

'AYYAPPAN SARANAM':¹ MASCULINITY AND THE SABARIMALA PILGRIMAGE IN KERALA

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Sabarimala – a South Indian all-male pilgrimage to Ayyappan, a hyper-male deity born from two male gods – plays a role in constructing male identities, at both external (social-structural) and internal (psychological) levels. The pilgrimage draws creatively on relationships between two South Asian male figures: renouncer and householder, breaking down the opposition between transcendence and immanence to bring into everyday life a sense of transcendence specific to men. This also has masculine and heroic overtones, characterized by ascetic self-denial and pain and by the identification of pilgrims with the deity and his perilous mountain-forest journey. Pilgrimage bestows power as blessings from Ayyappan and as specifically masculine forms of spiritual, moral, and bodily strength, while acting as signifier of masculine superior purity and strength and of male responsibilities towards family welfare. Sabarimala merges individual men both with the hyper-masculine deity and with a wider community of men: other male pilgrims, senior male gurus (teachers). This merger is both social and personal. A normal and universal sense of masculine ambivalence and self-doubt has a specific local-cultural resolution, when boys and men experience strengthening of the gendered ego through renunciatory self-immersion in a 'greater masculine'. The ostensibly egalitarian devotional community is actually hierarchical: pilgrims surrender themselves to deity and guru, while equality and friendship between men can be celebrated and performed precisely because it is predicated upon a deeper sense of difference and hierarchy – gender – with woman as the absent and inferiorized other. Such segregated celebrations of masculinity work both towards masculinity's reproduction – through processes of 'remasculinization' – and in the limiting of masculinity to males.

In this article, we approach South Indian arenas of masculine performance and senses of 'being a man' by considering the role of religious activities and devotion in the construction of male identities, focusing specifically on the annual pilgrimage to Sabarimala, the main temple of Ayyappan, visited every year by millions of male devotees from Kerala and from South India as a whole. We suggest that this pilgrimage, an almost exclusively male arena of religious performance, highlights masculinity while constructing a particular style of maleness or being a man which draws creatively on an antagonistic relationship between transcendence and immanence – between the characteristic South Asian figures of the ascetic renouncer and the worldly householder. The pilgrimage forges entanglements between renouncer and householder, bringing into the realm of everyday life a sense of transcendence that is specific to men, with clear masculine-heroic overtones. This transcendence is highlighted by a period of asceticism before and during the pilgrimage, and by progres-

sive identification of pilgrims with the deity, but we argue that it does not stand in opposition to the mundane world in which men are enmeshed. On the contrary, it acts not only as a source of power in the form of blessings from Ayyappan but also as spiritual, moral, and bodily strength displayed and augmented by participation in the pilgrimage, power which can then be tapped into in everyday life. The pilgrimage, undertaken as marker of devotion to the deity and in fulfilment of specific vows, acts as signifier of a man's responsibilities, as son or husband, towards the general welfare of the family.

Notably, this pilgrimage is a gender-specific ritual activity involving two separate forms of union. On the one hand, it merges individual men with a hyper-masculine deity – himself born from Shiva and Vishnu, two male deities. On the other, it merges each male participant with a larger community of men: other male pilgrims with whom one goes to Sabarimala; the mass of pilgrims one encounters *en route* to, and at, the shrine; and, ultimately, the category of men as a whole. This is a particular kind of male community: it is ostensibly an egalitarian devotional community – all pilgrims call themselves 'holy man' (*swami*) – but at the same time a hierarchical one, whereby individual pilgrims surrender themselves to a superior spiritual leadership – that of Lord Ayyappan himself, but also to that of their *guruswami*, the more experienced leader of pilgrim groups. Finally, both the pilgrimage itself – from which women of child-bearing age are barred – and also popular myths associated with Lord Ayyappan, highlight important aspects of the relationship between men and women. Lord Ayyappan, born from two male gods, is a celibate deity, a perennial *brahmachariya* (celibate student), his great powers derive specifically from his ascetic endeavour, in particular abstention from sexual activities, a practice also followed by pilgrims before and during the pilgrimage. While pre-pubescent girls and post-menopausal women may attend the pilgrimage, they are very few in number, marginal to the great mass of male pilgrims and are, we note, relatively ungendered in comparison to the category specifically barred from participation: mature fertile females. We believe it is important to identify the pilgrimage as a gendered ritual, both in view of the markedly different participation rates for men and women and also its overwhelmingly masculine ethos.

The pilgrimage

Ayyappan's Story

What follows is a composite version of the story of Ayyappan as collected during fieldwork. Data for this article were gathered over a two-year period of joint fieldwork in 'Valiyagramam' (a pseudonym), a village of southern Kerala² (see F. Osella & C. Osella 2000a), and during Filippo's participation in the pilgrimage over two seasons – once from Thiruvananthapuram (formerly Trivandrum), the state capital, as a novice *kanniswami* and once, as seasoned pilgrim, from the village itself.

When the milk-ocean was churned, and all the good things in the world were generated out of it, the demons had stolen from it the *amritha* [ambrosia, eternal life-giving food], properly the property of the gods. The god Vishnu took the form of Mohini

[literally desire, passion, in personified feminine form] the irresistibly beautiful temptress, in order to trick the demons into handing back the ambrosia. He went to the demon's kingdom, where they were all sitting at tables, waiting. There was no woman to serve the food, so the demons could not eat. [Men are always served their food by women in Kerala – mother, sister, or wife.] Mohini/Vishnu told them, 'You are all men: who will serve this food? Close your eyes to preserve my modesty and I will come and serve each of you in turn' [Mohini being unrelated and unknown to the demons, she would feel shame at being in their presence]. She/He then ran off with the elixir. When Vishnu later recounted his trick, the god Shiva insisted upon seeing the form of Mohini. Vishnu protested; Shiva insisted. When Vishnu became Mohini, he was so beautiful and irresistible that, as he had feared, Shiva forgot that this apparition was in reality Vishnu, was overcome by lust and made love to Mohini. The resultant child, Ayyappan, product of two males, was born from Vishnu's thigh. Shiva and Vishnu were ashamed. They arranged for the child to be found lying in a basket on the bank of the Pamba river, and hence adopted, by the childless Pandalam king.

After some years, the Pandalam queen gave birth to her own child, whereupon she became jealous of the foundling Ayyappan – the first son, the future king and heir. With the court physician she hatched a plot. The Pandalam king was told that the queen was extremely ill and dying, and that the only cure was tiger's milk. As the queen had hoped, the unsuspecting and good-hearted Ayyappan, by now an adolescent in his *brahmacharya* period, volunteered to make the arduous and dangerous journey to the hill-forest to get tiger's milk for his adoptive-mother. On the way, in the hill-forest, he encountered a fierce *Mahishi* [she-buffalo], whom, he fought and killed. He was helped by a Muslim – Vavarswami – and a 'tribal' – Karruttaswami. The she-buffalo became transformed into the goddess Ganga, who explained that because of a curse she had been transformed into the buffalo and that Ayyappan's reward, as her slayer and liberator, was to marry her. She also explained to him his divine origin and his mother's trick. Both agreed that he could not stay, as he had to fulfil his [divinely-ordained, fated] mission to acquire tiger's milk for his mother [some informants add here that he did not want to marry anyway, being in *brahmacharya* and being a celibate god who would lose his divinity and power if he had sex]. Promising to return, Ayyappan continued his journey, obtained the tiger's milk, and returned to Pandalam riding on a tiger. By now every one had realized his true divine identity. Bidding his adopted family farewell, he set off again for the hill-forest, went to the top of the mountain – Sabarimala – and achieved his divine form, whereupon many male devotees started to come on pilgrimage to worship him.

Every first-time Sabarimala pilgrim is a *kanni swami* (*kanni* meaning, literally, 'virgin'). Pilgrims follow Ayyappan's journey through the forest and act out his story. Ayyappan could not neglect his devotees, so he made a pact with the goddess that on the day when no more *kanniswamis* come to worship him he would marry her; in the meantime she sits near him and is known as Malikappurattamma (the 'jasmine bush outside/nearby woman'). It is an explicit duty of Malayali (and other South Indian) men to go on pilgrimage to Sabarimala and to take with them a new *kanniswami*, to prevent the celibate Ayyappan from having to marry the goddess, thereby losing his powers and his capacity for helping humans.

Sabarimala temple

Ayyappan is one of the most popular deities in Kerala and in South India as a whole: every year between 6 and 10 million pilgrims from the southern states of Kerala, Tamilnadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh visit Sabarimala. This generates an income for the temple, from offerings and the sale of take-home

prasadam,² of 2.14 Rs or £1.7 million (according to figures given in 1990 by the temple's government-appointed administrator). Moreover, both the number of pilgrims and temple income are increasing, according to temple administrators, every year.³ These figures are even more impressive given that the temple is only open for around 120 days a year: the main pilgrimage season lasts about sixty days, from mid-November to the second half of January (the rest of the time the temple opens to devotees only for the first five days of each Malayali calendar month, as well as at ten days for Vishu, summer solstice). The festival season begins on the first day of the Malayalam month of Vrischikam (from mid-November to mid-December) and lasts for forty-one days – this being referred to as the *Mandala* period. Then the temple is closed for five days, during which no *puja* (worship) is conducted, as Ayyappan is said to be resting after forty-one days of giving *darshan* (divine gaze). The temple opens again for about another three weeks and after fourteen days there is the culmination of the festival season, *makaravilakku* (Makaram lights), which we describe below.

On the first day of the Malayalam month of Makaram (from mid-January to mid-February), a movable image of Ayyappan is enthroned on an elephant and taken in procession to the Pamba river where *arat* (holy bath) is performed. Once bathed, the image is conveyed once more to receive 'divine gold ornaments' (*thiruvabharanam*) which arrive in another procession from the town of Pandalam, which is the seat of the Ayyappan's adoptive father, the erstwhile Pandalam Rajah, whose descendants ruled one of the region's former princely states. (During this period the temple is closed and the sanctum sanctum purified). Huge crowds of pilgrims accompany the procession up into the mountain from Pandalam, together with two divine eagles which are said to circle the sky for the duration of the journey. The gold ornaments are then taken to the temple and placed on Ayyappan's main image. The principal shrine is closed while the chief Brahmin temple priest and his assistants perform *pujas*; outside a great mass of pilgrims waits, calling Ayyappan's name. At 6.30 p.m., while the doors of the main shrine are still closed, a bright light (*Makara Jyothi*) appears on top of one of the hills surrounding the temple and a bright star appears in the sky, signs indicating the presence and satisfaction of Ayyappan. After a few minutes, the doors of the main shrine open and while *deepharadana* – the circling of holy flame in front of the deity which concludes every act of *puja* – is performed, the light in the sky disappears. At 12.30 a.m. the main festival continues with the movable image of Ayyappan taken out again in procession to visit the nearby shrine of Malikappurattamma, his hopeful, waiting bride who has meanwhile also been decorated with gold ornaments brought from Pandalam. But when Ayyappan reaches Malikappurattamma's shrine, all torches miraculously extinguish themselves: Malikappurattamma has started her menstruation and a red cloth is draped over the rear part of her shrine. As the goddess is in a state of pollution, Ayyappan is forced to turn back without even seeing her.

The temple is then open for a further seven days, during which a number of rituals connected to the deity's mythology are performed. In particular, during the two following evenings (Makaram 2 and 3), there are processions of a number of deities to the main shrine of Ayyappan: first, Malikappurattamma then, the following evening, Vavaraswami, Karuppaswami, and Kaduttaswami. The

latter three are important minor deities who helped Ayyappan in his fight against Mahishi. In local versions of the Ayyappan myth, Vavarswami is identified as a Muslim brigand and Karuppaswami as the chief or leader of one of the region's so-called forest 'tribal' populations. Both fought against Ayyappan, were defeated, and became his devoted allies and disciples.⁴ Kaduttaswami was a dwarf created by Shiva – by throwing a hair from his leg on the ground – to help Ayyappan defeat Mahishi. In the middle of the battle against the demon, Kaduttaswami barged in, shouting loudly; when Mahishi heard the shouting she felt dizzy, lost her strength, and thus Ayyappan killed her with an arrow. For Vavarswami, Karuppaswami, and Kaduttaswami's loyalty and courage, Ayyappan decided that they should sit forever next to him at Sabarimala. On the seventh day after *makaravilakku*, the Sabarimala pilgrimage season draws to a close with the performance of *gurudi* – mock blood-sacrifice using a cucumber as substitute for a live animal – for all the Sabarimala deities. The main Brahmin priest performs the sacrifice outside the main temple, just north of the Malikappurattamma shrine. After that the temple is finally closed to the pilgrims.

We turn now to discuss the various phases of the pilgrimage, from preparation to its conclusion, including recollections and stories about Ayyappan and the journey to Sabarimala.

Preparations for Pilgrimage

Preparations for pilgrimage usually start on the first day of the Malayalam month of Vrischikam (mid-November), a particularly auspicious day for worship which is marked by a flurry of other temple festivals and special *pujas* which continue throughout the forty-one day *Mandala* period. Preparations begin with the handing over to the pilgrim of a neck chain by a *guruswami* – an experienced senior man who has been to Sabarimala many times: pilgrims wear the chain around their neck until return from Sabarimala. From the moment of putting on the chain, pilgrims should follow the mandatory *vratham* – a forty-one-days period of votive abstinence – which means no meat, alcohol, sex, anger, coarse language, and so on; moreover, pilgrims should not shave and should go regularly to the temple for worship. During this period pilgrims become transformed: they are all *swamis* (holy men), incarnations of Ayyappan himself, and are to act, and be treated, as such. They wear a black or orange *lungi* (waist-cloth), address each other as *swami*, greet each other on the street with the cry and response, 'Swamiye!' (the vocative form of *swami*), 'Saranam Ayyappan!' (Ayyappan is my sanctuary/refuge), and attend evening, men-only, devotional singing groups.

In practice, however, and especially in the southern part of Kerala, the period of votive abstinence may be much shorter: pilgrims put on the chain and start abstinence just a few days before the pilgrimage: enough to show a clearly unshaven face, one of the most apparent symbols of a man undertaking votive abstinence. The distinctive black or orange waist-cloth may be worn only on the day of the pilgrimage itself, while other strict prescriptions – such as regular visits to the temple and attendance at devotional singing – may be followed only by a few enthusiastic devotees. In Valiyagramam, some people

commented that current casual attitudes towards votive abstinence reflected a decline in 'proper' devotion in Kerala. Raghavan, who has been going to Sabarimala for eighteen years and is now a recognized *guruswami*, told us that, 'Only Tamils are big believers nowadays, more devoted to Ayyappan than Malayalis. They follow *vratam* properly, go in big groups with a *guruswami* and cook together ... they do the pilgrimage as in the old days.' We have noticed since moving from southern to northern Kerala (in 2002-3) that pilgrims here often undertake the journey barefoot, on foot; they seem more intense and observant of votive abstinence than in the south. In the south, we found that the majority looked with some degree of suspicion and bemusement at those pilgrims – especially those from neighbouring Tamil Nadu – who are somewhat 'too keen', strict adherence to ritual prescriptions being taken as a sign of 'backwardness' and lack of sophistication. As one Valiyagramam pilgrim told us, 'Here, Ayyappan is our near neighbour; we can go four or five times a year on pilgrimage if we wish. For those who come from more distant places, it is more of an adventure. They also have to be more observant: for us, Ayyappan is in our territory and will be forgiving with us if we are not strict.' (Valiyagramam is just 4 hours by bus from the river where the pilgrimage begins.) But regardless of whether pilgrims follow votive abstinence strictly or not, everyone agrees that some form and period of abstinence – from sexual intercourse in particular – must be observed. Many villagers reminded us that Ayyappan is a celibate deity and that his miraculous powers derive from his celibacy; stories were recounted of misfortunes befalling men who did not abstain from sex before or during the pilgrimage. For example, the death of a local *guruswami* – also known for dabbling in sorcery (*mantravadam*) – was attributed to his alleged extra-marital relationship with a woman who persuaded him to take her to Sabarimala; overtaken by lust he agreed to take her disguised as a man, but on his return he fell ill and died.

After a period of votive abstinence, a date is set to go to Sabarimala. Older men told us that in the past pilgrims would leave after the *Mandala* period and a full forty-one days of votive abstinence to arrive at the temple in time for the culmination of the festival season – *makaravilakku* – when Ayyappan appears to devotees in the form of a light in the sky above the hills. Nowadays, however, *makaravilakku* tends to be avoided, since the temple on that day will be so crowded that it would take many hours of queuing, and much pushing and shoving, to get sight of Ayyappan, make offerings and receive *prasadam* of honey-balls (*unniappam*). Alternative dates are chosen – usually sometime during the *Mandala* period – relying on the knowledge and experience of *guruswamis* to select a time when crowds would be relatively less dense and numerous.

The pilgrimage is always conducted in groups, and never individually, villagers explaining that in the past the journey to the temple – across mountains and forests populated by wild animals – was so dangerous as to make it unsafe for lone pilgrims. Indeed, the whole rhetoric of the pilgrimage is one of communality and equality before the deity, of large groups of men traveling together under the absolute leadership of a *guruswami*, where personal identity (remember that all pilgrims address each other as 'swami') and differences of caste, class, or religion disappear (remember that the 'helper' deity, Vavaraswami, was Muslim); note also that, unlike other temples in Kerala,

non-Hindus are not barred from visiting Sabarimala. The pilgrim, as renouncer, is ideally dead to the differentiated social world of caste/community. Our experience is that in practice, at least in Kerala (see e.g. Gath 1997), these ideals of equality and community are greatly diluted. Groups of pilgrims are normally relatively small, composed of friends, relatives, or neighbours, and seldom include people of different castes. The majority of the pilgrims in the group with which Filippo travelled from Valiyagramam were people who would be identified locally as coming from low- to middle- or high-ranking caste groups. Few were Dalits (ex-untouchables) or Brahmans; most were Nayars (traditionally a superior landed group) or Izhavas (a caste of traditionally low status, formerly associated with coconut cultivation). When larger, multi-caste parties are formed – usually through temple/devotional associations which hire transport to take pilgrims to the site where the pilgrimage proper starts – they tend to split into smaller groups once the bus journey ends and the ascent to the temple begins. At the temple itself, there is both a strong sense of *communitas*, as men are confronted by and merge with a mass of pilgrims all dressed in a similar fashion, all carrying on their heads offerings for the deity and all calling each other ‘swami’, and a sense of separateness. Groups of pilgrims, large or small as they might be, carry on their ritual duties quite oblivious of each other, with little interaction between groups, albeit within a general atmosphere of friendship, tolerance, and elation. And even if an egalitarian community of worshippers is created during the pilgrimage, it might be an extremely short-lived one especially for those of comparatively low caste in local terms (see F. Osella & C. Osella 2000a). A number of older Izhava pilgrims reminded us that in the past they had gone to Sabarimala with high-caste neighbours, helping each other and sharing food during the journey, only to be confronted by the same old pollution distance on return to the village. We will see below that this apparent falling-short of the renunciatory ideal does not in fact make the pilgrims any less like renunciators.

Returning to the pilgrimage preparations, on the evening selected for the journey – normally the pilgrimage starts as soon as possible after dusk in order to avoid walking up the steep hill leading to the temple in the heat of the day – a group of pilgrims would congregate at the house of a *guruswami*⁵ after visiting the temple. *Guruswamis* are older men who have gone to Sabarimala many times – at least eighteen times, some people told us (a point to which we shall return later) – are known for their devotion to Ayyappan, and have acquired considerable practical and ritual knowledge about the pilgrimage. While many people in Kerala may undertake the pilgrimage journey itself unaccompanied by a *guruswami*, the latter’s ritual knowledge and expertise are essential to the initiation of pilgrims and their preparation for the journey.

We now provide a composite description of the rituals in which Filippo participated as preparation for the pilgrimage. Either inside a household *puja* room or in the courtyard of a home or a temple under a canopy prepared for the occasion, a number of offerings (rice, puffed rice, bananas, flowers, and sticks of incense) and a lighted oil-lamp are placed in front of a garlanded image of Ayyappan; to one side, on plantain leaves, are the offerings which pilgrims will take with them to Sabarimala (often acquired in bulk in specialized shops which sell ‘Ayyappan bags’). After performing *puja* to the deity, the *guruswami* lights camphor on a plantain leaf to circle in front of the deity,

calling 'Bhagavane' ('Lord!'), then passing on the flame to the pilgrims sitting cross-legged behind him, who receive it, murmuring 'Ayyappan'.

Sitting facing the pilgrims, the *guruswami* begins *irumudi kettu* (literally, two head coverings tied together), filling two cloth pouches (which should be black, white, or red) tied into a single bundle with ritual offerings for Ayyappan and his accompanying deities. The *guruswami* begins by pouring clarified butter (ghee) into a number of coconuts which have been previously bored with one hole and emptied of their liquid; he seals each with a cork. Each pilgrim then receives a number of items to be placed in the *irumudi*'s two pouches. The main offering to Ayyappan is in the front pouch: one ghee-filled coconut together with three handfuls of rice placed there by the pilgrim or by non-pilgrim relatives, an areca nut wrapped in betel leaf, and, for new pilgrims – the *kanniswamis* – a few coins as *dakshina* (ritual 'payment'). The rear pouch holds another coconut – whole and not filled with ghee – to be smashed before ascending to the main Ayyappan shrine and a small bag of turmeric powder; some camphor balls; a small bag of white rice; some tobacco and some marijuana leaves. A separate bag contains dried grapes, moulded sugar balls, and bananas to be offered to the god Ganapathi. As he passes each item to them, the *guruswami* calls, 'Swamiye Ayyappan' and as pilgrims receive each item they call, 'Ayyappa Saranam' (Ayyappan is my refuge).

Now the *irumudi* bundles are securely tied with string and pilgrims mix together the remaining offerings in front of Ayyappan's image and distribute them as *prasadam* to all those who have been present at the preparation. The pilgrims are now ready to leave. They make the devotional gesture of touching the feet of senior family members, give *dakshina* – a few coins wrapped in areca leaf – and receive blessings from non-pilgrim friends and relatives. The *guruswami*, standing behind them, balances an *irumudi* pouch on the head of each pilgrim who in return touches the guru's feet and offers *dakshina*. The pilgrims walk backwards out of the house or *pandal* and circle three times around a rock placed at the centre of the courtyard before smashing a coconut on it. They leave without turning to look back, accompanied for a while by male relatives and friends, who encourage them with loud shouts of 'Swamiye Ayyappan', demanding the pilgrims' response, 'Ayyappan saranam'. Finally, pilgrims set off in hired coaches and minibuses for Sabarimala, shouting and singing Ayyappan songs. From the time of departure until safe return, an oil lamp will be kept lit in the *puja* room of pilgrims' houses.

Pilgrimage preparation acts unequivocally as a rite of passage. Pilgrims are separated from their usual environment and social relations, and their bodies are marked out in particular ways – unshaven, barefoot, wearing a black or an orange waist-cloth, and carrying *irumudi* bundles on the head. They lose their social identity and become *sannyasis* (renouncers) incorporated into a wider undifferentiated community of men, while at the same time 'becoming like' Ayyappan himself. This process of separation, transformation, and incorporation we interpret as death. Funerary symbolism is evoked at many moments of the ritual: pouring rice onto the ghee-filled coconut in the *irumudi* which will later replace the pilgrim himself resembles that part of funerary rites when rice is poured onto the head/mouth of the deceased; walking backwards away from house or *pandal* recalls that dead bodies are taken backwards – head first – out of the house on their way to the funeral

pyre; walking around a rock in the courtyard three times is like the turning around of the corpse three times before it is taken off for cremation (cf. Gath 1997: 160; Sekar 1992: 55). Associations of death and cremation are again evident in the performance of *azhitullal* – fire-walking – optionally undertaken by pilgrims before filling the *irumudi* (while villagers said that this was common in the past, in the 1990s it was performed by only a few). None of this is surprising, given the ritual transformation of pilgrims into renouncers: like renouncers, pilgrims perform their own death rituals in an act of self-sacrifice and self-annihilation – a recurrent pilgrimage theme – which allows them to merge with Ayyappan himself.

To Sabarimala and Back

There are two routes to Sabarimala: the long and the short. The first route, some sixty-five kilometres long and taking several days to complete, starts at Erumeli, the small town where it is said that the dead body of Mahishi landed after having been tossed in the air by Ayyappan. At Erumeli there is a mosque dedicated to the Muslim Vavarswami and an Ayyappan temple.

From Erumeli, pilgrims begin an arduous climb through forests and steep hills, encountering along the way a number of sacred sites associated with Ayyappan's journey to find tiger milk for his mother and with his battle against Mahishi. By following Ayyappan's footsteps, pilgrims eventually arrive at Pamba Nadi, on the bank of the Pamba river, where the final ascent to Sannidhanam (Ayyappan's temple) begins. Until the 1960s, the long route was the only one to Sabarimala, and remains popular among particularly devoted pilgrims or as a 'special' vow. The majority now arrive by bus or car directly to Pamba Nadi, following a new road built by the Kerala government along the Pamba river valley. From Pamba Nadi, however, all pilgrims must continue their journey on foot, carrying their *irumudi* bundles on their heads along the way.

Having crossed the Pamba, pilgrims take a purificatory river bath and then perform a sacrifice (*bali*) for their ancestors. Pilgrims pass many tea-stalls and stores selling religious paraphernalia as well as '*ladies' items*' (men usually take back gifts to wives/daughters/mothers), before reaching and making offerings at the shrine to the elephant-headed deity Ganapathi which marks the beginning of the ascent. After a few hundred metres climb, they encounter a member of the family of the former Pandalam Rajah who sits in a hut a waiting *dakshina* in token of his descent from the god's adoptive family. The path then climbs up Appachimeeda, an extremely steep hill which many pilgrims climb running, while continuously invoking Ayyappan's name. At the top they reach a small shrine, Sabaripeedam: here, pilgrims throw moulded sugar balls down into the forest below to pacify the Mala Devans, dangerous forest-dwelling deities. From then on the path is on flat ground, and after a couple of kilometres pilgrims encounter Saramkuthi Aal, a big banyan tree around which new pilgrims – the *kanniswamis* – deposit a wooden arrow. It is said that an arrow thrown by Ayyappan to indicate to his followers where the temple should be constructed landed here. At the conclusion of the pilgrimage season, Malikappurattamma/Mahishi is taken in procession to this tree to check

whether first-time pilgrims have visited Ayyappan. Every year she finds thousands of arrows, indicating that many *kanniswamis* have come and thus that she cannot marry Ayyappan: in sombre mood she returns to her shrine.

Eventually, the Sabarimala temple complex comes into sight: pilgrims queue for hours under a hangar-like shelter and finally arrive in a large square leading to the pilgrimage's culmination, the Pathinettapadi, the holy eighteen golden steps up to the main temple. Before going up the steps, pilgrims first make offerings from their *irumudis* to the shrines of the three key disciple divinities, Vavaraswami (the deified Muslim brigand), Karuppaswami the 'tribal' chief, and the 'dwarf' Kaduttaswami, then break a coconut against a special tank on the side of the steps. This coconut, writes Alex Gath in a recent study of the pilgrimage

used to be broken on the holy eighteen steps which are ascended by pilgrims before reaching the main shrine. Since 1986, however, the steps have been decorated with a bright gold covering. Pilgrims are not permitted to break their coconuts on this but most do it off to the side, before ascending the steps (1997: 160).

The shells of the coconuts are collected and burned on a huge sacrificial fire nearby (*homakundam*). Loudly calling Ayyappan's name and taking blessings from each of the steps, pilgrims finally reach the Sannidhanam, Ayyappan's main shrine.⁶ Here, the ghee-filled coconut is taken to a special counter where it is broken up and the ghee, collected by temple officials, used for *abhishekam* (anointing the deity). Pilgrims join another long queue taking them in front of the main shrine, where they have a brief *darshan* (sight) of the golden deity. It is an extremely emotional moment: with joined hands, pilgrims pray, call Ayyappan's name and put money – sometimes large wads of cash – or gold ornaments into a large container before the deity. These offerings are on such a vast scale that the temple administration has installed a conveyer belt which transports every item directly to a room below the shrine for sorting, counting, and storing. From here, pilgrims move on to take offerings to other deities within the temple complex, Malikappurattamma in particular, and to collect honey balls, the main *prasadam*.

Exhausted from the long journey, from heat and from the long hours of queuing, but elated and joyous after receiving the auspicious sighting (*darshan*) of Ayyappan, pilgrims return to Pamba and from there proceed home by car or bus. On the way home, they go to their household *puja* room to worship Ayyappan and then remove the neck chain they have been wearing throughout the period of the pilgrimage, beginning with the initial period of votive abstinence. They distribute honey balls to family, friends and neighbours. Women also receive the small presents, such as hairclips or bangles, which had been bought in Pamba. Votive abstinence is finally broken; having renounced meat-eating during the pilgrimage, pilgrims now eat their first non-vegetarian meal, prepared by the women of the house.

Talking about Sabarimala

A number of recurrent themes emerge when talking with men who have gone to Sabarimala. The fatiguing and dangerous nature of the pilgrimage,

rendering it a trial, is always stressed – even exaggerated. Notably, men invariably referred to the possibility of being killed by wild animals (especially tigers and elephants) while in the forest. That this hardly seems likely (the men keep to well-used tracks; there is plenty of noise; tigers have all but disappeared), and appears never to have actually happened, does not detract from the genuine apprehension which people seem to feel at the prospect of entering deep into ‘the forest’, that symbolically loaded space of Hindu mythology. This is heightened among *kanniswamis*, the first-time pilgrims: in Daniel (1984: 249), the anthropologist appears to have entered this mood, to judge from his characterization of the journey he undertook as being through ‘forests infested with elephants, bears, leopards’. By talking about, and ‘talking up’, the dangers of the pilgrimage, men explicitly identify with Ayyappan’s perilous journey through the forest and with his bravery, while coding the pilgrimage as an ordeal, an act of masculine heroism (see Fuller 1992: 217). The men we spoke with often argued that women are barred from the pilgrimage for their own safety, or suggested that women lack the physical and mental strength to endure such an arduous journey. Others reminded us that women could not keep forty-one days’ votive abstinence because menstruation would take place, and hence impurity ensue.⁷ But even manly courage, strength, and purity may be insufficient to pull the participant through the ordeal: men talk about miraculous encounters with Ayyappan helping them along the arduous way to Sabarimala. In pilgrims’ tales, the deity, in various guises, comes to the rescue of imperilled pilgrims, typically those who become lost in the forest or are attacked by wild animals. Ayyappan also manifests himself to offer encouragement and strength to exhausted pilgrims whose resolve is flagging (cf. Gath 1997: 200–2). Miraculous encounters with Ayyappan are affirmations of pilgrims’ spiritual and moral worthiness: Ayyappan will only help those who follow votive abstinence and surrender themselves to him.

In their accounts of pilgrimage experience, many men also highlight a particular atmosphere that is experienced at Sabarimala. On return from his second pilgrimage, everyone asked Filippo whether he had ‘felt something different’ there. Madhavan, a Nayar shopkeeper who had been to Sabarimala many times, told us:

When you keep *vratam* for some days, you forget passions and bad things. The body becomes healthier, and so does the mind: you think of Ayyappan and forget all your trouble. You go to Sabarimala to fulfil a vow, sometimes you are sent there because someone else has made a vow – your mother or a brother. But you also go there for personal pleasure in the experience.

Another pilgrim mused: ‘There is a special atmosphere at Sabarimala, because everyone has only Ayyappan in mind and there are no such tensions and pressures as you normally experience at home.’ The sense of merging with Ayyappan (or of taking refuge in him – *swami saranam*) is heightened by the pilgrimage’s sacrificial symbolism. Pilgrimage preparations are a self-sacrificial death which blends individual men into a community of *swamis*/renouncers and, importantly, into Ayyappan himself. This process becomes most apparent in the final stages of the pilgrimage.

First, pilgrims should break a coconut on the holy eighteen steps. Until the practice was discontinued in 1986, this involved a direct reference to the

individual's pilgrimage experience: on the fourth pilgrimage, you would have broken a coconut on the fourth step and so on. Coconuts in Kerala are normally used in rituals and sacrifices as substitutes for people, a relation of homology being drawn between coconut trees and the human body, coconuts and human heads. The ritual breaking of coconuts is generally understood in Kerala as a sacrificial offering, where the fruit stands as substitute for the sacrificer. At Sabarimala, the coconut's broken shell is then destroyed on a huge sacrificial fire reminiscent of a funeral pyre. Many Sabarimala old hands told us that in the past, once a pilgrim had been to Sabarimala eighteen times, he was allowed to plant either a coconut or an areca sapling in the temple compound, in the same way that Malayali Hindu mourners plant coconut or areca samplings on the spot where a dead relative has been cremated (see C. Osella & F. Osella forthcoming *a*; Uchiyamada 1995). That the second coconut, filled with ghee, is also broken up and its contents used to anoint Ayyappan in the temple, suggests not only death but also merger with the deity.

Valentine Daniel's phenomenological account of the Sabarimala pilgrimage focuses on its cosmological and physiological dimensions. Pilgrims, he argues, progressively shed various layers of self as they proceed along their journey, experiencing pain, discomfort, and tiredness, ultimately achieving complete merger with the deity once they climb the holy eighteen steps – each one said to be associated with particular elements making up the gross and subtle body – and find themselves in front of Ayyappan. Our understanding is that identification with Ayyappan might occur at a rather earlier point, indeed from the point when the pilgrim undergoes the initial preparation ritual, and is then heightened by sudden miraculous encounters with the deity along the way. As suggested by Alex Gath, pilgrims do not just go to Sabarimala 'to Ayyappan', but also 'as Ayyappan' and 'with Ayyappan' (Gath 1997: 198ff.). Yet we also want to argue, *contra* Daniel, that transcendence via merger with Ayyappan (1984: 264ff.) does not in any sense erase worldly concerns (see also Gath 1997: 282). Pilgrims go to Sabarimala not with self-transformation and certainly not with *moksha* (final release) in mind, but hoping to receive the blessing of Ayyappan, seeking concrete help in resolving mundane problems such as having a child, finding a job, prosperity in business, and so on. A pilgrim seen leaving a substantial wad of cash in front of Ayyappan's shrine told Filippo that, 'I run a business in Madras in partnership with Ayyappan: he helps me, and every year I bring him his share of the profit'. For the not-yet-successful, in an environment where finding a 'good' job (especially in the Gulf, a favoured destination for those seeking remunerative overseas employment) depends just as much on luck and connections as it does on skills and qualifications, Ayyappan's blessing can provide much-needed supernatural help (see F. Osella & C. Osella forthcoming *b*).

Significantly, one commonly stated reason for going to Sabarimala is the desire for children. Having children – sons in particular – is of course one of the most important duties of the householder and a clear marker of having successfully attained full manhood (see Busby 2000; cf. C. Osella 1993). While the pilgrimage stresses asceticism and especially sexual abstinence, sexual desire and sexual potency often become emphasized during the return journey. Young Malayali men in particular find it entirely appropriate to round off their period of abstinence and pilgrimage by asking the bus driver to make

a detour to allow a pleasure-trip to the beach resort of Kovalam, the trip's explicit intention being to provide sexual gratification. Kovalam stands in stark contrast to the austere masculine environment of Sabarimala. It is a bustling resort outside the state capital, frequented by tourists, both foreign and Indian middle-class urbanites, and holds heady promises of glamour and squalor in equal measure. The main tourist season, around Christmas, conveniently coincides with the Sabarimala season. At Kovalam, beach cafés sell European food and two illicit substances, beer and marijuana (not very discreetly), while scantily dressed tourist women (and men, of course, but the visiting groups of boys do not pay much attention to them) wander around and can be ogled freely. 'You get so tired after going to Kovalam and seeing the girls', one young man remarked, referring to the hectic masturbation which follows this feast of sightseeing. For the most daring, Kovalam also offers the services of local prostitutes.

We do not wish to give undue emphasis to the behaviour of these perhaps unrepresentative young Malayali men, although they do present a striking contrast to the young male pilgrims from neighbouring Tamilnadu. These other devotees' visits to Kovalam tend to involve sea excursions in hired local boats, during which they chant and sing songs in praise of Ayyappan, studiously ignoring the undraped women all around them. What we do want to suggest about the Malayalis is that the Sabarimala pilgrimage, with its determinedly male and masculine nuances, would appear to provide men with an enhancement or reinforcement of their masculine powers, including productive and reproductive capabilities, which are what allow men to secure successful adult status. Sabarimala represents a particularly masculine way to explore and resolve some of the tensions of the male position within the household and wider social life. If the pilgrimage, by emphasizing renunciation, distances and detaches men from everyday life and offers a respite from the demands of domesticity – 'there are no such tensions and pressures as you normally experience at home' – at the same time, it allows men to draw on the powers of renunciation itself successfully to fulfil their role as masculine householders, providers, and begetters of children. But at the same time, the ascetic deity is heavily reliant upon the help of his householder devotees: as was seen above, Ayyappan needs annual visits of new pilgrims in order to remain celibate and hence retain his ascetic power.

The 'householder' and the 'renouncer' revisited

The pilgrimage, we suggest, has something particular to do with men, and with men in their relationships to other men and to women. This in turn has implications for a long-standing issue in South Asian studies: the apparent cultural tension between the householder and ascetic impulses.

Louis Dumont's classic account of Hindu social life rests upon several pivotal oppositions. Among the most important is that between the householder's domain of caste and interdependence and the arena of individual self-containment associated with the renouncer. Dumont refers to a master dichotomy ordering Hindu religious practice: that between the 'man in the world and the individual outside the world' (1970: 231). The pair stand in a

complementary but oppositional relationship, a claim which has been much debated within South Asian scholarship.

For example, Tambiah explores Buddhist and Brahmanic attitudes towards renunciation, noting that 'orthodox Brahmanism has been ambivalent towards, even resentful of the renouncer's vocation, and has incorporated it as an end ... appropriately adopted only as the last stage of a man's life cycle, especially after the life of the householder has been completed and its aims fulfilled' (1982: 317). In Buddhism, on the other hand, 'the very existence of the renouncer assumed the necessary presence of the lay householder ... upon whom he was materially dependent' (1982: 318). Thapar attempts to historicize the opposition, demonstrating the cultural dialogue which was taking place between representatives of Jaina, Buddhist, and Hindu thought and the threatening implications for Vedic sacrificer-householders of renunciation. This she sees as a threat which eventually led, via pragmatism, to the incorporation and dilution of renunciation within the Hinds theory of four life stages (*asramas*) (1982).

While the householder ideal has thus effectively won out as the dominant orientation for men approaching maturity, and while historically and within the different South Asian religious traditions there have been many interpretations of the relative importance or status of the householder and renouncer, and of the relationship between them, the idea of a tension or opposition between the two has generally been felt useful. Complementarity within early Buddhism grows into conflict and downright hostility by the time we reach current ethnography: '[R]enouncers ... are usually accorded respect in face-to-face encounters ... When talking about them generally, however, they are reviled ... [Dumont] is quite right in speaking of "subdued hostility" towards renunciation' (Madan 1982: 244).

Yet at the same time, Madan tells us that 'The virtues of the life of the householder [are] ... said to flow from "detachment in enjoyment" which is the essence of renunciation' (1982: 244). While Madan chooses not to explore this assertion, concerned as he is with balancing out the ethnographic record and affirming the value of the life of the man-in-the-world, his remark makes clear that we are then faced with two apparently antithetical values which refuse to stay apart and inhabit separate domains: the true householder should cultivate virtuosity in the arts of renunciation in order most fully to enjoy his non-renunciation.

In an important article, Burghart (1983) argued for a more nuanced treatment of the renouncer-householder issue by drawing on ethnographic record to consider the world from the ascetic's point of view. Seen from this perspective, and explored by means of an ethnographic account of the orders of sectarian ascetic renunciation known widely as *sampradayas*, some important distinctions emerge. For example, the transient world which is renounced is not identical to the social world: renunciation need mean neither individualism nor a refusal to engage with others, nor even retreat from the world of caste.

Later studies confirm Burghart's insistence that renunciation does not mean a solitary end to social relationships, nor does it imply indifference to matters of caste or community. Arguing that the renouncer has been 'partly assimilated' with the Brahman householder, Fuller suggests that the 'the "ideal

Brahman" is or is like an ascetic renouncer' (1992: 18). Although Brahmanical purity is partly buttressed by, and dependent upon, the existence and services provided by both the Brahman's wife and those deemed to be of lower caste, their dependence upon inferiors is denied at an ideological level. In other words, Brahman's ritual superiority depends just as much on their complementary hierarchical relations with lower castes as on a renouncer-inspired denial and detachment from the same. At the same time, popular Hindu devotionalism, making the goals of renunciation available to everyone, has universalized the endeavour of the renouncer. While van der Veer (1988; 1994) makes the point that renouncers and ascetic sects have seldom been detached from the world of caste and hierarchy, Mills (2000) shows that Buddhist monks do not turn away from the values of kinship and Srivastava (1999) offers ethnography of renouncers' continuing visits to – and links with – their 'renounced' families and villages.

All this means two things for our purposes here: first, that we can discount such classic Dumontian characteristics of 'true' asceticism as individualism, lack of social ties, flouting of caste, and so on; secondly, that the world of the householder and the renouncer are clearly not hermetically sealed off from each other either socially or ideologically, regardless of Burghart's insistence upon 'two conceptual universes'. The Sabarimala pilgrimage suggests a particular articulation of the relationship between householder and renouncer: here, in the first place, through a relationship of reciprocal empowerment, both householder and renouncer acquire the means to fulfil their separate socio-cultural roles. The lesson learnt from Sabarimala is that the man-in-the-world (the pilgrim) needs the power of the renouncer to be a successful householder, just as the man-outside-the-world (the celibate Ayyappan) requires the support of the householder in order to maintain his ascetic powers. At the same time, the man-in-the-world must actually himself take on the mantle of the man-outside-the-world in order to fulfil his (productive and reproductive) responsibilities effectively. With an act of pilgrimage, a householder becomes an ascetic and moves into an all-male community of ascetics; with no *kan-niswamis* to visit him, Ayyappan would marry Malikapurattamma and become himself a householder. His potential bride waits perpetually nearby, and the story's conclusion is forever deferred.⁸ Ayyappan's myths do not end with his spurned lover disappearing, leaving him to retreat into the forest: rather, the couple and the promise of marriage are held in timeless tension and deferral, dependent upon the annual pilgrim cycle. The world of the renouncer and that of the householder are not incompatible but continually impinge and spill over onto each other, while being co-dependent and mutually transformable.

Sabarimala and masculinity

So far we have suggested that the Sabarimala pilgrimage – a virtually all-male event – underscores and enhances some specific masculine qualities of both deity and visiting devotees (cf. Fuller 1992: 217). We now discuss pilgrimage's role in the construction and representation of Malayali gendered identities. This leads us to consider, on the one hand, some works of psychological anthropology which explore men's relationships with women and the

formation of the gendered male psyche and, on the other, anthropological theories which connect individual religious/ritual experiences to the long term reproduction of power relations in society.

We begin with Kurtz's radical attempt to propose a specific 'Indian' path to psychological development and maturity which does not pathologize all Indian men as substantially inadequate, repressed, and un-masculine, as much existing psychological anthropology has done (see e.g. Caldwell 1999; Carstairs 1957; Gough 1955; Kakar 1989; for refutations of this classic picture, C. Osella & F. Osella 2002; Srivastava forthcoming). Kurtz's central thesis is that willing sacrifice of infantile individual pleasure and individualistic desires is a normal, healthy, developmental path in India. While autonomy and individualism have been put forward as healthy norms under classical Freudian theory, in many societies, including India, this sort of self-centredness is not widely regarded as normal or healthy. Following earlier work (e.g. Roland 1988), Kurtz concludes that anthropologists and psychologists alike have greatly underestimated the ways in which groups exercise power in people's inner psychic experience. The group is not just an external force, curbing an individual's desire to live their own life, as is often supposed. On the contrary, the group actually exists within. The self is already multiple and refers back to the group. The ego structure is not individualized but is an 'ego of the whole' (1992: 103–4).

Kurtz surveys the existing ethnographic record on Indian child-rearing practices and finds that they confirm his intuition that babies in India are not locked into the sort of tight emotional bond with their mothers which then leads towards prolonged and undesirable symbiosis. Classical analyses, like that of Kakar and to some extent Roland, have assumed (on the basis of late weaning, for example) that Indian child-rearing offers a prolonged emotional and psychic cosiness, a lengthy period in which child and mother remain as one. Failure to break the mother-son dyad gives rise to a narcissistic personality, that is to a person who fails to make the distinction between self and other and who remains locked into infantile pleasures.

Investigation of actual child-rearing practices reveals, however, the mistaken assumptions upon which such analyses are based. While Euro-American mothers commonly find it desirable to 'mirror' their child and thereby form an intense emotional bond with him or her, Kurtz suggests that in many other ethnographic contexts, child-rearing practices are both less individualizing and also far less emotionally charged. He proposes that the Indian pattern is one of a limited and largely functional physical closeness unaccompanied by attention or mirroring, but is instead coupled with an emotional distance which prevents the development of strongly exclusivist mother-child attachments. For example, in India breast-feeding is often a matter of functional and often peremptory and interrupted feeding and is not a particularly heightened moment of intimacy within a generally intense and exclusive relationship. Moreover, all of this is set within a general understanding that the child is not a unique individual to be focused on but is thought of primarily in terms of its membership of a wider collectivity, that of the household.

Using evidence about actual practice and the consequent emotional relationship between mother and child, Kurtz argues that Indian babies are not symbiotically emotionally bonded to their mothers for an excessively lengthy period. Adult orientations towards groupness and a larger sense of self – a self

rooted in group attachments – is not then grounded in a continuation of the narcissistic and immature ‘“we” feelings’ of the new-born infant who is unable to distinguish between self and mother, or self and other, and who sees its mother as a unique source of sensual and emotional pleasure. Rather, Kurtz identifies a maturational process by which an Indian infant detaches itself – as is held necessary in classical theory – from its mother so as to form a sense of self; in forming this sense of self, the child reattaches itself to a larger group – the family, a wider group of care-givers – in a process which parallels but replaces Western separation-individuation and oedipal transformations. In contrast to the Western pattern of crack-down via weaning, toilet training, and so on, the Indian child is left over its own time voluntarily to renounce the pleasures of infantile sensuality: negatively by teasing, emotional distance, and fear of exclusion from the group; positively, through inclusion in the group and encouragement of imitation. Renunciation rather than repression then becomes the core mechanism of self-development. The child is distracted and attracted outwards and onwards; learning that happiness, satisfaction, and ultimately the sense of self actually come out of voluntarily forgoing selfish infantile individualized desire in favour of the mature pleasures which are available to one who is a connected part of a larger group.

One might object that this picture is overgeneralized and abstracted; of course, more ethnography will help to produce a more nuanced understanding of differences within India: how does the joint family differ from the nuclear household, the Bengali Hindu family from the Kerala Christian, and so on. We find such objections to be unpersuasive: note first that Kurtz bases his arguments on actual ethnographic studies, which do seem to concur and which do clearly suggest a different style of child-rearing from those considered ideal in Western contexts (see Trawick 1990 for lengthy discussion of some differences). Secondly, Kurtz’s generalizing aim is to be compared with classic Freudian theory, which also posits an idealized typical path to psychic processes; empirical variation has not, and need not, overturn the entire endeavour. Thirdly, it is after all in the nature of theory to abstract: only if one is completely hostile to theory can one refuse generalization. Attempts to build theory necessarily involve oversight of some difference, since one is working towards a larger picture.⁹

Summarizing then, Kurtz posits renunciation as the key psychic tool in the child’s experience of learning to move towards maturity via participation in the group, and asserts that this process of renunciation on the way to the group can be repeated at any developmental stage or recalled in cultural practice. If we retain our interest in masculinity and rework Kurtz’s thesis towards a more closely gendered interpretation, we can argue that boys and men at Sabarimala are reiterating self-immersion in a larger – but here specifically masculine – social body. This is not done – as in classical Freudian theory – out of an enhanced anxiety about masculine identity leading on to a regressive movement towards self-castration (submission to the guru father figure; refraining from asserting potency and hence the threat of competition, via celibacy). Rather, this move is undertaken in the context of a perfectly normal and universal sense of masculine ambivalence and self-doubt, which in South Asia can take on a specific local-cultural resolution or assuaging by means of immersion in a more potent and larger male self. This masculine self is at once

connected to, and embodied within, a collectivity of men: those within the family group, the male guru, the senior patriarch, and such hyper-male figures as the deity Ayyappan or idealized masculine iconic heroes such as the freedom-fighting father of the nation, the postcolonial military leader or the cinema star (C. Osella & F. Osella forthcoming). We could simply argue that the Sabarimala pilgrimage is another example of a cultural practice in which the lesson is again rehearsed and reiterated that mature renunciation leads to a larger and more powerful sense of self connected to the wider group. But, importantly, in this case 'the group' is gendered: a group of men. The mature self which is consolidated and evoked at Sabarimala is then a gendered self, a part of the whole which connects an individual man both to a wider group of men (fellow *swamis*, fellow pilgrims) and to senior men (*guruswamis*) as representatives of the masculine group while at the same time excluding women, thereby highlighting the significance of the pilgrims membership of and connection to a category of 'men'. We now move from internal to external motivation to argue that the process identified by Kurtz might not be 'power neutral', leading in fact to the construction and reproduction of specific (hierarchical) relations between men and between men and women.

We do so with the help of Maurice Bloch, an unlikely bedfellow for Kurtz. Bloch's *Prey into hunter* (1992) draws from a variety of ethnographic examples to argue that actual or symbolic violence, in the first stage of many rituals, is directed towards the participants themselves, as an act which seeks to dominate the 'life force' that they embody. In the intermediate stage, separated from society and from their own life force, participants enter in contact with and absorb (conquer or consume, according to Bloch) super-human vitality from deities/spirits/ancestors, returning thus re-vitalized into society in the final ritual stage. Bloch explains that: 'Vitality is regained, but not the home-grown native vitality which was discarded ... but, instead, a conquered vitality obtained from *outside* beings ... [Humans] become part of permanent institutions, and as superior beings they can reincorporate the present life through the idiom of conquest or consumption' (1992: 5). Turned outwards, either towards outsiders or 'insiders of lower status' (women, wife-givers, dependants), it legitimizes, respectively, military expansion and social hierarchy (1992: 81). At Sabarimala, we have identified a first stage of violent separation expressed through the symbolism of death, a violence reiterated throughout the journey through the real (or imagined) hardship experienced by pilgrims; a second stage of merger with a powerful deity; and a final phase of reincorporation when devotional tunes sung on the way to Sabarimala might be replaced by sexually explicit and obscene 'boat' songs (*vallampattu*),¹⁰ and when we see an emphasis on sexual desire and sexual potency and, especially in the case of young men, aggressive behaviour towards women.

David Gellner has criticized Bloch's analysis, arguing that 'it works best for social rituals', while 'it puts too much stress on the ritual itself and not enough on the institutions which enable it to be preserved over long periods of time' (1999: 150). At the same time, we can question Bloch's own somewhat reductionist portrayal of renunciation – seldom, as we have stressed earlier, are Hindu renouncers completely or permanently detached from the social world.¹¹ However, the argument put forward in *Prey into hunter* still allows us to see the politics inherent in Kurtz's insights about 'groups'. Sabarimala is an

opportunity for men to return to the cross-sex world of the householder renewed in potency: it is actually via renunciation and association with other celibate males that an individual man gains the strength to become and act as a successful householder. This process of production of an (illusionary) all-powerful male – empowered by the merging with a hyper-masculine deity and with other men – simultaneously impinges upon the exclusion of women and underscores their subordination as hierarchical inferior – women have neither the same degree of purity nor the moral strength of men.

This process is reiterated in several ways: first, the pilgrim becomes part of a wider, exclusively male body, bound to the group of men alongside whom he undertakes the pilgrimage and its preparations; secondly, membership of a pilgrimage group involves voluntary submission to a senior male, the *guruswami*; thirdly, the male pilgrim also actively seeks identification with, and proximity to, the extraordinarily and impeccably male deity Ayyappan; and eventually the pilgrim is dissolved within and connected to a sea of men who, by their sheer numbers, seem to suggest the entirety of male humanity. But even in the midst of activities which focus on celibate renunciation, matters of progeny and householder responsibilities were uppermost in pilgrims' minds. The blessing that men most hoped for was often to do with concerns about birth and fertility, an ethnographic observation also made by Gath (1997).¹² Men tell us that they go to Sabarimala with children in mind: to protect those already born; to ask for the conception of those desired but yet unborn; to ensure easy births for pregnant wives. Another preoccupation is employment and wealth: men go hoping to get jobs, improve their prospects, or keep their businesses running smoothly. In the end, then, the core prize desired by these renouncers is that of successful mature male householdership: to be a good husband and father, a provider. And yet, while men almost universally undertake the pilgrimage in their role as (actual or would-be) householders, thus as men (potentially) connected via sex and procreation to women, the pilgrimage denies altogether connection to, and dependence upon, women.

Of particular interest here are insights arising from Jeffords' analysis (1989) of Hollywood 'buddy' films dealing with US war experiences in Vietnam. Jeffords' argument is that equality and friendship between men can be performed and celebrated precisely because they are predicated on an underlying sense of difference and hierarchy, that of gender – with woman as the absent and inferiorized other. Such segregated celebrations of masculinity then help both in the reproduction of masculinity – through processes of 'remasculinization', in Jeffords' words – and in the limiting of masculinity to males (cf. Halberstam: 1998 on female masculinities and the possible detachment of 'masculinity' from 'men'). Existing differences of caste, class, age, and so on between men can be erased (as with the erasure of racial and class difference in Hollywood 'buddy' movies) exactly because difference is projected onto women, allowing for a focus on what all men share (in contrast to women), and hence evocation of an imaginary egalitarian group – 'men'. Extending Fuller's analysis about the posited superiority and independence of Brahmins being actually reliant upon their dependence upon inferiors (1992: 18), we then argue that, similarly, men's self-ascribed superiority depends just as much upon complementary hierarchical relations with those who are constructed as

social inferiors as it does on the very denial of connection with them. At the same time, women are constructed as ever dependant on men's practical or mystical intervention, hence as substantially inferior (cf. Busby 2000: 227-9).

For the whole year, the (spiritual and practical) well being of the household rests primarily on women, who visit temples regularly, who light the sacred lamp outside the house every day at dusk, who fast. During the *mandala* period – the time of the Sabarimala pilgrimage – temples hold special daily *pujas*, *bhajana* (devotional songs) singing and seven- or nine-day-long public readings from religious texts, such as the Bhagavan Gita. During this period of intense devotional activity, the crowds attending temples are composed mostly of women. Yet it is the blessings accrued by men through renunciation and pilgrimage which are endowed with the special powers of promoting long-term household prosperity, and in particular securing progeny. These blessings come through immersion in a more potent and larger imaginary male body, a body at once connected to the masculine group, to the guru and to the hyper-male deity. They are blessings passed from men to women and dependents: when returning pilgrims bring 'ladies' items' (gifts bought within the temple precincts); and when they distribute the deity's *prasadam* of honey balls, conscientiously gathered by men to take home. Predictably, women's quiet, continual spiritual work for the benefit of their families is overshadowed – and actually said to be activated and protected by – the more conspicuous ritual activities of men, that is the one-off or occasional act of all-male pilgrimage. Finally, the Ayyappan myth evokes an all-too-familiar theme of the transformation, taming, or containment of potentially dangerous, and yet powerful, unmarried females (here a she-buffalo; blood-thirsty goddesses in other stories) through the intervention of a male deity (see Fuller 1992: 199 ff.).¹³

Conclusions

In Sabarimala we find some apparently clear-cut dualisms which turn out to be experienced as much less straightforwardly complementary, their seeming oppositions either dissolved altogether or manifesting themselves as dynamic mutual connections. The secret at the heart of Ayyappan, the hyper-male ascetic renouncer who refuses to marry, is his deep concern with matters of marriage and progeny. In this, he resembles his father, Siva, the 'erotic ascetic' (O'Flaherty 1973). The secret of the everyday householder is that he depends for his success on acting as a renouncer who is removed from the household and its relationships. And while the devotee relies upon his deity for blessing and power, the deity is only empowered to give that blessing through the renunciatory actions of mortal males, and most especially by dependence upon the young first-time pilgrims, the junior *kanniswamis*. Sabarimala then also affirms for us the importance of relationship and group not only in social but also psychic life. *Contra* reductionist readings of Dumont – Dumont does not exclude the existence of 'individuals' in India, but of 'individualism as a value' – we have argued elsewhere that Malayali 'big-men' are deeply embedded in community and society, as leaders and patrons, depending for their success on social connections with others; individualistic 'selfish' orientations are roundly

condemned as 'anti-social' (see F. Osella & C. Osella 2000*b*). Here too we argue that individualism is neither an approved social orientation nor a desirable mental characteristic, and we also take the view that group and relationship take priority over self. But we seek to go further than this by proposing that the group is actually within, and that the self is already structured as multiple and strongly connected in what Kurtz identifies as the 'ego of the whole' (1992: 103-4). Importantly, however, we argue that if Sabarimala remasculinizes men and male deities via immersion into an imaginary undifferentiated body of men, it does so by reaffirming a gender hierarchy through the exclusion of women, on whom men otherwise depend in their everyday lives.

We wish to conclude by stressing the current political overtones of the Ayyappan pilgrimage and its masculinity themes, especially among adherents of the so-called *Hindutva* ('Hinduness') movements which have become increasingly active in the South Indian states since the early 1990s. One recent work on Hindu nationalism notes that in India, 'celibacy is the preferred state for possessing concentrated masculine vigour'. In Hindu chauvinist discourse, 'This masculinity, achieved through renunciate celibacy, is in marked contrast to the Buddhist emphasis on celibacy which leads to escapism and emasculation' (Chakravarti 1998: 256). An equally significant point is made by the cinema historian, Ravi Vasudevan, in an analysis of the film *Hey Ram*, directed by the South Indian film-maker, Kamal Hassan. The film is ostensibly critical of Hindu nationalism, but Vasudevan notes that it connects renunciation with notions of virile political potency: the plot turns on 'Muslim violence' as a force which awakens Hindu masculinity, transforming a quiet householder into an avenging renouncer (Vasudevan forthcoming). Hindu renunciation is thus explicitly marked out as an active and aggressive state which is linked to masculine potency. It distances itself from any negative connotations of passivity because it always holds the promise of resolution and gain – a return to strength and an augmentation of power. We note that in Valiyagramam one of the most devoted of Ayyappan's *guruswamis*, indeed the devotee who led the fire-walking ritual that preceded the pilgrimage, was widely known in the area as a 'rowdy' or thug attached to one of the most militant pan-Indian Hindu supremacist organizations, the RSS;¹⁴ he was a man much feared by local Dalits (ex-untouchables) with leftist political affiliations. It is also notable that in recent years two local temples closely associated to Ayyappan's devotees have been sites of political violence. In Kerala, participation in 'public' Hinduism in the form of pilgrimages and various forms of temple-related activity often has a strong *Hindutva* dimension. Returning to Valiyagramam in 2002 we find that the vast majority of temple committees in the area are now dominated by RSS militants and sympathizers, a move which the left parties have tried to contain – rather unsuccessfully – by directing their own supporters to try to adopt a prominent role in these same committees and the activities which they organize (see F. Osella & C. Osella forthcoming).

In South India, it is not at all unusual to find either Hindu gods relying on the help or protection of Muslim subordinate deities (see e.g. Hildebeitel 1989) or Muslim saints becoming assimilated to the pantheon and religious practices of other groups (see Bayly 1989) and vice versa.¹⁵ Yet Kerala's progressivist public discourse since the States Reorganisation Act, 1956, has

preferred to represent Sabarimala – where non-Hindus are allowed to participate and where Ayyappan has a Muslim and a ‘tribal’ as helpers – as a truly unique, non-communal religious event expressing an inherent and particularly Malayali egalitarian spirit (see F. Osella & C. Osella 2000c), where everyone is equal as a *swami*. This rhetoric is now being progressively superseded by another, gaining currency both in public discourse and private conversations. This latter suggests that those deemed non-Hindu others, like Ayyappan’s non-Hindu helpers, can only be incorporated into a (re-masculinized) Hindu community as tamed subjects, in the same way as a ‘Muslim pirate’ and a ‘tribal leader’ are allowed to sit near Ayyappan after their defeat by the deity.

NOTES

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¹ *Saranam*: refuge. Hence, here, ‘Ayyapan, give me refuge’ or ‘Ayyappan is my refuge’.

² This is food or other substances symbolically consumed by a deity and returned to the devotees imbued with the deity’s grace and blessings (see Fuller 1992: 74-5).

³ The popularity of Sabarimala has been further enhanced since the advent of local cable television channels which, during the 2002-3 pilgrimage season, made daily live broadcasts from the temple itself (cf. Rajagopal 2001). Similarly, a number of Malayalam and English newspapers have started daily features on the pilgrimage during the Sabarimala season.

⁴ Although according to local informants Mahishi, the she-buffalo, should not be confused with Mahishiasura, the male buffalo demon defeated and killed by the goddess Durga, we note striking thematic similarities between the two stories. In both cases, a deity’s (sacrificial) killing of a male or female buffalo – with an explicit (Mahishiasura) or implicit (Mahishi) demonic character or nature – engenders the rebirth/transformation of the latter into a servant-devotee of the slaying deity (see e.g. Biardeau 1984; Coburn 1988; Hildebeitel 1989; Reiniche 1979; Tarabout 1986). Ayyappan’s two ‘helpers’ are similarly transformed into devotees of the deity after their defeat (cf. Hildebeitel 1989).

⁵ Alternatively, a *guruswami* might perform the rituals in the house of one of the pilgrims.

⁶ To avoid checking the flux of visitors, during the busiest days of the pilgrimage season, pilgrims are unceremoniously pushed and pulled up the narrow stairs by a line of policemen.

⁷ Every year the exclusion of mature fertile women from the pilgrimage gives rise to debates in newspapers and, occasionally, public protests. In 1990, for example, some male devotees complained to the Devaswom Board (the government body that administers Hindu temples in southern Kerala) about the posting of a woman as Special Commissioner for Sabarimala and her subsequent visit to the temple. The issue was picked up by a number of activist groups who argued that in fact all women should be allowed to participate in the pilgrimage. A protest outside the main Devaswom Board’s office in Thiruvananthapuram was organized and court action was threatened. However, the ensuing public debate was soon overshadowed by the surfacing of a major scandal regarding the embezzlement of the temple’s funds and corrupt practices in the tendering of contracts for the supply of provisions to the temple. The issue of women’s participation re-emerged in the following years and in 1996 the Devaswom decided to conduct a *devaprasanam*, an astrological diagnosis of a deity’s wishes, to reach a decision on the matter. Predictably, the astrologer confirmed that Ayyappan would be displeased by the participation of women of child-bearing age. The verdict – which also dealt with other major issues such as the renovation, extension, and development of new facilities for pilgrims at Sabarimala – was contested by some. They argued that it was invalid as it had been per-

formed by an astrologer who had no customary rights in the Sabarimala temple and hence they organized their own *devaprasanam*. Eventually, a political compromise regarding the proposed developments was reached, but the *status quo* was upheld regarding women's participation. Ayyappan is a very popular and powerful deity, and hence women are just as eager as men to go on pilgrimage. However, our experience in southern Kerala suggests that by and large women accept that it would be a sin (*dosham*) for non-menopausal females to participate, as it would have a deleterious effect on the deity's powers.

⁸The deferral of marriage or sexual union in order to preserve unique divine powers is a recurrent theme in many local myths of the goddess (cf. Allen 1976; Fuller 1992; Sax 1991). In one local version of the pan-Indian myth, for example, Mahishiasura is so taken aback by the beauty of Bhadrakali (as Durga) that he asks her to marry him. To the sexual advances of Mahishiasura, she replies that she will concede herself only if he defeats her in battle. In another myth, Bhadrakali, as Kannaki, refuses to consummate her marriage with Balagan (Kovalan), by declaring that she will only do so after she has completed her mission of killing the Pandi Raja, the king of Madurai (F. Osella 1993: ch. 3).

⁹As we go to press in the middle of fieldwork (in Kerala) with our two children (aged 5 and 3), our impressions that Kurtz is correct are strengthened. People seek continuously to move their children away from strong attachment to their mothers and towards a wider orientation to the social group. This is done by, for example, forcibly removing an infant from its mother's lap and carrying her or him around the house to greet other household members; screams of protest are ignored or laughed off.

¹⁰This is a genre of popular Malayali songs which are sung in particularly rowdy all-male occasions, similar to United Kingdom rugby songs.

¹¹We found that men generally undertake the Sabarimala pilgrimage for the benefit of their families; very few express the lofty sentiments of hope for ultimate salvation expressed in Sekar's prescriptive account or Daniel's idealized narrative (Daniel 1984; Sekar 1992). We find, in other words, the familiar disjunction within the practices of popular religion between the very few who hope for the orthodox goal of *moksha* – liberation – and the many who hope for a more pragmatic *anugraham* – concrete blessing.

¹²Gath (1997: 205) notes that, 'It is certainly a well-known fact that the enormously popular Christian singer from Kerala, Yesudas, was blessed with a son after he had made a pilgrimage to Sabarimala'.

¹³Although in Ayyappan's killing of Mahishi we find a reversal of roles *vis-à-vis* other popular myths which usually pitch a goddess (Durga or Bhadrakali) against a male demon (for example, the buffalo-demon Mahishiasura), we also note substantial continuities in the way that the powers of supernatural female beings are dealt with. In Kerala-wide myths, when the goddess Bhadrakali reaches the apotheosis of her powers after killing the demon Darikan and drinking his blood, her power becomes so great that she can no longer control herself and is in danger of destroying everything else around her. Anger and hunger for more blood are contained by Siva himself, her creator/husband, who alone can perform this task without being destroyed in the process. He lies at her feet: when in her fury Bhadrakali steps on his body, she cools down immediately. So, although in this story a powerful goddess kills a demon, it is only the intervention of a male deity which allows a complete and final restoration of socio-cosmic order. In the same way, Ayyappan's intervention transforms a dangerous she-buffalo into a peaceful (and marriageable) goddess.

¹⁴Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is a right-wing Hindu nationalist organization.

¹⁵In northern Kerala, for example, there are many Muslim versions of the Ramayana written and performed according to the particular local *Mappilla pattu* style (Prof. Karassery, personal communication).

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