deities but they also accept a universalizing principle of the godhead whereupon most temples follow the same religious calendar, enshrine a similar constellation of Sanskritized deities, and

Figure 4: Trinidadian Style Temple. (2003 Photo by author)

provide the same kinds of opportunities for individual, family, and larger group worship (Jayawardena 1966, Vertovec 1993).Given the success of the Presbyterian Mission in attracting new converts, (Samaroo 1981, Prorok 1997b) Hindu leaders recognized it as a vital force in the larger community. Thus, to some degree, a Christian sensibility was incorporated into the physical and ritual structure of worship such as benches or chairs in rows for seating, and a homily of sorts by the priest as he expounds the meaning of a particular passage from sacred literature.In the end, they are an adaptation to a substantially intolerant (towards Hinduism) colonial social, political, and cultural environment.

Hindu Temples in Malaysia[6]

In Malaysia, Hindus constitute approximately 6-7% of the total population (Christian and Muslim Indians raise this proportion by 1-1.5%). This percentage has remained fairly constant for nearly a century. In the state of Pulau Pinang, the focus of this study, the proportion of Hindus has fluctuated between 10 and 11% over the past century (see the census of Malaysia from 1890 onwards including the most recent 2011 report). As in Trinidad, Malaysia's Hindus have shrines, temples, and *puja* rooms in their homes. Unlike Trinidad, temples in Malaysia continue to be primarily traditional in form and function. Thus, the typology presented here is based on a combination of the characteristics of form and function from the original, southern Indian folk styles and *dravida* styles transplanted by migrants, rather than one reflecting evolutionary changes in form and function.

From the earliest known migration of Hindus to Malaysia in the modern era (1790) to the present, temples tend to be established in two basic forms. *Agamic* temples are those built according to the Sanskritic *agamas*, and they are often substantial structures. Second are folk temples, which tend to be simpler in form.

Several features are consistently present in an agamic temple; (1) a *vimana*, which is literally the temple itself as the house and body of God. This is understood to be the main, domed structure that enshrines the deity. (2) a *mandapa*, which is a pillared hallway extending away from the vimana. (3) at least one *gopura*, or towered gateway that rises anywhere from 20-50 feet and often dominates the entire sacred space (Figure 5). It is also notable for the plethora of carved and colorfully painted figures that reflect Hindu narratives of deities and their devotees. *Agamic* temples are expensive to build, require skilled artisans, and are dependent on a wealthy patron or the wealth of donations from a substantial number of devotees. They may also have strong caste linkages, such as that of the *Chettiar* community.

Folk temples in Malaysia are generally small in size, made of local timber with pitched roofs of corrugated iron, and they can be viewed in two ways. The first are those established at sites with a natural feature that is often imbued with sacred significance. This can be along a river bank or waterfall, at a cave (as with the Batu Caves outside of Kuala Lumpur), under special trees such as the pipal

(*Ficus Religiosa*) or neem (*Azaderachta indica A. Juss*), and particular termite mounds (*Odontotermes obesus*) (Figure 6) which are called *kalayan* in Tamil and believed to house sacred cobras that serve *Sakti*—the fundamental feminine force that drives the existence of this universe and which is expressed in all things feminine such as goddesses.

Figure 5:   A *Gopura* in Malaysia. (1994 Photo by author)

People believe that local spirits manifest themselves at such places, and if an extraordinary experience occurs in conjunction with such a site then often a simple structure (and occasionally an *agamic* one) is erected in association with, in, or around, the natural feature. The second type of folk temple was usually established on the estates or along the railroad where many Hindus labored.

They were also of simple construction, and may or may not have been built in association with a special natural feature (Figure 7). Remembered village deities, caste deities and some Sanskritized deities were often enshrined.

Figure 6: An Amman Temple (Mother Goddess Temple) as Expressed through Ritualized Termite Mounds in Malaysia. (1995 Photo by author)

Malaysian temples, whether folk or *agamic* in form, exist as the embodiment of particular sacred places, entities, or powerful energies that draw devotees from near and far. Hindus and believing non-Hindus visit any given temple based upon a relationship with the deity/deities enshrined there. Festivals and relevant holy days are marked at specific temples where large groups of devotees gather or process the deity. Given this traditional function of the temple, location matters. Worship at the site over any length of time imbues that site with the sacred force of the deity/ deities and the people's active devotion.

Establishing and Rebuilding Temples in Trinidad and Malaysia

Because the act of building or renovating a temple entails such a significant investment on the part of a family or community it becomes a useful gauge for

Figure 7: A Temple Dedicated to the Village Guardian *Maduraiveeran* and Set in a Rubber Grove in Malaysia. (1995 Photo by author)

assessing group activities at a large scale. In addition, the *relative* permanence of temples in the landscape provides a visible record of past choices made by a community. Thus, the following data on establishing and rebuilding temples illustrates past and present patterns of Hindu interaction with the dominant cultural communities of Trinidad and Malaysia. For the purposes of this study, the terms 'renovating' and 'rebuilding' are used interchangeably, and though not synonymous, they refer to major architectural additions which often include a rebuilding of the original structure.

Trinidad

Based upon the 1985 field survey, 186 temples have been established in Trinidad at their present sites. In 2003, a reconnaissance of the island indicates that at least another 50 temples have been added to this list. Certainly, there would have been temples established and possibly abandoned over the last 150 years, however, their numbers should not be great and would unlikely detract from the pattern illustrated in Figure 8. During the period of indentureship (1845-1917) nearly 20 temples are known to have been established. All of them were simple traditional or traditional temples that survived in some form to this day. In the late nineteenth century many Hindus would have worshipped at small shrines in their gardens or fields and homes (Prorok 2013).
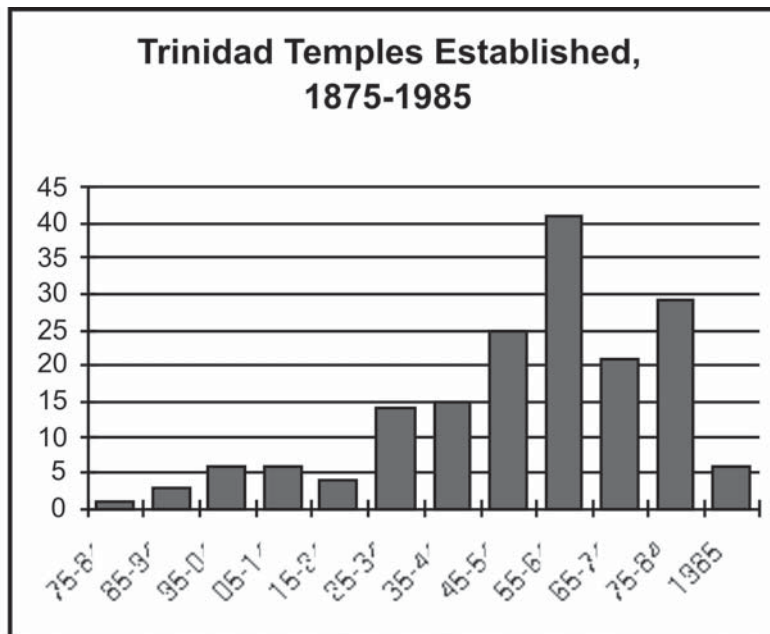
Trinidad Temples Established, 1875-1985

Figure 8: Temples Continue to be Established in Trinidad with Both Individual and Community
Support. Two Temples in the Original Survey have Unknown Dates of Establishment

Building temples during the indenture period was fraught with difficulty for Trinidad's Hindus. But, with the Hindu community well established and freely settled by the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century, the stage was set for expansion of temple sites. Reaction to the pressure of Christian proselytization, and the catalytic effect of charismatic religious leaders such as the Arya Samaji missionary Mehta Jamini galvanized many Hindu communities who built temples as a part of their new found sense of community cohesion and identity (Singh 1974:63). Nearly four times as many temples were built from 1925-1934 as in the previous decade, and it is during this time that the innovation of using the *koutia* as a temple occurred. Expansion of the Hindu population and the politicization of the Hindu community in the wake of universal enfranchisement in 1945-6 produced an environment of frenetic temple building when compared to previous decades. It had taken 100 years to establish the first 50 temples, and then from 1945 to 1964, during which universal enfranchisement was established, independence had been achieved, and Hindu political aspirations were in their incipient, yet heady stage (1962), 66 temples were built; this represents one third of all extant temples at the time of the survey. During the period from independence to 1985 another 69 temples were established, though the total number for each decade seems to be in decline. Follow-up studies in 1988/89,

1993/94, and 2003 though not comprehensive, indicate that new temples continue to be established though at a moderate pace.

Figure 9 indicates the pattern of rebuilding temples in Trinidad. The earliest renovations in the late 1920s and 1930s mainly entailed the addition of a *koutia* to an already standing traditional temple. Thereafter, most renovations replaced earlier temple forms with a newer form. For example, Shiva Mandir in El Dorado (between Tunapuna and Arima) began as a simple traditional temple in 1926. It was rebuilt as a traditional temple in 1950, had a *koutia* attached in 1956, and was rebuilt (with the original traditional temple incorporated into the structure) as a Trinidadian temple in 1983. In this case one can see that renovation and rebuilding are as significant as the original establishment of the temple in terms of spiritual, social, and economic investment. During the economic boom period of the late seventies and early 1980s, renovations outnumbered the building of new temples for the first time, indicating first and foremost the sense of political and social transition many Hindu communities felt, and secondly that they had the financial means to act upon this sensibility (Vertovec 1990 and 1993).

Both the establishment of temples and their renovations have grown in number during the independence period, and they follow a provocative pattern in that there are significant upsurges of (re)building activity during election years (Prorok 1988). This points to the central role of the temple as an organizing principle around which political leaders have been able to effect power and influence. Given the minority position of the Hindu Indian population and their substantial numbers in several districts in western Triniadad (sugar cane areas), they have constituted the opposition party most of the time though they have posed a real challenge to the power base of the party in power (PNM-People's National Movement). Until 1996, when they were successful in electing Trinidad's first Hindu Prime Minister (Basdeo Panday), minority politicians organized political rallies at temples and often made a "donation" towards its upkeep. The infusion of new cash resulted in the renovation of existing structures and the desire of some communities to have their own temples (for both spiritual and political reasons). Mr. Panday remained Prime Minister until 2001 when he was replaced by the PNM. During his tenure, he increased public monies available to all religious organizations and Hindus, for the first time, felt they were receiving their fair share of public resources. In 2010, Trinbagoans elected a second Hindu prime minister and the first woman to serve as head of state: Kamla Persad-Bissessar. Not surprisingly there has been a major building and rebuilding boom throughout the past twenty years. They are able to build temples anywhere they own land. In Trinidad, Hindus have arrived!

Malaysia[7]

Based upon the 1994 survey of Penang, Malaysia 140 temples were established at their present sites. As in Trinidad, this survey represents only extant temples and
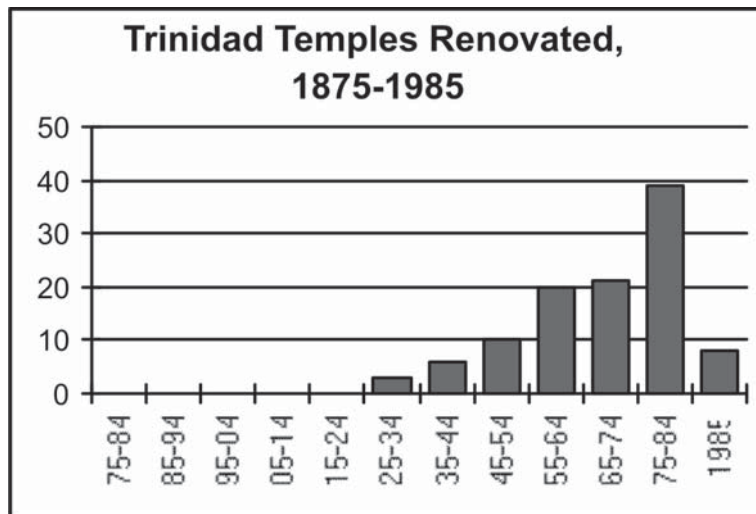
Trinidad Temples Renovated, 1875-1985

Period	Count
75-84	0
85-94	0
95-04	0
05-14	0
15-24	0
25-34	3
35-44	6
45-54	10
55-64	20
65-74	21
75-84	39
198	8

Figure 9: Some Temples were not Renovated during this Period Whereas others were Renovated Multiple Times. Twenty Renovation Events have Unknown Dates

does not include any temples that may have been built and then disappeared for various reasons. Figure 10 shows the pattern of establishing new temple sites from 1790 to 1994. Contact between Indians and Malayans probably dates to the pre-Christian era, and Hindu culture certainly has dramatically influenced various regions of southeastern Asia since then. In the modern state of Malaysia no extant temples and few archaeological sites remain from that era. The temples of Penang (Pulau Pinang) date only since the time of British hegemony in the region, which began in 1786.

In the early years Hindu migrants were merchants, domestic servants or laborers. By 1870, Indians—of whom at least 80% were Hindu, replaced the Chinese as principal laborers in an expanding sugar industry in Penang and Seberang Perai or Province Wellesley (the mainland section of the state of Pulau Pinang). Until the 1890s, when rubber estates were commercially established, Indian migrants formed a small, but significant, population in Malaysia. Thus, the period from 1790-1890 reveals a slow, but inexorable establishment of temples to serve the Hindu community.

The period from 1890-1909 shows a remarkable surge in the building of temples. This is primarily due to the systematic influx of substantial numbers of Indians (*kangani* recruitment) brought in by the British from southern India and colonial Ceylon (Sri Lanka today) to labor on rubber estates. Establishing temples drops dramatically in the next decade and recovers at a moderate level until the period of Malaysian independence.
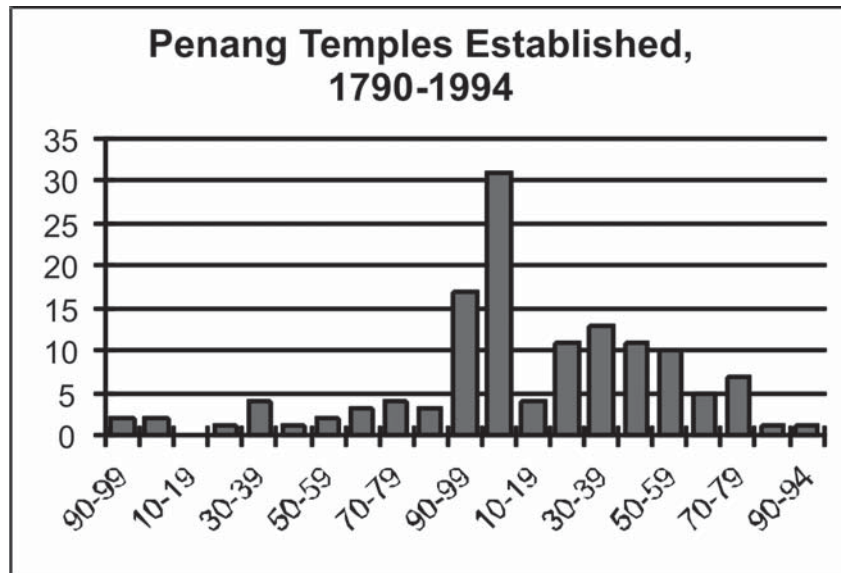
Figure 10: This graph largely reflects the only period during which new temple sites are established
in and of themselves. It is very difficult to establish a new temple in Malaysia today.
(Seven temples have unknown dates of establishment in this data set)

A number of reasons occur for this pattern. First, Pulau Pinang or Penang, was among the earliest locales in the establishment of rubber estates. Experimentation with trees began in the late 1880s and the first estates created in the mid-1890s. Second, rubber takes six to eight years to mature before harvesting can begin. Trees planted in the mid-1890s would be ready for harvest only at the turn of the century when labor needs would be greater. The first rubber boom came in 1905, at which point rubber became the dominant crop of the mainland portion of Pulau Pinang (Seberang Perai; aka Province Wellesley). Prices stabilized and then another boom came from 1908-12, whereupon rubber estates expanded rapidly. This expansion mainly occurred in other states, as Pulau Pinang was nearly saturated with estates on available land. Finally, the Hindus who were recruited to labor on the estates would often find a temple already established near their housing unit. Unlike Trinidad, estate owners (both British and Chinese) would help the incipient Hindu community to establish a temple and a toddy shop (a fermented palm drink) right away with the assistance of the *kangani* recruiter. One reason given for this practice was that plantation owners believed that workers were more productive if these two institutions were immediately at hand. Another reason given for establishing the temples is that it helped in the recruitment process of Tamilian Hindus. There is an old Tamil adage attributed to the Sage Auvaiyar, and which is repeated by many to this day; "kovil illa uril kudi irrukka vendam" or "do not live

in a place where there is no temple."[8] Thus, recruiters often assured prospective migrants that temples already existed on estates. Once laborers arrived, they often expanded the number of temple sites on the plantation or in the surrounding area according to their perception of localized sacralities and/or to accommodate the sheltering of related deities.

The pattern of establishing temples as revealed in Figure 10 reflects the early and rapid growth of rubber estates in Pulau Pinang, as well as their stabilization by the 1910s. Temple building recovered as the larger Hindu population established second and third temples on some estates, migrated to create their own communities in rural areas, or went in search of work in local towns. The dramatic drop in establishing new temples from 1980 onwards reflects the difficulty of Hindus to get permission to build new structures in the independence period (Ramanathan 1995: 249).

Figure 11 indicates that renovation of temples in Malaysia is primarily a recent phenomenon with more than three quarters of them occurring between 1970-1994. Also notable is that there have been more renovations (152) in this time-frame than the total number of temples in existence. This results from some temples having been renovated more than once. In addition, several temples have been physically destroyed and/or moved to different locations due to pressure from development schemes and government intervention (Ramanathan 1995: 250).

A politically complex scenario emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s that dramatically impacted the Hindu community (as with other religious and ethnic groups) in Malaysia. First, the federal elections of 1969 were fraught with racialized/ethnic polemic, and two ethnically based opposition parties (Gerakan and DAP)[9] won seats at the expense of the Malay controlled Alliance party. Public celebrations in the streets by supporters of the opposition parties, and a counter-rally by Alliance supporters degenerated into violence, whereupon it took four days to restore order to the city. Kuala Lumpur burned.

A state of emergency was called. Within several months of the riots the government established a Department of National Unity to formulate a national ideology in order to prevent another recurrence of ethnic animosity. In 1970, on Independence Day (August 31), the new ideology—*Rukunegara*—was proclaimed (Andaya & Andaya 1982: 281):

> Our nation, Malaysia, being dedicated to achieving a greater unity of all her peoples; to maintaining a democratic way of life; to creating a just society in which the wealth of the nation shall be equitably shared; to ensuring a liberal approach to her rich and diverse cultural traditions; ...

The government continued to establish committees whose task was to provide positive and practical guidelines for inter-racial co-operation, and laws were enacted that restricted public speech and behavior that could lead to communal violence. In keeping with its anti-communalism campaign, the government announced in
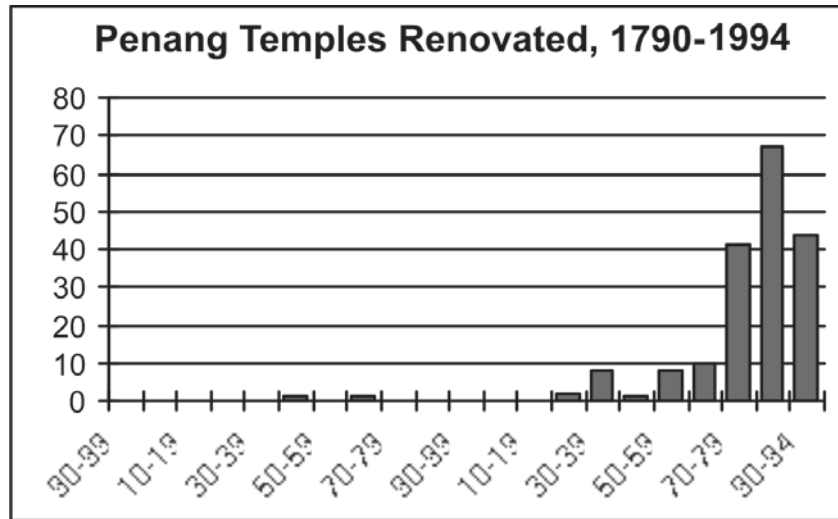
Penang Temples Renovated, 1790-1994

Figure 11: Today, Hindus have little recourse but to rebuild existing temples as means of community cohesion. Twelve temples have unknown dates of renovation, and four temples have never been renovated in this data set.

1971 a new "National Cultural Policy" or NCP. Its three basic premises are as follows (Kua 1987:14):

1. The National Culture must be based on the indigenous culture of this region.

2. Suitable elements from the other cultures can be accepted as part of the National Culture.

3. Islam is an important component in the moulding of the National Culture.

There is not much in this policy that would surprise anyone knowledgeable about Malaysia's postcolonial politics. Assertion of a politicized Malay identity during decolonization was central to the creation of the modern Malaysian state. Also, the Malaysian Constitution identifies Islam as the state religion, while granting the right of every religious group to maintain its religious institutions. The Malay dominated committee that produced this policy in large part were reaffirming what was already *fait accompli* as far as the politico-cultural environment was concerned. British authorities had assured Malay Sultans that the position of Islam was inviolable when they signed agreements in 1874 that imposed British rule on the peninsula. A subsequent agreement in 1948 made Islam the official religion (Ramanathan 1994, 1995).

So then, why does the NCP play such a pivotal role in inter-ethnic relations when its position was already a public reality? First, new civil regulations that governed public cultural events were based upon the policy. The regulations cover many issues, such as permits for public processions, school cultural programs,

public performances of dance and theater, access to radio/television airtime and the establishment of new cemeteries and places of worship. Since these regulations were primarily made by Malays, the interpretation of what was "suitable" from non-Malay cultures was often applied in a limiting and restrictive manner as Malay nationalism continued to intersect with more rigorous notions of what constituted the 'proper' practice of Islam. In addition, such interpretations were inconsistent from one region of Malaysia to another. Secondly, the NCP was produced from a commission whose task was to promote ethnic harmony. Much to the dismay of Malay political leaders, Chinese and Indian communities criticized the policy as assimilative and unfair. From the Chinese and Indian point of view, the policy did nothing but promote the status quo. More recently, the policy of *Islam Hadari* or Civilizational Islam, as promoted by Prime Minister Badawi (2003-2009), has produced a strong current of Malay identity politics syncretizing with conservative Islamic principles (Pandian 2008). All other ethnic and religious groups are now subject to this contemporary sensibility, and the NCP is often deployed as an extension of it. So, while Malays have seen the NCP as a means to actively promote *Rukunegara*, Chinese and Indian leaders see the NCP as contradictory to it.

To cap the series of events that led from the riots to the NCP, a new political party—the National Front—emerged between 1971 and 1973 that formed a coalition among ten Malay, Chinese and Indian parties. Parliamentary procedure was re-established in 1971, although it became a seditious act to discuss Malay special privileges, Bahasa Malay as the national language and the status of Islam as the official religion. In the 1974 elections the National Front swept the polls with guaranteed positions for Chinese and Indian political leaders in the system.

For Indians in Malaysia, particularly non-Muslim Indians, negotiating the mine field that is Malaysia's postcolonial cultural politics is difficult in the least. They are guaranteed government representation, but not a free expansion of worship sites. Given the central role of the temple in Hindu spiritual, cultural and social life, it is not an understatement to recognize the renovations of temples as a paramount resistance, yet a fairly safe resistance, to the current political climate.[10]

Today, renovating temples usually entails the complete rebuilding of small, vernacular temples as substantial Agamic temples, a process that is also promoting the Sanskritization of many of Penang's temples (Lee & Rajoo 1987). Communities with limited resources will generally focus on building up the *vimana* dome, or creating a *gopura* for a temple that only has the *vimana* and *mandapa*. It is extremely difficult to get a permit to establish a new temple, but it is often possible to receive public funds to renovate an existing temple. Adding to the contradictory context of being Hindu in Malaysia is the official promotion of Hindu sacred places (e.g., Batu Caves) and sacred events (*Thaipusam*) for foreign tourism (Hindustan Times 2006). This is the hall of mirrors that is the NCP and the regulations that derive from it.

Conclusions

Building and rebuilding temples in Trinidad and Malaysia clearly reveals complex social and political interactions between a religious minority such as the Hindus and the dominant, often unsympathetic, milieux of Christian and Islamic cultures. Thus, temples make explicit the association of the differential maintenance of ethnic identity among people and the religious material culture that they create in the landscape.

Trinidad's Hindus chose transformation of their material culture, while Malaysia's Hindus chose a conservative traditionalism. Both choices serve to maintain a special, public identity for their respective communities. The dramatic difference in how each community does this rests mainly in the socio-political conditions in which each community lived and worked, and to a lesser degree in the differences in their original cultural origins per se.

A number of circumstances can be elucidated in regard to each situation. These include; (1) method of labor recruitment and manner of relocation, (2) socio-political conditions during colonial times, (3) socio-political conditions in the post-colonial period.

The method of labor recruitment for rubber estates in Malaysia was much different than that for Trinidad's sugar estates. In Trinidad, labor was recruited mainly in northern India and based upon indentured contracts for specified periods of time. Co-workers on the sugar estates may or may not have derived from the same village or even have spoken the same language. Bhojpuri Hindi became the *lingua franca* among Indians since this group dominated demographically. Significant social and economic relationships formed between those that travelled together on the same boat, or laboured together on the same estate, thus a shifting of alliances that devalued traditional ascriptive characteristics, such as caste and village of origin, emerged—though it did not eliminate them (Haraksingh 1981). Resulting from this social environment where new alliances were formed was a situation whereby localized religious practices from India often gave way to more universally recognized practices that were mainly Sanskritized in form (Jayawardena 1966). Also, partly due to the significant distance between India and Trinidad, programmes were established to give labourers parcels of land in return for their passage. The number of returnees declined and contact with India became difficult, although infusions of new labourers until 1917 continued to refresh Hindu village traditions. Also essential to understanding the Trinidad experience was the fact that Indian labourers moved off of the estates and established their own villages relatively early, while Indian labourers in Malaysia remained on the plantations if they stayed in Malaysia. This encouraged a certain degree of autonomy and contact with non-Indians for Trinidad, and a certain degree of dependency and isolation from non-Indians in Malaysia.

In Malaysia, the *kangani* system prevailed. The term derives from a Tamil word that refers to a labour foreman, a labourer of standing, and eventually a labour recruiter. In the 1860s coffee planters in Malaysia experimented with this system, which originally served the tea and coffee plantations of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). A *kangani* employee of an estate would return to his home village (mainly in Tamil Nadu) and recruit labour for the estate. Because they were "free" labourers, these workers were not subject to as much government regulation and fluctuations in the labour needs of the planters were more easily controlled (with labourers repatriated and re-recruited as needed). Thus, the newly emerging rubber estate owners chose the *kangani* system over the indentureship system which prevailed in other British colonies. Since each estate was likely to have a large number of workers from the same village or district in India, traditional caste ascriptions and interpersonal relationships were more easily reconstituted and vernacular religious traditions, such as worship of a particular village deity, where transplanted more readily. Also, a combination of the *kangani* style of recruitment and the short distance between southeastern India and Malaysia meant that there was a high rate of return and contact with home villages.

The second, and probably more significant, circumstance that affected each community was the dominant socio-political environment during colonial times. Hindus arrived in mid-nineteenth century Trinidad to find a predominantly Christian, multi-racial society where Victorian era values infused public behaviour (especially among the planter class). Their movement was restricted during the indentureship period, and they lived under conditions where establishing a place of worship was difficult at best. Both Europeans and Christianized Africans found Hindu religious practices alien, and even intolerable in some cases. Some traditions, such as "fire walking" (usually practiced by Trinidad's small south Indian population), were actively discouraged by the planter class (and even the Hindu elite) and eventually disappeared (Besson 1985). By the late 1860s an intensive program of Christian proselytization by the Canadian Presbyterian mission began. It was supported by the plantocracy and effectively helped to place Hindu practices on the margins of acceptability. Thus, Trinidad's Hindus were constantly, and consistently, placed in a position of defending who they were. Creating new social and economic alliances among Hindu brethren—or *jahaji bhai*—brothers of the boat—was a necessary strategy.

In Malaysia, on the other hand, a different situation occurred. First, Hindus arrived to find an established indigenous culture that had received significant infusions of Hindu culture (particularly in the Sanskritizing of Malay court language) over the centuries. Also, at the time, Islam in Malay villages was predominantly syncretized with pre-Islamic Malay practices (known as *adat*), which included animistic beliefs (Endicott 1991). Thus, Hindu practices (both vernacular and Agamic) generally were not perceived as 'alien' by colonial period Malays.

Secondly, both the British and Chinese rubber planters assisted (usually financially) the earliest labourers in establishing a temple on estate grounds. But more importantly, the British planters in Malaysia were basically indifferent to Hindu practices, and if not indifferent, they did not actively support an organized proselytization effort. The Chinese, particularly Chinese labourers, were as likely to worship at Hindu shrines or temples as they were at their own places of worship. To this day, most Hindu temples in Penang can count large numbers of Chinese devotees among worshippers. Thus, the establishment of traditional Hindu practices and sites for worship had an assumed and taken for granted quality without the sense of its validity being challenged by non-Hindus.

The third contributing factor to the circumstances with which Hindus had to face was the decolonization process and the post-colonial political environment. In Trinidad, decolonization brought Hindus into the political limelight as their numbers were too significant to ignore; a position that many resisted at first because they felt an independent Trinidad would be even less accommodating to Hindu culture than the colonial one (Lowenthal 1961). Yet, as Hindu political leaders played a newly significant role in the West Indian Federation government, a fresher and more open environment emerged for Hindu organizational efforts. One might even speculate that universal enfranchisement and decolonization set the stage for an astonishingly revitalized Hindu presence. Hindu schools were opened, Hindu marriage rites recognized, and cremation became legal. Despite the racialized political environment, Hindus were able to express their religious culture more openly and with even greater exuberance. In this environment, the Trinidadian style temple emerged, and over the next thirty years the type of temple that a community erected, in part, depicted how they saw themselves as an ethnic group in independent Trinidad (Prorok 1988). From the early 1960s to 1985, fully one third of all temple building events resulted in a Trinidadian style temple.

With a more open and freshly assumed presence tension within the community can rise to the surface more readily. Sometimes identity differences within villages erupted in local conflicts. A case in point is a village in north central Trinidad. A traditional temple served the community for many years. In the early 1980s some villagers began raising money to replace the 'old' temple with a 'new' Trinidadian style structure. At first, there seemed to be much support for this process as the new temple took form. Part of the older temple had already been dismantled, but then conflict within the temple committee resulted in a halting of the project.[11] It took over a decade to finally raise enough money to make the Trinidadian temple usable, though it still does not have its *sikhara* (thus, it looks more like a *koutia* temple now). A substantial number of people had decided that they did not want the 'old' temple dismantled. Some people worship at the traditional temple without ever attending services in the new temple and *visa versa*, although these two temples literally adjoin one another now.

In Malaysia, the process of decolonization worked differently for Hindus. Due to their small numbers, and their relative isolation on estates, they did not play as significant a role in decolonization as Trinidad's Hindus did. Primarily, political tension existed between the Malay and Chinese communities, and Hindus had to struggle to even have a voice in the situation. Decolonization gave rise to a fervent Malay-Muslim nationalism that continues to dominate post-colonial politics. As described above, this political environment has dramatically curtailed the ability of Hindus to publically express themselves. In areas where Hindus can be found in larger numbers, such as Penang, religious processions are relatively common as they have a long (and entrenched) history. However, even in these areas procession permits are known to have been denied. More importantly, it is difficult for Hindus to establish new temples.

Under these circumstances, conflict within the Hindu community and with the larger society emerges.[12] On the one hand, some Muslim youths (from particularly conservative communities) have been known to vandalize and destroy Hindu shrines and temples since the late 1970s, with several dying at the hands of Hindu 'temple guards' in one case (Ramanathan 1995: 240-243). This experience, despite government intervention, served to galvanize the Hindu community into greater organizational efforts. On the other hand, a case of intra-community conflict can be found in north central Seberang Perai. In 1970 a small temple was built at a site where some people say that an image of the god *Vinayagar* (or Ganesha—the elephant-headed god that is the son of Shiva) emerged from the earth. As the politics of the NCP blossomed over the next two years, the local government challenged the existence of the temple. A local Hindu leader (my primary informant) was consulted about the veracity of the story. He said that he could not lie, and could not vouch for the authenticity of the story.[13] Soldiers from a nearby base were sent to destroy the temple because they did not have the proper permit, but my informant convinced them to only remove the roof and exterior walls as it would be highly improper for them to do anything to the *murti* (God's image). As a substantial number of Malays still recognize the efficacy of Hindu sacred places, the soldiers did not destroy the altar. Through negotiation with local Malay leaders, and the donation of a parcel of land by a wealthy Hindu family, the temple was moved to a new site. In 1987, the temple was rebuilt as an *agamic* temple with the support of public funds. This temple is one of only a few to be established in the state of Penang since 1970. Throughout the 1990's and the first decade of the 21st century Hindu temples have continued to be a target for destruction in areas where new housing and commercial developments are planned (Bukhari 2006; Iskander 2013). Local councils, usually dominated by Malays, often use the excuse that a temple is not registered in order to have it removed. No consideration is given to its age, size, or significance—including the destruction of a temple resting on a seventh century Pallava foundation in the state of Kedah. A Telekom project replaced it

(Willford 2006). One can view the destruction of a number of temples throughout Malaysia through online videos as well as violence against devotees who stand to protect them (Tamilan 2008). It is clear just how painful it is for Hindu devotees when some cannot help but sob during their testimony at public hearings. Non-Hindu witnesses in several videos mention huge new temples on the outskirts of town, and they do not understand the issue. Not all demolished temples are rebuilt. Those that are 'replacements' cannot be counted as new temples *per se*, as they do not automatically have the *power* of the original temple transferred to them, and they will always be *agamic* in character. Moreover, the experience of having one's temples demolished, often violently, is such an assault on one's very being—as a Hindu, as a Malaysian, as a person—that replacement temples hardly assuage the pain. Even so, some Hindus appreciate that replacement is possible.

Closure

What is clear is that the juxtaposition of working conditions and the socio-political environment created by the dominant culture serves to contextualize temple building efforts made by Hindus in Trinidad and Malaysia. While Trinidad's experience was characterized by an early restrictiveness and contemporary flowering of Hindu expression, the Malaysian one was the inverse. Thus, these two Hindu communities faced similar circumstances at different times in their migration and settlement history, which resulted in making divergent choices about how to preserve the integrity of their collective identity.

Based on the material presented in this paper, one can surmise that temples symbolize the dialectic of human experience: conflict and unity—within the Hindu community and between Hindus and other ethnic groups, and identity and identity crisis—being Indian and being *Trinidadian or Malaysian* (not Malay). Resolution of the dialectic is presented to the public at large through the symbology of the temple. That is, the formal representation of Hindu architectural elements provide a rich text to be read for the differential degree to which Hindus of both countries negotiate the social, political, and spiritual tensions inherent in resolving these issues with a self-defined dignity under conditions of (generally) unsympathetic acculturation.

Acknowledgment

Notes

1. My focus is on the mainstream Hindu traditions (folk and Sanskritized) that the earliest Hindu migrants carried with them from 19th century India, and which persist to this day. I

do not consider sectarian movements such as Arya Samaj (Forbes 1984), Kabir Panthi, and the more recent phenomena of Satya Sai Baba worship (Klass 1991; Kent 2005).

2. Trinidad is the focus of this work as Tobago historically has not had a Hindu population in sufficient numbers to be clearly evident in its landscape. All material presented on Trinidad in the paper is based upon previous work that I have published, and a tremendous number of primary and secondary sources. I include a number of them here as a general citation, with specific notations in a limited number of places. Besson 1985; Biswas 1980; Brereton 1979; Census of Trinidad (all available years); Clarke 1986; Collens 1888; Crooke 1926; Jayawardena 1966; Kingsley 1871; Klass 1961; Lewis 1983; Prorok 1988, 1991, 1997, 2013; Singh 1974.

3. By and large, Hindus have averaged about 24-26% of the total population in each census year from the height of indentured immigration in 1891 to the year 1990. In the 2000 census their proportion dropped to 22% and in 2011 it dropped further to 18%. Substantial outmigration of Trinbagoans over the past three decades has played a role, but the expansion of Pentecostal/Evangelical Christianity at the expense of all other religious groups has played a greater role. See Census records of Trinidad and Tobago from 1891-2011.

4. Hinduism's range of spiritual literature and oral heritage, doctrines and ritual practices in diaspora can be linked to both village traditions and the subcontinent's Sanskritic heritage which have ax—this construction is an exception to the rule universal spread in all parts of India today. Ritual institutions in India can still be classified as great or little traditions and they can be analyzed in terms of the process of the little tradition becoming absorbed into the great tradition, whereby local festivals, deities and ritual acts slowly take on Sanskritic rationales. As is often the case, ritual institutions have several layers of "explanations" and devotees are not necessarily concerned with a 'right' Sanskritic origin. More important is identification with the Sanskritic tradition. Srinivas (1956) describes the process of transforming little tradition by great tradition explanations and ritual institutions as "Sanskritization."

5. Rana P. B. Singh is a cultural geographer and scholar of Hinduism at Banaras Hindu University. Personal communication in 1995.

6. This material is based upon a standing structure survey and consultation with K. Ramanathan at the Universiti Sains Malaysia. I also used his unpublished paper, "Hindu Temples in Malaysia: Problems and Prospects," presented at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers in San Francisco in 1994 to identify particular features of Malaysia's Hindu temples as well as his PhD dissertation (1995).

7. As with the Trinidad material, some of my work (Prorok 1998) as well as many primary and secondary resources were brought to bear in this section. Abraham 1986; Ackerman & Lee 1988; Andaya and Andaya 1982; Arasaratnam 1970 ; Hua 1983; Hussain 1990; Kua 1987; Lee and Rajoo 1987; Sandhu 1969; Tinker 1990; Mearns 1995[not in reference list or is it Mearn 1995? it should be Mearns]; Collins 1997.

8. This expression was repeated by many informants during my fieldwork, and older informants on many plantations indicated that the plantation owner funded the building of the original temple.

9. Gerakan refers to the "Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia" or Malaysian People's Movement and DAP refers to the Democratic Action Party.

10. Ramanathan (1995: 252) interprets the revitalization and focus on *agamic* renovations of temples as incorporative of the revitalization of Islam among Malays with their respective focus on the 'right' way to practice Islam (as understood in its Arab origins). That is, the revitalization of Islam among Malays has positively influenced Indian Hindus to take a similarly intense interest in Hinduism.

11. There are many layers of interaction in this conflict (including but not limited to personality conflict, residual caste conflict and disagreement over the involvement of local politicians in the temple building process) which cannot be dealt with here.

12. Mearns (1995) describes the centrality of the temple and temple rites in Hindu identity in Malacca (Melaka), as well as the class, caste and ethnic conflict that emerges as different groups contest control over temples.

13. Few people were willing to discuss this event with me. My informant insisted that his response was based solely on his personal ethics of telling the truth, which placed him at odds with many members of his community. At the very least, this conflict may have deeper roots from the perspective of the community.

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