

Sin and Flaws in Kerala Temple Astrology

Gilles Tarabout

▶ **To cite this version:**

Gilles Tarabout. Sin and Flaws in Kerala Temple Astrology. Phyllis Granoff & Koichi Shinohara. Sin and Sinners. Perspectives from Asian Religions, E.J.Brill, pp.309-323, 2012, Numen Book Series, n°139, 9789004229464. halshs-00870206

HAL Id: halshs-00870206
https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00870206

Submitted on 6 Oct 2013

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

[Published in P. Granoff et K. Shinohara (eds.), *Sin and Sinners. Perspectives from Asian Religions*. Leiden, E.J.Brill, 2012. pp. 309-323]

/p.309/

Sin and Flaws in Kerala Astrology

Gilles Tarabout (CNRS, Laboratoire d'Ethnologie et de Sociologie Comparative CNRS/Université Paris Ouest)

In the popular imagination the Christian notion of sin as a transgression against divine law is intimately linked with personal responsibility. Ideally, sin should provoke a sense of guilt, for personal morality depends on this inner experience. If a sin has been committed, sincere repentance and expiation may help the sinner obtain forgiveness and even a lesser punishment.[1] That such a view is highly cultural specific is clear from the reaction to the foundations of Christian morality that we find in Hindu interlocutors in Kerala (on the south-western coast of India), who pointed out to me that confessing sins, as is the practice in different Churches of the region, is nothing but an easy way to escape the potentially dreadful consequences of transgressions. In their minds repentance and the forgiveness it engendered encouraged immorality.

Scholars attempting cross-cultural comparisons in this domain are at the risk of reproducing cultural prejudices. A quantitative study published some ten years ago, for instance, advanced the hypothesis (not discussed here as such) that, in many societies, religion and morality are not linked. When there is a link, it is contingent "on images of gods as conscious, morally-concerned beings", that is, in an explicitly evolutionistic perspective, it is linked with the idea of God in the Abrahamic religions.[2] Another cross-cultural study about "the sense of sin" was more cautious in its conclusion and pointed out the historical connection between societies with "a messianic idea of a savior conquering sin" and the fact that "the individual's attitude to sin has assumed a central role in religious thinking. For it is believed that salvation can only be attained by eschewing sin, or at least by wiping out the stain of sin through penance and meritorious works".[3]

/p.310/

One difficulty with projects such as these is that they often proceed from an asymmetry in the comparison: why for instance look for 'sin' around the world, finding therefore some societies somewhat defective in this respect, and not for concepts such as 'dharma', 'karma', etc.? Arguably, the process by which the English language and, to a lesser extent, other western languages have become the standard languages for international scholarship, has increased such an asymmetry by establishing concepts proper to these languages as referents. Scholarship about India will regularly use English terms such as 'sin' or 'expiation' for translating concepts which do not necessarily share the connotations they have in Christianity. While such a pitfall is probably unavoidable, and has often been remarked, the self-evident quality of such translations is problematic. It leads to

[1] This of course is hardly an accurate presentation of the historically diverse and constantly evolving notion of 'sin' in Christianity.

[2] Rodney Stark (2001: 621). India seemed at first to contradict the hypothesis because of "the general impression among westerners that Hinduism is polytheistic"; in reality, the author claims, Hindus worship only one god—and the theory is safe.

[3] Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf (1974: 555).

discarding important aspects of the interpreted culture, and instead of fostering understanding may merely add sanction to a western-centered vision of morality.

Indian concepts for which the terms 'sin' and 'expiation' are regularly given are respectively *pāpa* and *prāyaścitta* (Skt.). They are often associated with the notion of karma: briefly said, the misfortune which one experiences may be explained as being the consequence of one's own acts committed in a previous life and those past actions are termed 'sinful' in English translations. A 'sinner' may however alleviate to some extent the consequences of his 'sins' by practicing 'expiations'. Put into English in this vocabulary, things look familiar, perhaps a bit too much.

There are at least two main difficulties. The first is that there is no uniform conception of karma (or *pāpa* or *prāyaścitta*) throughout India: on the one hand, these notions have been the subject of debates and controversies since early times; on the other hand, there exists considerable variation in the understanding and the contextual invocation of these notions in practice. Various studies suggest the diversity in the conceptions and use of karma: for many people, karma is seen as 'transferable', and one may have to endure sufferings as the result of the actions done by others (usually parents) in past lives, as well as in the present one. In other words, one may not have to suffer from his or her own 'sins', but from those of others. In that case, past 'sinful' acts may still legitimate an overall moral order: but this order does not involve a direct link between one's deeds and one's own suffering.

The second difficulty is that each notion occurs in association with other ones, defining semantic associations that may considerably differ from the ones of their supposed English equivalents. 'Sin', *pāpa*, is **/p.311/** transferable through religious gift, *dāna*.[4] The term is also used for fever or illness and is the name of a specific illness for which the Indian medical tradition of *Āyurveda* offers certain medicated oils or ghees (clarified butter) as a remedy.[5]

Moreover, people might refer in some contexts to karma and *pāpa* as the cause for present-day misfortune, while favoring in other contexts other explanations: the wrath of deities, affliction by ghosts, or sorcery instigated by enemies. These two sets of explanations usually complement each other and may be seen as two different registers of causality. In this respect, many anthropologists have followed the distinction proposed by D. Mandelbaum between "transcendental" and "pragmatic" aspects of religion.[6] Paul Hiebert, for instance, working in a Tamil village, distinguished between upper "Hindu explanation traditions" which invoke karma and fate and entail a moral opposition between good and evil, where the notion of 'sin' is significant, on the one hand, and what he called a "middle level explanation tradition" on the other hand.[7] According to Hiebert, the latter is characterized by the action of village goddesses, of spirits, of magic, and by the recourse to astrology for identifying causes of misfortune; notions of good or evil and of 'sin' are less relevant than notions of ritual faults, impurity, or of being the innocent victim of ghosts or enemies.

My aim is not to elaborate in general terms on 'sin' or karma in India, and there is ample scholarship on these points.[8] Rather, I propose to reflect on the contrast established by Hiebert (and others) by looking at what **/p.312/** astrology has to say on the matter and by focusing on the use in astrological contexts of terms translated into English as 'sin' and 'expiation'.

My argument is that in the context of astrology, what is rendered as 'sin' or 'expiation' corresponds to a more ambivalent conception of wrong deeds, of their consequences, and of the

[4] See Parry1986.
[5] Zimmermann (1989 : 126).
[6] Mandelbaum 1966.
[7] The author establishes a further contrast with another, third level, the 'folk' one. See Paul G. Hiebert (1983: 121, 129).
[8] See for instance Chenet 1985; Gächter 1998; Goldman 1985; Keyes and Daniel 1983; Nuckolls 1971, 1991, 1992; Sharma 1973.

solutions they call for, than what may be found in Christian-inspired cultures. This suggests in turn that the contrast drawn between 'Hindu explanation traditions' and 'middle level' ones, or between the 'transcendental' and the 'practical' aspects of religion, may not be a very fruitful one.

The material I use concerns astrology as it is practiced in Kerala. Of its three main branches, birth horoscope (*jātakam*—I will use henceforth the Malayalam transliteration for terms), determination of favorable moments (*muhurttam*) and the resolution of problems (*praśnam*), it is the latter with which I am concerned here. The main reference text in Kerala in this domain is the *Praśnamārggam* (Mal.), *The Path of the Questions*, a Sanskrit treatise compiled and written around 1650 in Kerala, with a later Malayalam commentary by *Sārabōdhinī*.[9] This work, without its commentary, has been rendered into English by B.V. Raman.[10] I will also rely on the ethnography of some astrological consultations and on personal discussions with astrologers and ritual specialists, made during separate fieldwork trips in 1991, 1994 and 1999.[11]

Sin and Afflictions in the *Praśnamārggam*

The *Praśnamārggam* (hereafter P.M.) extends over 2500 stanzas arranged in 32 chapters. Four chapters directly bear on the present topic: chapter XII (86 stanzas), chapter XIII (39 stanzas) and chapter XXIII **/p.313/** (41 stanzas) deal more specifically with diseases (*vyādhi*, Skt.; *rōgam* in the Malayalam commentary), while chapter XV (230/234 stanzas, depending on the edition) is concerned with various afflictions (*pīḍam*).

Regarding diseases, the term *pāpam*, used in chapters XII, XIII and XXIII, is translated by B.V. Raman as 'sin' and is invoked both as a general and rather abstract cause for all diseases and misfortunes, and as the direct reason for specific diseases, whose nature is ascertainable through an examination of planetary positions and relationships.

Significantly, the English rendition of stanza XIII.29 by B.V. Raman is "Diseases are the resultant of sins done in our past births [. . .]" where the text, more literally says "*pāpam* done in a previous life finds rebirth in the shape of disease"—with a more complex understanding of *pāpam* than 'sin'.[12] While published commentaries both in English and in Malayalam make clear that what is meant by *pāpam* here is one's own deeds, oral explanations by astrologers about this very verse point to the possibility of deeds done by the ancestors as well.

The P.M. then goes on to explain the mechanics of the relationship between *pāpam* and diseases. Whatever be the immediate causes one can think of, all diseases originate from one's own 'sins' (*pāpam*) [XIII. 30], which provoke the wrong position of planets and, ultimately, the agitation of the three humors of the body (*tridōṣa*): this agitation is the disease [XIII. 31]. Therefore, all diseases have two causes, one which is 'seen' (*dṛṣṭa*), and one which is 'unseen' (*adṛṣṭa)*. This entails the necessity to combines medicines (for the visible causes) with *prāyascittam* (for the unseen causes) [XIII. 26]. Consumption is given as an example. Its root cause is the willful murder of a Brahmin in a preceding life; the appropriate remedy is *prāyaścittam*, which B.V. Raman translates here as 'due repentance' and the gift of clothes to Brahmins [XIII. 33]. This kind of diagnosis and remedy is specifically elaborated in chapter XXIII, mostly a rendition of another text, the *Karmavipāka*. This chapter enumerates various diseases, always resulting from deeds done in

[9] Govindan 1987.
[10] Raman 1992, 1996.
[11] I have elsewhere presented Kerala's astrological practice for solving the problems of temples. See Tarabout 2002, 2006, 2007.
[12] « *Janmāntara kṛtam pāpam vyādhi rūpēṇa jāyatē* » (S.). There is a similar statement in XII.30, and the full chapter XXIII (a compilation of Sāyana's *Karmavipāka*) is dedicated to enumerating the diseases one suffers from past 'sins'.

one's own previous births. The appropriate measures consist in the repetition of mantras, the performance of offerings in the fire (*hōmam*), and the donation of various items, depending on the disease. These are familiar rituals. Donation appears to be a major 'moral' therapy, but the panacea for any type of **/p.314/** disease is the performance of the Mṛityuñjaya *hōmam* (XIII. 36–39], offerings into a ritual fire accompanied by the repetition of the Mṛityuñjaya mantra (here, 8000 times is suggested) Mṛtyuñjaya is the name of Śiva who conquered Death itself. The ritual includes feeding and making donations to Brahmans.

The P.M. is thus working within the framework of a 'Hindu explanation tradition' of a 'transcendental' level; it prescribes the corresponding ritual measures that are usual in such circumstances.[13] However, sufferings to which such transcendental explanations are applied are diseases, and ritual measures are used in complement to the administration of medicines. The goal is quite immediate and practical. Moreover, the kinds of *hōmam* indicated are sometimes presented as forms of atonement, but they are also, and perhaps mostly, valued for their sheer power to deal with adversity. They maintain all the ambivalence and potentialities of the fire sacrifice.

The tone of chapter XV, concerning afflictions, is rather different. One and a half times the length of chapters XII, XIII and XXIII together, chapter XV describes afflictions either in terms of obstruction and torment (*bādha*—usually understood as spirit affliction or possession in Kerala) or of curses (*śāpa*), by gods, family gods, serpents, parents and ancestors, gurus, brahmins, *prētam* (ghosts), evil visions,[14] "food-poisoning", and witchcraft. Without entering into the details of the indications and the prescriptions set out in this chapter,[15] a few salient points may be underlined.

The word *pāpam* is only used in this chapter in a technical sense: *pāpagraha*, rendered as 'malefic planet' (here, Mars, Saturn, Rāhu);[16] and *pāpayōgam* (Mal.; *pāpayuktē*, S.), 'malefic (astral) conjunction'. In both usages the moral connotation of 'sin' seems absent. It does not mean that the chapter does not recognize the effect of past mistakes, such as neglecting the worship of a god or a goddess, or destroying (even unknowingly) serpents' eggs, etc., all of which result in an affliction. However, the focus here is on the divine anger, which results from such faults, or on the curse **/p.315/** itself. The specific source of misfortune must be discovered by the astrologer by examining the position of the planets. The text frequently mentions 'Divine-anger-signifying-planets'.

This chapter provides answers as to the causes of present-day afflictions, distinguished from diseases, without dwelling on the question of responsibility. Efforts are deployed in order precisely to identify *prētam*, gods, enemies, etc., who are the causes of the torment; the actions deemed to be at the origin of their displeasure are scarcely attended to, except in the case of enemies. Such a focus is perceptible in the vocabulary used; in the Malayalam commentary, for instance, the most frequent words are *bādha* (obstacle, torment) and *kōpam* (anger, here of elders, deities, spirits). Remedial measures are termed *śamanam* (quietening, pleasing), *parihāram* or *prati*v*idhi* (remedy, atonement), or *oḻivu* (cessation). In line with these preoccupations, many remedial measures consist of offerings of food, sacrifices (*bali)*, performance of worship or *pūjā*, and *hōmam*. The whole emphasis is put on the personal agency of other beings for causing afflictions; these beings have to be placated, counteracted, or eliminated. The possible moral dimension of the fault at the origin of a supernatural being's wrath is not elaborated: it is just not relevant.

[13] This strongly reminds one of the *Prēta* (or *Dharma*) *khaṇḍa* of the *Garuḍa purāṇa*, which describes major sins and their punishments, as well as the appropriate rituals for avoiding such fates.
[14] Evil vision (*dṛṣṭi*) and not evil-eye, as it is commonly translated.
[15] For a more detailed presentation, with a focus on sorcery, see Tarabout 2003.
[16] Kētu is not mentioned in the PM.

At this stage, my enquiry concurs with the studies noted above that have concluded that there coexist two perspectives on the causality of human sufferings, with only one of them actually involving the notion of *pāpam.* The astrological tradition exemplified in the text of the P.M. combines explanations of both kinds and is not restricted to a 'middle level' approach of causality, though it is undoubtedly aiming at practical results. Furthermore, the translation of *pāpam* as 'sin' does not do justice to the nuanced usages of the word. This may become more apparent by looking at how, exactly, astrologers actually proceed.

Sin and Flaws in Kerala Astrological Practice

There exist differences between the letter of the text of the P.M. and the way it is understood and used in practice. As noted above, the very verse stipulating that a disease is the consequence of one's own deeds in a previous birth was explicitly interpreted by a Kerala astrologer as opening the possibility that it could also result from the deeds of the sick person's ancestors:

> What enables the astrologer to conclude whether the diseases in the present life are the consequences of the wicked deeds of the person concerned in **/p.316/** his previous birth, or done by his father and his paternal ancestors, or done by his mother and his maternal parents, is the position of the stars. [. . .] The deeds of an ancestor can therefore ruin the life of a person.[17]

To make things clearer, the astrologer gave as an illustration the case of a patient's chronic gas trouble, which was found to be the consequence of spirit possession by the *prētam* of one of his dead ancestors: "it may sometimes be found that the cause of the ailment is the wicked deeds of the person's father or grandfather. It is to be inferred then that the impure spirit of a dead ancestor has entered the body of the person". Here, the patient's own past deeds are not evoked, and are not the direct cause for his suffering. Rather, deeds of an ancestor turned the latter into a *prētam*, who then afflicts and possesses the patient. It is still a 'moral' explanation of suffering, but centered on the *prētam*, while the patient is not seen as having any personal responsibility for his present state. Moreover, contrary to the text of the P.M. there is no distinction here between a 'disease' and an 'affliction'. As a matter of fact, the manner in which the case is described identified the problem as an instance of what in astrological and ordinary parlance is called a *dōṣam* (flaw)—here a *prētadōṣam.*[18] This shift in the interpretation of responsibility, it could be argued, could be connected to the fact that the astrologer who was interviewed belongs to a specialized caste of formerly untouchable status, with restricted expo-sure to Sanskrit culture (though he knew some texts). There are other traditional astrologers in Kerala who belong to higher status castes and have a more intensive knowledge of the philosophical and normative textual traditions. However, as a matter of fact, their astrological advice does not deliver much more about 'sin' to their clients.

The consultation of a Tamil Brahman astrologer by a male client will serve as an illustration of the kind of semantic associations and reasoning that are used.[19] The man (who was already known to the astrologer) did **/p.317/** not disclose his motivations at once; it became clear after some

[17] Interview with Shri K.N.B. Asan, Thiruvananthapuram, March 10th, 1991. The recorded interview was then kindly transcribed by M. Sivasankaran Nayar, who also prepared a preliminary English translation.

[18] The term is the same as that used in *Āyurveda* for 'humor', but here it has the meaning of an affliction caused by a supernatural being; it is more or less synonymous with *pīḍam* (affliction) and may replace *bādha* (obstacle) in most of its occurrences, with an additional nuance of impurity and a rather 'sticky' quality.

[19] Consultation of Shri Dharmaraja Iyer, Thiruvananthapuram, April 1st, 1999. Because of my presence, most of the consultation was held in English (which the client understood perfectly), with some Malayalam. I took notes during the initial phase of the meeting and then obtained permission to record it.

time that he wanted to marry a non-eligible girl but feared his own parents' opposition. However, asking the advice of an astrologer is by itself the proof of an existing problem, which has to be elucidated by looking at the planetary positions. In this case, the astrologer first checked the astrological chart of the moment when the client came asking for an appointment, a few days before the actual meeting:

> The lunar mansion (*nakṣatram*, lit. 'star') is not good, except for marriage. The lunar day is bad except for learning. Some disease is there, prosperity is lacking. The lunar mansion is not completely good, not free from previous faults in previous births. There is some wrong somewhere, most probably dissatisfaction. He [the client] will not change his job, planets are showing stability. The problem is more a feeling of dissatisfaction against which he has to react. This is the illness (*rōgam*), the feeling that his job does not correspond to his possibilities. [. . .] *rōgam* means, you know, something against tradition. [. . .] It all goes by certain rules. Then, when there is something wrong somewhere, we call it a disease. So something is wrong somewhere. So he wants to break the rules, go or act against. [. . .] An aspect of Mars is cast on Saturn, he must be having some desire to move out from the present situation because of a tendency to dissatisfaction . . . He is totally dissatisfied with whatever he sees. That is actually what is called a disease.

The reference to the client's own past faults provides a general cause for the actual planetary chart. However the astrologer doesn't elaborate further on the matter, except in terms of the resulting disease, the man's dissatisfaction. Past deeds may frame the understanding of the overall situation, but will not end up in the prescription of specific remedial measures. The astrologer now considers a second chart, corresponding to the consultation proper:

> Today we are getting slightly more. Clarity is thrown on this picture, with today's ascendant Libra . . . One thing is certain. Venus is in the 7th [house], Lord of the ascendant is in the 7th, and the Lord of the 7th is in the ascendant . . . Clearly, there is an exchange of signs between Venus and Mars. And Saturn [is with Venus]. He's having somebody in mind for marriage. How to put this to the parents, that is the problem he is facing.

The man confirms this, and the astrologer just asks him if the girl is of the same caste—she is. The astrologer then goes on:

> Fortunate. Because Saturn has not worked its way. It is the Lord of the 5th. [. . .] The problem is this. There is Saturn, there is difficulty. The Sun is in 6th (called the "house of *bādha*", of obstacles, enmity), the Sun is *bādha*. Sun represents the father also. [. . .] Father is not going to agree for this. Though **/p.318/** the mother may agree. [. . .] but father may not agree. That happens to be the *bādha* for this.

As mentioned before, the term *bādha* is frequently understood in Kerala as pointing to an affliction by a spirit. Indeed, this is what the astrologer finds as being the source of the observed *bādha*:

> So Guḷikan [a malefic "sub-planet", *upagraham*, involved in the diagnostic and resolution of problems in Kerala] is in the 8th [house], Guḷikan represent dead persons; Saturn also is there. So the Lord of the house-of-Guḷikan is Venus and Venus is afflicted by Mars and Saturn. Now the sign also, the sign occupied by Guḷikan is aspected by Mars. So it should be really a *bādha* arisen from a *prētam* [ghost] . . . See, peculiarly, the *navaṃṣa* [ninth portion of a sign] sign of Guḷikan is Cancer, and the Lord of Cancer is occupying an unfavorable position. Venus is in an unfavorable position. Guḷikan himself is in an unfavorable position. And both are feminine signs. So a lady *prētam* is there.

The astrologer tries unsuccessfully, with the help of the client, to put a name to the *prētam*, and concludes it must be somebody who was at one time connected to the family. He also explores the possibility of sorcery, but there is none that may be deduced from the chart. He eventually concludes, "this ghostly affliction (*prētadōṣam*) is the only one", and he prescribes the necessary rituals for pacifying and sending away the *prētam*, much like funerary rituals.

The line of reasoning may be summarized in this way. There is an overall weakness (disease) of the client that results from faults done in his past life. Concerning his actual projects, the planets show that his father will oppose them (especially because the girl, though from the same caste, is not from an appropriate sub-group), he is an "obstacle". This hindrance results from a ghostly affliction (a *prētadōṣam*); the client's family has no particular responsibility in this. Taking care of this ghost through rituals is required, as well as—the astrologer also suggested with commendable pragmatism—breaking the news to the parents in such a way that they would be forced "to accept everything".

It is thus not the case that *pāpam* is not taken into account, but it provides only the general context. The actual problem, expressed in terms of obstacle, is the "flaw" (*dōṣam*) caused by a ghost. The ritual measures, called *prayaścittam*, accomplish a transformation of the *prētam* into a pacified, good spirit, enabling it to leave this world and join the world of good ancestors: it is a separation process. Notions of responsibility or guilt are absent, and there is no 'expiation' for the deeds of the client or of his family.

/p.319/

Sin and Flaws in Temple Astrology

Similar consultations for temples are called *dēva praśnam*. Questions are put to an astrologer by representatives of a temple committee, either for improving the temple or for resolving some problems. It is usually an occasion when a long list of flaws, *dōṣam*, is established, and elaborate remedial measures prescribed. As if looking through a magnifying glass, it provides a peculiarly rich astrological context for understanding what is meant by *dōṣam* and ritual reparation.

I will take the written report, established and signed (as is the practice) by a team of astrologers at the end of the consultation of the Thalakottukara temple (chart dated July 6th, 1998) dedicated to Goddess Bhagavati.[20] The text starts with a few verses in praise of deities. It exposes the astrological chart and the exact longitudes of the planets at the time of the *praśnam*, after which it enumerates a list of *dōṣam*:

> As an indication of the above said *dōṣam*, (we see) pollution, breaking of the idol's cement [. . .], the destruction of the divine presence of the goddess, *dōṣam* from ghosts of Brahmins, from *prētam*, from the pollution caused by them: all these *dōṣam* are seen as existing. As a result, people connected with the temple or living nearby suffer from untimely deaths, accidental deaths, etc., mental diseases, monetary loss, etc. The result of these *dōṣam* continues to exist. If reparation (*parihāram*) is not done, there is indication (in the chart) that there will be an increase of *dōṣam* in the future. [. . .] If the remedial measures are done with devotion and care, there is full indication for prosperity in future.

In this context, *dōṣam* can designate any kind of flaw resulting from the action of human or supernatural beings, and it is strongly associated with the notion of impurity: the pollution of the

[20] Thalakkothukkara temple is situated in Trichur district. I am indebted to my regretted friend L.S. Rajagopalan for providing me with a copy of the report, and for preparing a first translation.

temple's well is another instance of *dōṣam* found in the present case. These flaws have their own causes, and they are themselves the reasons why the temple is not faring well and why people suffer in the locality (a repeated conclusion in such temple consultations). An important aspect of the astrological process is to identify one by one each *dōṣam* and its cause, and to determine accordingly appropriate remedial measures.

These measures are grouped at the end of the written report under the general heading *oḻivu*, 'cessation, purge'. In the present case there is **/p.320/** a long list of them: performing worship in various neighboring temples; changing the ritual routine for some subordinate deities; rectifying architectural defaults; developing festivals, etc. A special emphasis is put on the removal of the *dōṣam* caused by numerous *prētam*. The latter are detailed and, whenever possible, identified by their name: a couple of *rakṣassu* ('ogre'), a Brahman gored by a bull, a temple servant who died hanging by a rope, a woman servant who died in a fire, two women living nearby who died during pregnancy, etc. Their spirits are to be invoked in effigies made with a silver leaf (*pratimā*, 'likeness, image'), to which the kind of funerary rituals already mentioned for the private consultation are performed:

> People known and unknown; children and aged ones; *rakṣassu* and *prētam*: without omission, invoke them in the images (*pratimā*) [. . .] together with the afflictions and misery of the place. Once their presence has been transferred to the images, do *hōmam* with appropriate Vedic *sūkta* for each misery linked to a bad death. [. . .] Get all the sub-tormentors (there is an additional list of 10 supernatural beings associated with the various ghosts) released with 3000 *Mahāsudarśana mantras* (it refers to the discus-shaped weapon of Vishnu), 9000 *Sadākṣara sudarśana mantras*, do 12000 times *Sudarśana hōmam*. After that, do 24000 Gayatri mantras, and 8000 times each Gīta, *Triṣṭup, Aṣṭākṣaram, Sadākṣara sudarśanam*, as well as 48000 sesame *hōmam*, 16 *Puruṣa sūkta hōmam* [. . .]. Getting the curse and the *dōṣam* removed, do *sāyūjya* ("oneness with the supreme being") *pūjā*. The images are to be taken to a holy river; perform *kṣētra piṇḍha kriya* and cast away the images (in the river).

The ritual transforms ghosts into good ancestors so that they may leave our world and stop harassing human beings. The impressive, and costly, accumulation of mantras and *hōmam* at the core of this part of the remedial measures is called indifferently in the report *parihāram, prativid*hi, or *prayaścittam.* It presents no evidence whatsoever of repentance. Rather the rituals pertain to the complex world of the sacrifice, able to subdue spirits, satisfy the gods, and procure happiness for the patron of the sacrifice. It is a reordering of the world, an act of propitiation, not an act of contrition. Even what may outwardly resemble an expression of repentance has to be understood in its context. For instance the removal of the *dōṣam* of the curse from Brahmins requires someone "to wash the feet and feed many Brahmins, [. . .] and to prostrate before them." Or the *dōṣam* of the curse by good women requires a person "to invite and bring a Brahmin couple, do *pūjā* to the couple and get their blessings so that the *dōṣam* is removed." The ritual enacts the proper relationship one has to have toward Brahmins, or the worshipping of an idealized married couple; it is an expression of subordination to social classes and values, an act **/p.321/** of submission, placing oneself under the protection of a superior power; but it does not correspond to a sense of guilt. This is also, I argue, how we should consider a last example of a remedial measure, from the same report:

> If some speech or deeds not liked by the Goddess have been done, knowingly or unknowingly, in order to remove these *dōṣam* pray, make a boat of silver, put money in it without counting, and on top keep one *tāli* (gold leaf mounted on a string and put as a necklace to the wife at the time of marriage) of gold wrapped in silk, speak out repentance (begging pardon publicly) and submit to the Goddess. The *tantri* (superior ritual authority of the temple) should do a special *pūjā* to the Goddess. At the end of the worship, adorn the silk and the *tāli* on the Goddess. As a representative of the

> Goddess, the *tantri* is to bless all those connected so that the *dōṣam* is removed. Present special ritual honorarium, cloth and betel to the *tantri*.

The expression 'speak out repentance' (begging pardon publicly) is the translation which my friend provided for *aparādham ēṟṟu colli*, ('speaking the offense while standing'); for the same expression used in another report, he proposed "speak out admitting the offense committed and submit to the deity". This is the closest to an expression of 'repentance' which I could find. In my view, the core concern is to express publicly the existence of an offense (not necessarily committed by the ones who are 'speaking out'), and to reaffirm the submissive stance of devotees. It need not involve the experience of any remorse for 'sins' committed.

It is also to be noted that all these rituals, often called *prayaścittam* and which are performed in this case for removing flaws, are of the very same nature as the *prayaścittam* prescribed as remedies for the diseases provoked by *pāpam*.

Concluding Remarks

The above observations allow for a rough mapping of the main understandings of suffering and responsibility according to Kerala astrology. In the P.M., misfortune is treated under two different categories, with overlaps: diseases and afflictions. On the one hand, diseases are explained in terms of *pāpam*: it is a human deed, the effect of which, besides 'taking rebirth' in the shape of specific diseases, determines the general condition of the client at a given time. The sick person need not be the one who committed the *pāpam* that caused the disease. On the other hand, afflictions are *dōṣam*, flaws, which are often of a polluting nature and result from the anger of some entity. A *dōṣam*, contrary to a *pāpam*, is not a deed **/p.322/** but a situation. Though the text of the P.M. separates *dōṣam* from disease, in practice diseases are actually interpreted in terms of *dōṣam*.

The contrast sometimes drawn between 'transcendental' and 'pragmatic' aspects of religion seems therefore of limited interest in the case of Kerala astrology. It appears largely artificial as far as remedial measures are concerned. Diseases, according to the P.M., need to be treated by combining *prāyaścittam*, often translated as 'expiations', and medicines. Afflictions, following an apparently different regime of causality, nevertheless also require the performance of *prāyaścittam*. Rather than 'expiations', such rituals are 'removers' or 'destroyers' of the obstacles resulting from *pāpam* or *dōṣam*. Their very nature, involving repetition of mantras and oblations into a fijire, suggests that what people are looking for is to mobilize religious power to overcome diseases and afflictions. There is little sense of feeling guilty and doing penance on that account.[21]

The discourse on moral responsibility which is present in astrology is therefore not a discourse on guiltiness and forgiveness, but a discourse about the laws of the world and the effects of their transgressions. These have to be 'purged' by means of purification and sacrificial ceremonies, so that prosperity and good health may be restored in an ideal ordering of the world. The 'purge' (*oḻivu*) section in the report of the Thalakottukkara temple ends thus:

> If things are done as mentioned above, will the *dōṣam* be removed? And will the divine presence of the Goddess increase? And will there be prosperity and will the people connected with the temple prosper? Is there any sign for it? To know that, praying for the blessings of Jupiter, when it was 4.30 p.m. the 24th in the month of Gemini, 1173 (Malayalam era), the *oḻivu* was seen in Cancer: so it is seen that it is good.
>
> May good things happen!

[21] On the interrelations between *prayaścitta*, penance, ascetic *tapas*, and sacrifice, see for instance Renou (1985: 606sqq; 1971: 111sqq); Fürer-Haimendorf (1974: 549–550); Kaelber1979.

/p.323/
Bibliography

Chenet, François, 1985. "Karma and Astrology: An Unrecognized Aspect of Indian Anthropology." *Diogenes* 33: 101–126.

Fürer-Haimendorf, Christoph von, 1974. "The Sense of Sin in Cross-Cultural Perspective." *Man*, n. s., 9, no. 4: 539–556.

Gächter, Othmar, 1998. "Evil and Suffering in Hinduism." *Anthropo*s, Bd. 93, H. 4./6: 393– 403.

Goldman, Robert P., 1985. "Karma, Guilt, and Buried Memories: Public Fantasy and Private Reality in Traditional India." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 105, no. 3 (Indological Studies Dedicated to Daniel H.H. Ingalls): 413–425.

Govindan, Krishnalayam M.K., editor, 1987. *Praśnamārggam (pūrvvārdham) enna sārabōdhini vyākhyānattōṭukūṭi*. Kottayam, NBS.

Hiebert, Paul G., 1983. "Karma and Other Explanation Traditions in a South Indian Village." In *Karma. An Anthropological Inquiry*, ed. by Charles F. Keyes, and E. Valentine Daniel. Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press: 119-130.

Kaelber, Walter O., 1979. "Tapas and Purification in Early Hinduism." *Numen*, 26, fasc. 2: 192–214.

Keyes, Charles F., and E. Valentine Daniel, eds., 1983. *Karma. An Anthropological Inquiry*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press.

Mandelbaum, David G., 1966. "Transcendental and Pragmatic Aspects of Religion." *American Anthropologist*, n. s., 68, no. 5: 1174–1191.

Nuckolls, Charles W., 1971. "Interpretation of the Concept of Karma in a Telugu Fishing Village." *The Eastern Anthropologist*, 34, no. 2: 95–106.

——, 1991. "Culture and Causal Thinking: Diagnosis and Prediction in a South Indian Fishing Village." *Ethos*, 19, no. 1: 3–51.

——, 1992. "Divergent Ontologies of Suffering in South Asia." *Ethnology*, 31, no. 1: 57–74.

Parry, Jonathan, 1986. "The Gift, the Indian Gift and the 'Indian Gift'." *Man*, n. s., 21, no. 3: 453–473.

Raman, Bangalore Venkata, trans., 1996. *Prasna Marga*, Part I. Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass (1st ed. Bangalore, 1980).

——, trans., 1992. *Prasna Marga*, Part II. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass (1st ed. 1985).

Renou, Louis, 1985. "Le brahmanisme. Les formes religieuses." *In L'Inde classique. Manuel des études indiennes*, vol. I, edited by Louis Renou, and Jean Filliozat, 480–620. Paris, Maisonneuve (1st ed. Payot 1947).

——, 1971. *Vedic India*. Translated from the French by Philip Spratt. Delhi/Varanasi, Indological Book House.

Sharma, Ursula, 1973. "Theodicy and the Doctrine of Karma." *Man*, n. s., 8, no. 3: 347–364.

Stark, Rodney, 2001. "Gods, Rituals, and the Moral Order." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 40, no. 4: 619–636.

Tarabout, Gilles, 2002. "Les corps et les choses. Résonances et métaphores corporelles dans l'astrologie appliquée aux temples (Kérala)." In *Images du corps dans le monde hindou*, ed. by V. Bouillier and G. Tarabout. Paris, CNRS Editions : 135-159.

——, 2003. "Magical Violence and Non-Violence. Witchcraft in Kerala." In *Violence / Non Violence. Some Hindu Perspectives*, ed. by D. Vidal, G. Tarabout, and E. Meyer. Delhi: Manohar (transl. from the French *Violence et non-violence en Ind*e, Paris, EHESS, 1994) : 219-254.

——, 2006. “La réparation des fautes. Le contrôle astrologique de la transformation des rites et des temples au Kérala.” In *Rites hindous: transferts et transformations*, ed. by G. Colas and G. Tarabout. Paris, EHESS (coll. Purusartha, n°25): 463-493.
——, 2007. “Authoritative Statements in Kerala Temple Astrology”, *Rivista di Studi Sudasiatici*, 2: 85–120.
Zimmermann, Francis, 1989. *Le discours des remèdes au pays des épices*. Paris, Payot.