"Who am I . . . what significance do I have?" Shifting Rituals, Receding Narratives, and Potential Change of the Goddess' Identity in Gangamma Traditions of South India

Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger

I first attended the village goddess Gangamma's *jatara* ("annual festival")[1] in the South Indian pilgrimage town of Tirupati in 1992, knowing little about the *jatara* except press reports that emphasized the custom of male participants taking female guising.[2] Over the intervening years I have attended the *jatara* four times, spent nine months living in Tirupati conducting research about Gangamma traditions, and have returned for numerous shorter visits. Since my first visit, I have observed numerous changes in both Gangamma narratives and rituals that have the potential to change who the goddess is. Gangamma's largest temple, Tatayyagunta, has been radically transformed—ritually, architecturally, and in the personnel serving the goddess. The local narrative repertoire surrounding the goddess seems to be receding from the public imagination, or even being silenced, and is unknown by many in the burgeoning *jatara* crowds (reported to be 500,000 in 2012) drawn from beyond the boundaries of Tirupati that Gangamma traditionally protects.[3]

These narrative and ritual changes raise questions about what each individually creates, their relationship, and what is lost or gained in the changes I have observed. What is created with the addition of Sanskritic rituals to temple service (traditionally offered to *puranic* deities[4] rather than *gramadevatas* ["village deities"] such as Gangamma), when middle-class aesthetics have

---

[1] *Jatara* is the Telugu term used for the festivals of *gramadevatas* ("village goddesses") that are celebrated in public spaces; these are distinguished from the (often domestically oriented) festivals celebrated in honor of *puranic* deities, who are worshipped throughout India.

[2] In the contexts of Gangamma *jatara*, the clothing Gangamma wears in the myth and that worn by male ritual specialists and lay participants disguises, reveals, and transforms identities.

[3] Ethnographic data for this essay also appear in "Narratives of Excess and Access" (75-96) and "The Goddess Served and Lost: Tatayyagunta Mudaliars" (180-209) from *When the World Becomes Female: Guises of a South Indian Goddess* (2013). Those chapters are focused, however, primarily on the creation of gender possibilities created through Gangamma traditions. Initial English translations of voice-recorded Telugu and Tamil conversations and Telugu oral narrative performances were made together by the author and her fieldwork associate, Krishna Priya, during our fieldwork itself; the author made further refinements in English upon her return to the United States.

[4] The *puranas* (literally, "old stories") are a classification of narrative texts, composed in Sanskrit and a multitude of regional languages, from which most Hindu mythology is drawn. Many regional-language *puranas* are available only in oral performances and not written texts.

impacted architectural temple changes, and when Gangamma's narratives recede from the public imagination? How is the goddess' identity potentially changing with these narrative and ritual shifts? These questions bring a performative lens to older questions of the relationships between ritual and narrative, which often prioritize one over the other.[5] Ethnographic and performance analyses of Gangamma ritual and narrative traditions show the finely tuned ways in which they are both independent and codependent and the ways in which they both reflect and create—and have the potential to change—the identity of the goddess.

Gangamma *jatara* began as a local, very local, celebration that is typical of a wide range of *jataras* performed for what are known as the Seven Sister *gramadevatas* in Chitoor District of Andhra Pradesh. The purpose of these *jataras* is to invigorate the power of the goddess so that she will protect the *uru* ("local community") during the vulnerable time of the hot season—when she herself is said to expand—when the *uru* is threatened by particular hot season-associated illnesses and drought. The power of these *gramadevatas* must be *ugra* ("excessive" or "heated") in order to accomplish these ends. But then that *ugram*[6] must be cooled or satisfied in order that the goddess not become destructive beyond these ends; this has traditionally been accomplished through the offering of *bali* ("animal sacrifice"). Nevertheless, even in her cooled and more "stable" state, Gangamma is typically identified as too *ugra* to bear or serve at home by most devotees; her needs are simply excessive. However, as will be mentioned below, there are a few ritual families and individuals who can and *do* bear her and enter intimate relationships with her.

Some explanation of what it means for a goddess to be heated or cooled may be helpful here, before proceeding with discussions of Gangamma's shifting narratives and rituals.[7] Heat in Hindu discourse and ritual is associated with expansion, (sometimes excessive) presence of a deity, and both human and divine unsatisfied desire—that is, *ugram*. Coolness, in contrast, is associated with stability, satisfaction, desire fulfilled—*shantam*. Some Indian languages use the phrase literally "to cool" (Hindi: *thanda karna*) when referring to immersion in a body of water of a temporary clay festival image at the end of the end of festivals such as Durga Puja and Ganesha Chathurti, even if that deity or its clay form is not directly identified as *ugra*. Rituals that are offered to a heated, that is, *present*, goddess who is possessing a human body—performed to "send her on her way" (to "de-possess" the person)—may be called, in some contexts, "to cool" the goddess. Gangamma is consistently characterized as *ugra*, but her *ugram* must be ritually consolidated and built up during her *jatara* for her task at hand during the *jatara*. She expands into multiple forms outside her temple, forms that require more and more rituals to keep her satisfied; her hunger, too, expands to such a degree that vegetarian offerings are no longer sufficient to satiate her. Thus, one could characterize the rhythms of Gangamma *jatara* rituals as creating a fine balance of heating and cooling—intensifying and satisfying—the goddess.

---

[5] For some of these debates, see Bell (1997), Segal (1999), Strenski (1996).

[6] *Ugra* is the adjectival form and *ugram* the nominal form of words that I have translated as excessive and excess, respectively.

[7] See McGilvray (1998) for resonances of heat and cold in Tamil culture—in food, medicine, and ritual.

Gangamma is considered to be the most powerful of the Seven Sisters who live in Tirupati and its environs. She also stands apart from her other sisters in that she has a fully developed biography and lives in permanent, enclosed temples rather than in open-air shrines. It is difficult to know whether the biography and residences have helped to create Gangamma's unique *shakti* ("power") or if they have developed more fully than that of her sisters because she *has* this *shakti*. But changes in her residences have impacted and been impacted by the wealth that Gangamma's largest temple has begun to generate and accrue primarily through the *jatara*, the new personnel brought in to serve the goddess, and the rituals performed at that temple. Further, because many *jatara* participants no longer know Gangamma's unique biography and it is being overwritten by stories of the *puranic* goddesses with which she is becoming increasingly associated, the rationale for Gangamma's unique rituals is also changing, or at least has the potential to do so. While neither narrative nor ritual is dependent on each other, they mutually reflect and create the unique "character" of Gangamma, and when one shifts, so, too, does the other. Just to be clear: I am not suggesting that Gangamma rituals and narratives were ever fixed or that they have not changed significantly before the 20 years over which I have been visiting Tirupati. In fact, there is evidence that there had been earlier changes, some of which are described below. Rather, this paper describes more recent changes to which I have been witness and some of their potential consequences.

Shifting Temple Personnel and Rituals

The most significant changes in Gangamma ritual traditions were instigated with the change in personnel of those serving the goddess in her Tatayyagunta temple and the widening caste and class identities of *jatara* attendees. Both shifts have resulted in changes in temple and *jatara* rituals, some of which, I argue, have affected the nature of the goddess and/or who she is becoming.

When I first visited Tirupati in 1992, Gangamma in her Tatayyagunta temple was being served by a Mudaliar-caste Tamil woman.[8] Because many *gramadevatas* are traditionally served by women, her presence was not particularly noteworthy. But, when we returned for the *jatara* the next year, this female caretaker's absence in the temple was palpable. The Mudaliar family that had been serving Gangamma at this site since 1914 (according to their own family oral histories) had been replaced by Brahman male *pujaris* (ritual specialists serving the deity in a temple). The Mudaliar patriarch thought that the Andhra Pradesh Department of Temple

---

[8] While Tirupati is part of the contemporary state of Andhra Pradesh, it lies on the boundaries of Tamil and Telugu cultures, and many of the women I worked with during my Gangamma fieldwork were Tamil speakers.

Endowments and Tataiahgunta Devasthanam (temple administrative committee)[9] had ejected the family because they were not Brahman; his wife thought she, as primary caretaker of the goddess, had been ejected because she was a woman. The longer story and personal losses of this ejection can be found in my book *When the World Becomes Female* (2013), but what is most significant here are the ritual changes that this shift in personnel instigated.[10]

The Mudaliar family had already initiated some of the architectural and ritual changes that were accelerated after their ejection from the temple. For example, the grandfather who had immigrated to Tirupati from Chennai (then Madras) and had first met the goddess as a stone head laying on the ground under a tree had, with the goddess' permission, built a roof over her head and an inner sanctum to protect her from the elements and had made other perceived improvements to the site.[11] The family decided to stay in Tirupati in order to serve the goddess after she, seemingly miraculously, cured a baby daughter. Female family members became the daily caretakers of Gangamma in what began as a small shrine, but senior male members were the primary decision makers when it came to innovations such as introducing new rituals and festivals. For example, in the 1980s they initiated celebration of the annual pan-Indian festival of Navaratri (Nine Nights of the Goddess, which celebrates the different forms of the goddess) at the temple as a way to honor Gangamma as one of these goddesses and raise her status. Somewhere along the way, they had begun to perform *abhishekam* (a ritual anointing with a series of liquids) to Gangamma, a ritual not traditionally performed for *gramadevatas*.[12] In 1927, the grandfather who first met Gangamma, himself an artisan, had created a silver *kavacam* ("metal covering;" literally, "armor") for the stone image of Gangamma, giving hands and feet to her head-only form.[13] *Kavacams*, too, are not traditionally associated with *gramadevatas*, but rather with *puranic* deities. And so we see that the change of personnel of those serving the

---

[9] In its English publications and signs, the Devasthanam transliterates its name as "Tataiahgunta Devasthanam." However, in references to the temple itself, I have followed traditional academic conventions for transliterating Telugu; thus, "Tatayyagunta." The Endowments Department assumes administration of all temples that generate a certain income, presumably to prevent graft and accrual of excessive wealth to any given family. According to the Mudaliar patriarch, Endowments had taken over the Tatayyagunta temple in 1941, but at that time gave permission for the Mudaliar family to continue its service at the temple. The Endowments Department assumes administration of all temples that generate a certain income, presumably to prevent graft and accrual of excessive wealth to any given family. According to the Mudaliar patriarch, Endowments had taken over the Tatayyagunta temple in 1941, but at that time gave permission for the Mudaliar family to continue its service at the temple.

[10] I often think about the serendipitous timing of my first visit to Gangamma's temple and return the next year that enabled me to witness the transition between the Mudaliar family and Brahman priests as primary caretakers/ritual specialists at the temple. Had I first arrived at the temple in 1993, when the Brahman priests were already installed, I may not have heard about the eviction, because I wouldn't have known to ask. This gives an ethnographer pause and a heavy dose of humility.

[11] Many reports circulate about other *gramadevatas* who have not permitted enclosures to be built around them, causing the roofs built over their heads to cave in.

[12] Those who serve *gramadevatas* regularly pour water over their stone images before applying turmeric and vermilion powder to the wet surface, but this is not called *abhishekam*, which implies pouring of more liquids than simply water. Traditionally, *abhishekam* liquids used in *puranic* temples include honey, milk, yogurt, ghee, turmeric water, and thin sandalwood paste.

[13] When they were evicted from the temple, despite the protestations of the Devasthanam, the Mudaliar family took with them this silver *kavacam*.

goddess back in 1914—from lower, non-landholding castes traditionally associated with *gramadevata* service to Mudaliars who are not so associated—also changed some of her rituals; and, like the Brahmans who followed the Mudaliar family, the latter, too, had little to do directly with the *jatara* rituals performed for the goddess, such as *bali*.

When Brahman priests became Gangamma's caretakers, however, the rate and depth of change was of a different degree altogether, and these changes coincided with changes in the class of Gangamma's worshippers. The Devasthanam introduced new daily, weekly, and annual rituals traditionally associated with *puranic* deities—not *gramadevatas*—such as recitation of Sanskrit *slokas* ("verses"), *homam* ("periodic fire rituals"), and rituals such as *laksha kumkum archana,* the recitation of the 1000 names of the goddess while sprinkling her with *kumkum* ("vermilion powder"). The Brahman priests serving at Tatayyagunta temple have been trained at a Veda *pathshala* ("school") supported by the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam that administers the great pilgrimage temple uphill and numerous educational institutions in Tirupati. They are employees of the Endowments Department and told me that they are regularly rotated between temples, sometimes serving at a particular temple for only one festival, or months, and even years at a time. The rituals they perform can be performed for any *puranic* deity; none are specific to Gangamma. When I began interacting with these priests regularly in 1999-2000, many did not know Gangamma's stories or the details of her *jatara;* gradually, however, some priests who continued to serve at the temple for several years at a time have come to know her as distinct from the *puranic* goddesses with which they were initially more familiar, but the Sanskritic rituals they offered did not change. While I did not witness this, one way they may have come to know the stories and characteristics of this unique goddess may have been through conversations with the Pambalas, who are professional drummers and traditional Gangamma narrative performers. The Pambalas have been hired by the Devasthanam as temple employees, whose role is to drum at certain ritually heightened moments throughout the day. They have also come to know her through ritual service, which includes application of turmeric powder as a kind of mask on the fanged face of the goddess—a ritual associated with *gramadevatas* that the Devasthanam *has* retained.[14]

In the mid-1990s only a few years after the Devasthanam began control of daily administration of the Tatayyagunta temple, the courtyard outside the inner sanctum was enclosed to create a *mandapam* ("pavilion") on the rooftop of which cement-cast and brightly painted images of *puranic* deities were built. After some years a maze of metal guard rails was installed inside the *mandapam* for crowd control (particularly during the *jatara*), which forced women who had performed their own individual rituals of lighting lemon *diyas* ("oil lamps") in that space to move out to the outer courtyard, at some distance from the goddess.[15] In 1999 the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam formed a renovation committee to plan and coordinate subsequent changes to the temple. Walls were built around the exterior courtyard, a newly built

---

[14] When I returned to find male Brahman priests serving Gangammain in 1993, several female temple groundskeepers complained that these men did not know how to apply the turmeric mask and vermilion lip powder and cheek dots—making the goddess look like a Bollywood movie star.

[15] This ritual is performed to remove *naga dosham* (blemish caused by the position of astrological bodies) that causes problems such as infertility and late marriage.

traditional tall *gopuram* ("temple gate") graced one entrance, and a *vimanam* ("tower") was built over the inner sanctum. From the exterior there is nothing except the name board that indicates that this temple houses a *gramadevata*.

Eventually the external courtyard was paved over by stone slabs that make some rituals such as *angapradakshina* (circumambulation by rolling the body over and over) during the hot season almost unbearable on the heat-absorbing stone surface, and that are unable to absorb the blood of animal sacrifices still performed in that space. The Executive Officer (EO) of the Devasthanam was particularly proud of the ticket system, with accompanying fees, that had been established for individual *archanas* (offerings of coconut, flowers, and fruit) and *harati* ("flame offerings"), and a *hundi* ("cash collection box") now sits directly in front of the goddess, between her and her lion *vahana* ("animal mount")—itself an innovation—associated with the *puranic* goddess Durga.[16] A *makara toranuam* ("brass arch") has been installed behind Gangamma, typical of other *puranic*-deity temples. *Purana pandits* or *panditas* (professional reciters of the *puranas*) have been hired by the Endowments Department, who, like the *pujaris*, cycle between different temples, and their recitations are broadcast beyond the temple courtyard over loudspeakers.

Joanne Waghorne (2004) has written about many of these kinds of architectural and ritual changes in two *gramadevata* temples in Chennai. She identifies the processes as "gentrification." About one of the temples, she writes (155):

> . . . [Mundakakkanni Amman] MA has, to date, retained its non-Brahman priests, but the village-style shrine has been architecturally and ritually "over-written" by a middle-class aesthetics . . . the continuous renovations move toward propriety . . . I read this process as visual gentrification—everything is maintained but put into a comfortable . . . and tidy environment.

Waghorne focuses on the middle-class patrons who have supported and influenced these changes. This growing middle-class has rather dramatically affected the dominant sense of aesthetics in India today, and more and more Gangamma devotees and *jatara* participants who are from lower castes, many from artisan castes, and lower class backgrounds have entered this "new" or aspiring middle class. Their children are finishing high school and even college; and many children whose parents do not speak English are only attending English-medium schools. Most homes in the neighborhood of Tatayyagunta, where many Gangamma devotees and traditional *jatara* participants live, are electrified, although many do not yet have running water. When I asked the temple flower sellers about some of the aesthetic changes that have been made at the temple, they commented that if they make some of these changes such as adding fans and "beautifying" her premises in their own homes, the goddess, too, deserved them. But the change that initiated the flood of architectural and ritual changes—the eviction of the Mudaliar family and introduction of Brahman priests—was one that personally affected the flower sellers and several women who had assisted the Mudaliar matriarch in her service of the goddess—an eviction that they deeply mourned.

---

[16] *Gramadevatas* do not traditionally have *vahanas*.

In *When the World Becomes Female* I focus on the personal losses experienced by those evicted/displaced in the process of "gentrification" of Tatayyagunta temple (2013:180-209). Here I want to shift the focus to emphasize the potential for such changes of personnel, architecture, and ritual to transform the identity of the goddess herself.

The patriarch of the Mudaliar family that was evicted from Tatayyagunta complained about some of the architectural innovations/additions to the temple made by the Devasthanam, saying that a "Shudra" temple, which is served by low-caste devotees, such as *gramadevatas*, should not have *gopurams* and *vimanams* that signal a *puranic* deity inside. He did not explain what he meant by "shouldn't" except to imply that these features were not in accordance with correct propriety. I propose, however, that these kinds of aesthetic changes—not any single one, but when they begin to accrue—have the potential to change the perception and even the identity of the deity housed inside. With *puranic* recitation being blared over loudspeakers, images of *puranic* deities gracing the rooftop of the *mandapam*, new festivals celebrated that Gangamma shares with *puranic* goddesses, and Sanskrit *slokas* being recited to her, Gangamma is increasingly being identified both *with* and *as puranic* goddesses.

The goddess herself would seem to agree with this assessment of the transformative potential of the material and ritual changes going on around her. One of Gangamma's primary forms is the *trishul* ("trident"), and on village boundaries this is often her only form. Before the Devasthanam began its renovations, a line of three- to four-foot high, thin iron tridents faced the inner sanctum that houses Gangamma's dark stone form, a head without a body. By order of the Devasthanam, these were removed and placed behind a *neem* tree next to the temple, where they receive little service; they were replaced by a large, much lower, shiny white metal, rather bulky trident that is so non-traditional that it is treated by worshippers as decoration rather than the goddess herself. The Devasthanam EO told me this change had been made for the "safety of the worshippers," but the goddess revealed her anger at her (this) displacement to one of her elderly female devotees, known as Pujaramma.

Pujaramma is one of a select number of ritual families and individuals who, she says, was born with the strength to bear this *ugra* goddess on a daily basis. She has brought Gangamma into her domestic shrine and reports that the goddess regularly communicates with her through dreams, visions, and possession. Through Gangamma's presence in or on her body, Pujaramma has the reputation to be able heal both humans and run-down temples. Others in her community acknowledge Pujaramma's intimate relationship to Gangamma and come to her in order to learn of the goddess' desires and hear her speak. One ritual specialist, who is the chief organizer of Gangamma's *jatara* in a village on the outskirts of Tirupati, told me that he had come to Pujaramma to learn how to invite the goddess to come to him (that is, to possess him), and so I, too, have given Pujaramma's voice authority in the following episode.

Along with the replacement of the iron *trishuls* with a non-traditional white metal one, another ritual innovation raised the stakes in the existential questions of Gangamma's identity. Formerly, at the beginning of every *jatara*, a *neem* tree was cut down, its central trunk smoothed into a pole that was brought to the temple courtyard. Covered with turmeric and vermilion paste and wrapped in saris, the wooden pole was transformed into the goddess and became her first form to receive *jatara* rituals. Shortly after it took over temple administration in 1992, the Devasthanam decided that rather than cutting down a new tree every year—a waste of time and

effort, they told me—it would build a permanent cement pillar as a substitute. Pujaramma, the above-mentioned devotee, reported that the first year in which the cement pillar was to be used, one week before the *jatara* was to begin, Gangamma came, knocked on her door, and told her to follow her to the temple. At the temple, she showed Pujaramma the pillar and said (Flueckiger 2013:208-09):

> Since the beginning of time, they've been using a neem tree. Now it's like an *office job* [using the English phrase]. They brought this [cement pillar] without asking me and placed it here. If they bring this stone, *then what significance do I and my shulams* [iron tridents] *have*? [my emphasis]. . . . If I do anything, they only say "Gangamma has no eyes, no ears; she did like this; she did like that." They revile me.

Gangamma proceeded to ask Pujaramma to gather up all the *shulams* that had been taken outside under the *neem* tree and bring them home to offer *puja* ("ritual offerings") to them. Pujaramma objected that she had no permanent residence in which to house the *shulams*. The goddess admitted this was true—she had not yet given her a home—and she threw the *shulams* away and disappeared.[17] In another reference to this same episode, Pujaramma reported that the goddess subsequently, "pouted and went away from the temple," cursing those who would so easily replace her to be struck with illness.

This dream/vision/visitation is a commentary from within Gangamma's traditional community—or, if you give the goddess agency, then by Gangamma herself—on the limits of change in ritual before the goddess herself is changed. When she asks, "what significance do I and my *shulams* have," she is ultimately asking, "who am I?" If her forms (*shulams* and pillar) can so easily be substituted, then she wonders if her very nature and identity (in her words, her significance) can also be substituted. Ritual not only *reflects* the identity of the goddess, but also helps to *create* it. While the goddess is not so explicit, I suggest that the material and ritual substitutions have the potential to transform Gangamma from a *gramadevata* to a *puranic* goddess, who can more easily be managed/sustained, whose power is not *ugra* or potentially threatening, and thus who may ultimately no longer require the ritual of *bali* to be satisfied.

But so far goat and chicken *bali* is still practiced in the temple courtyard (not in the *mandapam* directly in front of Gangamma's image) both during the year—often as the result of a vow taken by a particular worshipper or his or her family—and during the *jatara*. As the *ugram* of the goddess expands during the *jatara,* her hunger and desires also increase, and several worshippers told me that only *bali*, rather than vegetarian offerings, will satisfy the expanding goddess. Until 1950, when the Andhra Pradesh Animals and Birds Sacrifices Act was passed, buffalo *bali* was offered to Gangamma during her *jatara*, and it still is in some surrounding villages. But in Tirupati buffalo are no longer sacrificed in the temple environs; some *jatara* celebrants, however, insisted that Gangamma still required buffalo *bali*, and the practice still continued somewhere outside the temple but was hidden. During the last days of the *jatara* the Tatayyagunta temple courtyard is filled with individual families offering chicken *bali* and a few goats. This *bali* is unconnected to the rituals inside the temple; the Brahman *pujaris* are aware of

---

[17] As mentioned earlier, some *shulams*, however, still remain under the *neem* tree next to the temple.

what is taking place outside, but the Devasthanam has not yet put an end to *bali* by *jatara* participants. It should be noted that the "new" participants do not offer *bali*, nor is it clear how they understand it. The practice of *bali* not only reflects the *ugra* nature of the goddess, but also creates it, particularly in the public imagination; this ritual is a key way through which Gangamma is distinguished from other *puranic* goddesses.

One way that the goddess can be known for who she is—an *ugra gramadevata*—even if rituals around her are changing, is through her unique narratives. Many middle-class worshippers of Gangamma and "new" participants in her *jatara*, however, do not know these narratives. The next section analyzes what these narratives create, what is lost when they fade from the public imagination, and their relationships to shifting rituals offered to Gangamma.

Gangamma's Oral Narratives

Gangamma narratives circulate in oral performance and reported speech, with no written texts except (quite recently) those of anthropologists who have transcribed and/or translated these narratives in their own academic texts (Reddy 1995; Flueckiger 2013).[18] Thus, there has always been rather wide variation, particularly differences in gendered perspectives of storytellers, between variants of individual stories that make up the Gangamma narrative repertoire. The shifts analyzed below are not primarily in content, then, but rather in what happens when the narratives begin to lose their performative frequency and circulation and how this loss may affect both ritual and the goddess herself. I focus below on the two primary narratives performed during Gangamma *jatara*, one embodied and one verbally performed.

Gangamma and the Palegadu

Gangamma's oral biography places her birth and human-form life in *this very place*—Tirupati and the close-by village of Avilala—and in relatively recent historic time. I heard numerous versions of the story, whose tellings were significantly gendered, although they followed a basic narrative grammar that displayed and created the power of this very local goddess.

The following is a summary of the story as related to me on several occasions by a male ritual specialist from Avilala who organizes the *jatara* in that village and arranges for the goddess to move from Avilala to Tirupati for the *jatara* there:

> There were two Reddy-caste men residing in Avilala, the older of whom had no children. One morning when he went out to his cowshed to milk the cows, he saw a little baby laying there, heard her crying. He raised this baby as his own daughter, not knowing she was the goddess.
>
> One day, after she had reached puberty, she stood on the rooftop of the Reddy home drying her hair. A local chieftain [*palegadu*], known for taking advantage of the beautiful young

---

[18] Peta Srinivasalu Reddy's small book on Gangamma *jatara* (1995), published in Telugu, has become so authoritative that when I asked some ritual specialists about the *jatara*, they referred me to the book. A small pamphlet published one year for distribution at the *jatara* about Gangamma draws directly from Reddy's book.

girls in his kingdom, saw her and desired her. He asked the Reddy to give his daughter to her in marriage. Fearful of what a negative response would create, he assented. But he was worried and returned home and lay on his bed, sick with worry. His daughter asked him what was wrong and he replied, "I've given my word to the Palegadu to give you in marriage. Because of circumstances [of social hierarchy], I couldn't save myself. I had to give my word." His daughter told him not to worry, "I'm here to save you; start the wedding preparations."

As the couple was rounding the wedding fire, the Palegadu turned around to look at his bride and saw her stretching "from earth to sky." He jumped off the wedding platform, saying "She's not the bride; let me go." The bride chased after him; she "chased and chased and chased him." He reached Karnala Street in Tirupati, with the bride chasing after him, and hid in the home of the Kaikala family. She thought to herself, "If I'm in this form [*rupam*], I won't catch him," so she took a series of guises [*veshams*] and went door to door searching him.

After taking the guises of an ascetic, snake charmer, herder, ruffian, merchant, and sweeper, she took the guise of a prince [*dora*]. The Palegadu heard people praising this *dora* and came out of hiding to see who was competing with him. When Gangamma saw him, she beheaded the Palegadu and then showed her true form [*vishvarupam*] as the goddess. In full *ugram* [her fullest power], she wandered the streets holding his bloody head.

During Gangamma's *jatara*, the latter part of this biography—the series of guises Gangamma takes in pursuit of the Palegadu—is not verbally performed but ritually enacted and embodied by men from the Kaikala-caste ritual family who take the *veshams* that Gangamma herself took in her pursuit of the Palegadu (a different *vesham* each day of the week-long *jatara*).[19] Here there is a double guising: males who become the goddess, who herself is guised. After the beheading of the Palegadu (local chieftain) is enacted early morning with only a small audience of men accompanying Gangamma's *dora* ("princely") *vesham*, the goddess shows who she truly is, and the *vesham*-ed Kaikala men who are the goddess thereafter appear in a series of three singly guised forms: men who become, through guising, Gangamma. Both doubly and singly guised *veshams* perambulate through the streets of "old" Tirupati, stopping at particular households to be greeted and worshipped by female householders at the doorways of their homes.

The Gangamma-Palegadu narrative gives rationale to the ritual sequence of Kaikala *veshams*, but more importantly the narrative embodiment is one means through which Gangamma is brought out of her dark temple or shrine forms into the *uru*, making her intimately accessible, as she comes to her worshippers rather than the other way around. Female householders pour water over the feet of human-bodied goddess and anoint them with *pasupu-kumkum* ("vermilion" and "turmeric"); they sometimes bring cool drinks to Gangamma or bring their babies to her for blessings, particularly the more powerful, later *veshams*.

Many of these same female householders seemed to know only the most basic outlines of the Gangamma-Palegadu story; when I asked them to tell me the story, they often referred me to men of the Kaikala family and/or the male Pambala professional musicians who accompany the

---

[19] *Vesham* literally means "clothing" or "dress," and it can also mean "disguise" or "guise." I prefer to translate *vesham* as "guise" to reflect the contexts of the Gangamma *jatara* discussed above.

Kaikala *veshams* in their perambulations. Women, it appeared, were more fluent in the intricacies of the *jatara* rituals that they perform both at home and at Gangamma's temples—primarily cooking for the goddess—than they were with her narratives, and they usually answered questions about the *jatara* with a description of the rituals in which they participated, not narrative. But men from the same families usually answered the same questions about the *jatara* narratively, with the Gangamma-Palegadu story.

The reasons for this gendered difference could be varied, although I am not totally satisfied with any of them: lay men perform very few temple rituals and do not perform domestic *jatara* rituals, thus the men focus on the narrative. Women, on the other hand, are responsible for and busy with an array of rituals that both expand and satisfy the goddess, who then protect their families' health; a different question in a different context *outside* of the *jatara* may (and did) elicit more narratives.[20] Or, one could assume that traditional female participants in the *jatara* *know* Gangamma's story without being able (or having the inclination) to report or perform it. Or, as I have suggested (2013:75-96), because the two primary stories are about male transformation (or the lack thereof), men may engage with the narratives more directly in order to be in the presence of the goddess: both of Gangamma's primary narratives are debates about gender relations. Gangamma kills the Palegadu because of his over-aggressive male behavior. In one version, Gangamma brings him back to life and he begs for mercy, but she doubts his ability to change and puts him to death again; thus, he is not capable of transformation. Ritually, many lay men take female guising (saris, breasts, braids, ornaments) on the last two days of the *jatara* —a ritual that suggests men, at least during the *jatara*, must become women to enter the presence of the goddess. Female guising transforms men not into women but into men who embody a different kind of masculinity. Women, on the other hand, need no such transformation; they explicitly identify with the goddess already as sharing her quality of *shakti*.

But whether or not traditional *jatara* participants perform or report Gangamma's narratives with their specific details, they are a part of the narrative imagination of these families and castes.[21] Many members of the growing "new" audiences for the *jatara*, however, who are either not from Tirupati (coming from neighboring districts and states) or from local families who are not traditional celebrants have little knowledge of the Gangamma-Palegadu narrative at all. This was apparent when, in 2005, each of the Kaikala-Gangamma *veshams* was painted and individually identified/labeled in a series on the courtyard wall of Tatayyagunta Gangamma temple, cues traditional celebrants would not need. These new audiences know the goddess only as one of many, not for her (narrative and ritual) uniqueness.

The performance and efficacy of *jatara* rituals to banish illness and of Gangamma's blessings when she comes to domestic doorways do not seem to depend on narrative fluency of *jatara* participants. After all, Gangamma's sisters in nearby villages also have the power to banish illness and share many of the same rituals, such as *bali*, but do not have such elaborate narratives. But when the rituals, specifically *bali*, that are explicitly performed to satisfy *ugram*

---

[20] See Flueckiger (2013:97-112).

[21] See Dell Hymes' distinction between narrative performance and reporting (1975) and Laurie Sears and Joyce Flueckiger's distinction between performance traditions and oral traditions that circulate outside of performances *per se* (1991).

change or are not practiced by the new *jatara* participants, without the narratives of Gangamma's *ugra* self, the concept of *ugram* may be lost altogether.

Gangamma as Adi Para Shakti (Primordial Goddess)

In contrast to the Gangamma-Palegadu narrative that is enacted and embodied but not verbally performed, that of Adi Para Shakti is sung by professional performers during the *jatara* itself. The performers are Pambala drummers and singers and its primary audience is the goddess herself. Its performance context and timing suggest that the goddess, as much or more than her worshippers, may need to hear her own stories, and that narratives help to create her identity and power. The performance takes place on the second-to-last day of the *jatara*, as the two *sunnapukundalu* (literally, "limepot") *veshams* are being created in the courtyard of one of Gangamma's temples—the only *veshams* that are created in the temple rather than the Kaikala home. Lime-covered clay pots are painstakingly attached to strands of hair atop the heads of two Kaikala men, and then are covered with strands of jasmine flowers.[22]

The timing of the Adi Para Shakti narrative performance in the week-long *vesham* sequence is significant. Gangamma has already taken a series of guises to chase and find the Palegadu, and has beheaded him; she has subsequently dropped the disguising *veshams* she took to chase the Palegadu and has appeared as her *ugra* self in the form of the Matangi. This powerful self, however, cannot be sustained by Gangamma's human worshippers on a daily basis; she is simply too *ugra*. And so, the next *vesham* (the penultimate one of the *jatara*) is a divided one, the *sunnapukundalus*. The preparation of these *veshams* is lengthy and the temple courtyard fills with women waiting for their completion and presumably the particularly accessible blessing of the now less-*ugra* goddess. The women, however, chat among themselves and seem to pay little attention to the story being sung by the Pambala performers; the narrative performance is explicitly directed towards the goddess as she is being created in an *ugra*-reduced split form.

The story is not of the goddess as Gangamma, but as the primordial goddess Adi Para Shakti, who ultimately divides herself among all the many goddesses of the world, including the Seven Sisters and Gangamma and the consort goddesses of the three male gods whom Adi Para Shakti has created, as narrated below. Although the Pambala singers told me that their performances can last up to 20 hours when they sing it outside of the *jatara* context, in the temple courtyard as the *sunnapukundalus veshams* are being prepared the performance lasts under two hours—the amount of time required to prepare these *veshams*.

The Pambalas begin by describing the goddess Adi Para Shakti all alone in the world. When she reaches puberty, she experiences sexual desire and decides to create a male to fulfill this desire. She first creates the god Brahma, but the first word out of his mouth is "Amma" ("mother"), precluding him as a sexual partner. Next Adi Para Shakti creates Vishnu, and he similarly addresses her as Amma. Finally, she creates Shiva, and the first word he says is

---

[22] I never received full explanations for the significance of the limepots; lime is both a heating and cooling substance that would fit the general ritual grammar of the *jatara* that is a calibration of heating and cooling the goddess—eliciting and satisfying her *ugram*.

"*eme*," the Telugu pronoun husbands use to address their wives; he is thus eligible as a sexual partner.

Shiva, however, tries to negotiate with the goddess to give him some of her superior power; only if she gives him her third eye and trident will he satisfy her desire. One Pambala singer explicitly identified the power Shiva sought to be the "power to destroy;" a young male narrator who served Gangamma at a village shrine suggested that without the power of the eye and trident, Shiva would not be able to bear the goddess. A lay female narrator explained that the goddess was willing to give up some of her power in order that the relationship with Shiva might be one of *equals*—just like an oxcart needs two equal wheels to proceed smoothly, she said, so too, a satisfying relationship requires two equal partners.[23] Shiva, however, reneges on his end of the deal—taking the goddess' third eye and trident, but refusing to have sex with her. The infuriated goddess, in one version of the story, sprinkles the three gods with sacred water from the Ganges, ash, and turmeric, transforming them into women. After some time, however, she says to herself, "I myself created them as men. Now, if I change them into women, it's not *dharmic* [according to the correct social order]," and she recited sacred *mantras* and changed them back into men. The temple performance I recorded ended at this point.

Another performance, sung outside of the *jatara* context by a young man serving the goddess at one of her village shrines, begins with the goddess giving Shiva her third eye. And with that eye Shiva gazed at the goddess, and she burst into flames and menstrual blood began to flow out of her body. She asked Shiva what would become of her now, and he answered that no male would be able to fulfill her desire in this form. Rather, she should divide into the many different forms of the goddess and receive *bali* during her annual *jatara*; only in this way would her desire be satisfied.

A *purana pandita* (female *puranic* reciter) emphasizes the destructive potential of an unsatisfied *ugra* goddess in her performance of Adi Para Shakti:

> Not knowing what to do with [the desire of] her youth, that young *gramadevata*—knowing that she had lost the possibility of full satisfaction . . . with all these emotions, went to the ocean, and she made all the seven oceans into one. As soon as they became one, she started wringing the oceans . . . The seven seas became a storm of destruction. There was absolute destruction. Even with that destruction, her emotions did not recede. Her desire was not fulfilled. Her emotions stirred the water. Seeing those seven seas like this, everyone was afraid, thinking that the whole world would be destroyed, the whole world would collapse in that great destruction.
>
> The three gods wonder what they can do to make the goddess peaceful; they offer her turmeric water, flowers, and fruits and ask her what they should do. She offers the solution of her annual *jatara*, during which she should be offered *bali*.

---

[23] I met this female narrator and one of her friends on a return visit several years after my year-long stay in Tirupati. This serendipitous meeting was the first time I had heard lay women narrate Gangamma's stories in full performance (that is, taking responsibility to an audience for the performance). Their narrations raised questions about my earlier conclusions concerning women's narrative fluency, presented above with several caveats (Flueckiger 2013:97-112).

The Adi Para Shakti narrative performed to the goddess during the preparation of her form as *sunnapukundalus* reminds the now-dividing Gangamma of who she is: not "simply" a local village goddess, ultimate reality that sustains the universe, the primordial goddess. But she is also reminded that ultimate reality is too *ugra* to humans—and even to god (Shiva) himself—who cannot sustain this full power on a daily basis, in intimate relationship. And so, narratively she divides into more sustainable forms—the *gramadevatas*—at the same time that ritually (in the *jatara*), she is splitting into the two *sunnapukundalus*.

A side note: neither the Gangamma-Palegadu or Adi Para Shakti narratives result in marriage, nor are there any images of a male consort in Gangamma temples or shrines. Rather, she is iconographically accompanied by a brother, Potu Raju, who stands facing her images. Interestingly, he does not appear in either of the two main Tirupati Gangamma narratives.[24] Although she has no narrative or iconographic husband, Gangamma wears a *tali* (gold pendant) that is typically identified with marriage. Because Gangamma was wearing a *tali*, the first year I visited Tirupati I asked the Tatayyagunta temple flower sellers who her husband was.[25] Their immediate response was that she had no husband. Several years later, however, when I asked the same question, without hesitation the same women answered "Shiva." Within these few years Gangamma had "acquired" a husband in at least some segment of the public imagination—although he is not narratively or iconographically present. I interpret this "new" presence of a husband to the shifting nature of the goddess herself, as she is becoming more and more identified with *puranic* goddesses—not all of whom are married, however, such as Durga and Kali.

The Interdependence of Narrative and Ritual in Creating Gangamma's Identity

The Gangamma-Palegadu and Adi Para Shakti stories narrate the creativity and destructive potential of the goddess' power. She is left with full *ugram* at the end of the Palegadu narrative, having beheaded the sexually aggressive protagonist—for which there is no narrative resolution—and, in the Adi Para Shakti story, when her desire is not satisfied by the three gods. This *ugram,* which is ritually elicited during the *jatara*, is required in order that the goddess be able to create the world and subsequently to destroy illness and protect the *uru*; but, it is also potentially dangerous if not satisfied. According to the postscript of the Adi Para Shakti story itself, only the *jatara* ritual of *bali* will satisfy this *ugram*.

---

[24] See Flueckiger (2013:10-13) for further discussion of Potu Raju.

[25] Only well into my year-long fieldwork in 1999-2000 did I learn of the tradition of *matammas*, women who have been offered to the goddess as young girls and who exchange *talis* with her upon reaching puberty. Thereafter, the women do not traditionally marry males, but may have sexual relationships with them and bear children. This tradition raised for me new questions about what the *tali* signifies, if not marriage. See Flueckiger (2013:210-41) for a discussion of *matammas* and *talis*; my argument there is that *talis* signify and help to create women's auspiciousness. Traditionally, women have needed to be married to fully enact that auspiciousness (in particular, to have children), but *matammas* were exempt from this requirement since they had entered a *tali*-relationship with the goddess.

While the narratives depend ultimately on ritual resolution, the rituals do not depend on the narratives in the same way. So, what is lost when more and more non-locals and local non-traditionally associated families and castes attend the *jatara*? And what is lost when, with increased education, many younger people in families that traditionally participate in the *jatara* no longer know Gangamma's orally transmitted stories—when the narratives are lost or are receding from the public imagination? Without narratives that describe and, in part, create her unique *ugram*, Gangamma becomes just another powerful goddess. Without *ugram* there is no fear of its potential consequences if not appropriately satisfied through ritual, and ritual changes are more acceptable.

It is significant that Gangamma's two unique narratives are receding at the same time that the rituals in the Tatayyagunta temple are brahmanizing and ritually identifying Gangamma with *puranic* goddesses. At the same time, more and more of Gangamma's worshippers are entering the "new" middle class. Just as narrative and ritual are interrelated in complex ways, so too is the relationship between the castes and classes of Gangamma's worshippers and her own identity, rituals, and narratives.

Gangamma has traditionally been served by members of artisan (lower) castes, whose women have traditionally been freer to move in public spheres and relatively more independent than women of land-owning (upper) castes. Gangamma narratives and rituals such as the exchange of *talis* between the goddess and *matammas* (see note 25 *supra*) contribute to these possibilities of female independence and agency. Gangamma does not need male protection from the Palegadu; she assures her father she can take care of herself, and proceeds to chase down and behead the aggressive chieftain. Adi Para Shakti is clearly superior to the male gods she has created, but willingly gives up some of her power to enter a relationship with one of them. Ultimately she does not marry and is divided among the *gramadevatas* who are known for their *ugram*, independence, and proclivity to wander, thus often refusing roofs over, and walls around, their shrines.

As members and families of the artisan and other non-land-owning castes who have traditionally served Gangamma become more educated and are raising their class status, they are beginning to appropriate upper-caste and middle-class aesthetics, values, and gender roles. I have suggested above that these shifts coincide with and are in complex relationships with changes in Gangamma temple aesthetics and rituals. The potential exists for the goddess to lose the unique characteristics (many of which we know primarily narratively) that identified her with the artisan and herder castes, even as these castes are losing *their* unique characteristics.

Gangamma, witnessing ritual changes implemented without her permission, as if she didn't exist, asked, "Who am I . . . what significance do I have?" My analyses of ritual and narrative changes over the last 20 years indicate the answer is (or soon may be): "You are not (fully) yourself anymore."

Emory University

References

Bell 1997   Catherine Bell. *Ritual Perspectives and Dimensions*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Flueckiger 2013   Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger. *When the World Becomes Female: Guises of a South Indian Goddess*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

p

Hymes 1975   Dell Hymes. "Breakthrough into Performance." In *Folklore: Performance and Communication*. Ed. by Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth S. Goldstein. The Hague: Mouton. pp. 11-74.

McGilvray 1998   Dennis McGilvray. *Symbolic Heat: Gender, Health & Worship among the Tamils of South India and Sri Lanka*. Middletown, NJ: Grantha Corporation.

Reddy 1995   Peta Srinivasulu Reddy. *Tirupati Ganga Jatara* (Telugu). Tirupati: Self-published.

Sears and Flueckiger 1991   Laurie J. Sears and Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, eds. *Boundaries of the Text: Epic Performances in South and Southeast Asia*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Segal 1999   Robert Segal. *Theorizing About Myth*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Strenski 1996   Ivan Strenski. "The Rise of Ritual and the Hegemony of Myth: Sylvain Lévi, The Durkheimians, and Max Müller." In *Myth and Method*. Ed. by Laurie L. Patton and Wendy Doniger. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press. pp. 52-81.

Waghorne 2004   Joanne Waghorne. *Diaspora of the Gods: Modern Hindu Temples in an Urban Middle-Class World*. New York: Oxford University Press.