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# The Migrant Priests of the Tamil Diaspora Hindu Temples: Caste, Profiles, Circulations and Agency of Transnational Religious Actors

Pierre-Yves Trouillet

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

- 1 Recent research has shown that ritual specialists are crucial in the transnational development of religions (Mary 2003; Mohammad-Arif 2004; Fancello 2006; Claveyrolas 2014; Bava 2017). But whereas several important aspects of the contemporary transnationalization of Hinduism have been widely studied in the literature, such as “long-distance nationalism” (Fuglerud 1999, Jaffrelot 2017) or the sense of belonging to a transnational “imagined community” (Anderson 1983), the realm of ritual practices and actors, which is central to Hindu social life and religiosity, has received far less attention, especially as regards the Tamil Hindu community. This article focuses on a specific category of ritual specialists: the “migrant priests” originating from South India and Northern Sri Lanka who officiate in the Tamil diaspora<sup>2</sup> Hindu temples (tam. *kōyil* or *kōvil*). My intention is to show how their migrations and their agency contribute to shaping the forms that transnational Hinduism is taking in different immigration countries of the Tamil diaspora, such as Mauritius and Toronto, Canada.
- 2 The focus on this social category is motivated by the fact that Indian and Sri Lankan Tamils are known to be particularly involved in the many Hindu temple constructions that have multiplied all over the world since the 1980s-90s (Punzo-Waghorne 2004; Clothey 2006; Trouillet 2012 and 2014; Whitaker 2015; Claveyrolas 2017; Bradley 2018), and that more and more Brahman priests are recruited from South India and Northern Sri Lanka to work in these overseas temples in order to meet the ritual needs of the

Tamil diaspora. Moreover, worldwide circulation of this specific category of migrant priests as well as the conditions under which they migrate and their social standings abroad have not been specifically studied to date,<sup>3</sup> whereas temple priests have been playing a major role in Tamil societies for centuries (Tambiah 1950; Appadurai and Breckendridge 1976; Stein 1980). Taking a specific interest in these migrant priests thus not only allows us to contribute to the understanding of contemporary transnational Hinduism, but also to learn more about these little-known transnational ritual actors.

- 3 Focusing on such transnational ritual actors implies adopting a methodological positioning rather different from (but complementary to) that usually used in most of the studies on Hinduism in diaspora. Indeed, to study transnational Hinduism, I propose to start not from a single specific and localized diaspora community, but from the religious actors who circulate between the host and home countries. Migrant priests are particularly interesting interlocutors since they are deeply involved in ritual practices conducted overseas, and also because they really circulate in the diaspora's migratory space, which enables them to take part to the shaping of overseas Hinduism. This is why I argue that if we succeed in better understanding who these migrant religious actors are, as well as the motivations for their migrations and their different migratory profiles and social standings, it is ultimately the concrete forms and mechanisms of transnational Hinduism that we can also better understand.
- 4 This work is mainly based on biographical interviews I conducted<sup>4</sup> with thirty-six priests working in temples of the Tamil diaspora, who originate from South India or Northern Sri Lanka. Biographical interviews are useful because they allow for tracing out the personal histories<sup>5</sup> of these priests as well as their migratory and professional paths. These interviews also provide an opportunity to understand their motivations for migrating to work abroad and their strategies.
- 5 This type of research focused on "circulating actors" requires not working in a single immigration country of the Tamil diaspora as that would reduce the scope of the information collected to this context alone. This is the reason why eighteen Brahman priests were interviewed in Mauritius and eighteen others in Toronto.<sup>6</sup> Mauritius and Toronto were chosen for their complementarity<sup>7</sup> in terms of their (relative) representativeness of the diversity of the Tamil diaspora, which includes Indians as well as Sri Lankans who have emigrated since the colonial period and more or less recently. On the one hand, most of the Tamil Mauritians are descendants of craftsmen or workers, and then of a great number of indentured laborers, who arrived from India as of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Sooriamoorthy 1977, Trouillet 2014). On the other hand, Canada has welcomed not only upper-middle-class Indian Tamils since the 1960s, but also one of the largest contingents of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees. According to the latest national censuses,<sup>8</sup> the number of Mauritians claiming Tamil Hinduism was approximately 72,000 in 2011 (6% of the Mauritian population). In the same year in Canada, twice as many Tamil speakers were identified, three-quarters of whom arrived during the Sri Lankan civil war. Nevertheless, it is highly likely that these figures are far below the reality and that Canada has several hundred thousand Tamils of Sri Lankan origin (Bradley 2018). Since the 1980s, the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) has been the main destination for Sri Lankan Tamils immigrating to Canada, and it is undoubtedly the first "Tamil city" outside South Asia. In the end, combining the comparative approach between two countries with biographical interviews of migrant religious actors makes

it possible to combine the macro and micro scales in the same analysis, which seems heuristic for studying the processes of religious transnationalization.

- 6 The ideas defended in this article deal therefore with two complementary levels. On the one hand, regarding the methodological level, I defend the idea that in paying attention to “circulating” religious specialists, such as the migrant Brahman priests, is necessary to understand some of the major trends and mechanisms currently involved in the transnationalization of Hinduism. On the other hand, and more broadly, I argue that these migrant priests are major actors of transnational Hinduism and that their profiles are more complex than is sometimes believed. To explain why I think so, I will present the reasons why these priests want to work abroad and their different migration strategies. Then, I will show how their migratory profiles and social status abroad can vary in order to demonstrate that these migrant priests are not always mere ritual technicians but also true religious entrepreneurs, who are progressively challenging the conventional distribution of power in Tamil Hindu temples, which testifies to their capacity for action as major religious actors of transnational Hinduism. But before analyzing the migration strategies, the agency and power of these migrant priests, it is first necessary to specify which particular caste of Brahmans is concerned in these transnational recruitments, why recruiting these Brahman priests from the country of origin is so important to more and more overseas Tamil communities, and what the main impacts on overseas Tamil Hinduism are.

## Why recruit migrant Brahman priests? Caste in overseas Tamil temples priesthood

### The Tamil migrant priests' subcaste

- 7 The great majority of the migrant priests (*arcakar*, *ācārya*, or *gurukkaḷ*) working in the Hindu temples of the Tamil diaspora are indeed Brahman. To be more precise, these migrant Brahman priests belong to the subcaste of the Śivācāryas (“priests of Śivā”), who are also known by the name Ātiśaivas (“first śaivites”). These migrant temple priests are śaiva Brahmans because, as in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, the great majority of the Tamil diaspora Hindu temples are dedicated to śaiva deities, such as the goddess Amman, Vināyakar, Skanda-Murukan, and Śiva (though Śiva temples are less numerous in the diaspora). Although Śivācāryas can conduct rituals (*pūjā*; tam. *pūcai*) both in temples dedicated to Brahmanic deities and in those of village gods (*tēvatai*), they are hardly ever recruited in the latter type of shrine in the diaspora, nor in the non-Agamic temples. It is rather local non-Brahman priests (*pūcāri*) who officiate there, as has been the case since the 19<sup>th</sup> century in former colonies where Hindu indentured laborers have settled, such as Mauritius (Claveyrolas 2014; Trouillet 2014). In fact, Śivācārya priests are sought after owing to their skill in performing the rituals required in the Dravidian temples that follow the Brahmanic and Agamic traditions, but above all because they are the only ones authorized to perform public temple rituals (*parārtha pūjā*) according to the *Āgamas*. Such considerations are developing in more and more Tamil diaspora temples, which shows the ongoing importance of caste and *Āgamas* in the contemporary overseas temple priesthood, whereas Brahmans represented a very small proportion of the Indian indentured laborers who emigrated during the colonial period (Sooriamorthy 1977; Singaravélou 1987; Guilmoto 1991) as well as among

recent Sri Lankan Tamil emigrants. (Nevertheless, Brahmans have been far more numerous among the upper-middle class Indians who have been emigrating to Western countries since the 1960s).

- 8 If the migrations of these Hindu priests are not well documented yet, Christopher J. Fuller (1984; 2003) has provided two valuable monographs about this subcaste in the South Indian context. With Haripriya Narasimhan, he also estimated the Śivācārya population at around 3 percent of all Tamil Brahmans, which may represent 55,500 people in 2011<sup>9</sup> (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014:186 and 214). Sri Lankan Śivācāryas are much less known because the number of Brahmans is very small on the island and the Brahmanical ideology is not widely spread there. The great majority of them live in the Jaffna peninsula (Pfaffeberger 1982; McGilvray 2008:84; Mahadevan 2008:33; Obeyesekere 2015:2-3) where they represent only 0.7 percent of the population (Derges 2013). Most of them are the descendants of those who migrated to Jaffna after the Tamil Hindu “Renaissance”<sup>10</sup> triggered by Arumuka Navalar<sup>11</sup> in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Sivapathasuntharam 2016). They are fully established as Brahman priests in major temples, for their religious authority as well as their expertise in Sanskrit and temple ritual are recognized. Nevertheless, Jane Derges notices that, due to the flight of many Śivācāryas during the war, “temple officiators are no longer exclusively Brahmin [in the Jaffna peninsula]; there are also a number of Śaiva Gurukkaḷs [mostly Veḷḷāḷars, the local dominant caste<sup>12</sup>] who perform similar roles and functions but are also able to preside over funerals, unlike the ritually ‘purer’ Brahman priests” (Derges 2013:77). It is thus also possible that some Veḷḷāḷars pretend to be śivācārya priests in diaspora, as has been the case in former European colonies, where many non-Brahman individuals tried to impersonate caste Brahmans after migration.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, none of my informants mentioned this possibility.
- 9 In terms of social and ritual status, Śivācāryas are considered the fifth subcaste of the Smārtas (or “Aiyars”), who are one of the two main groups of Tamil Brahmans, with the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas (or “Aiyengar”) (Fuller 2003). Smārta Brahmans worship all the major Hindu gods, whereas the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas worship only Viṣṇu and do not have any caste specialized in temple priesthood, as do the Smārtas with the Śivācāryas. It is also noteworthy that the Śivācāryas subcaste is conventionally ranked below all the other Brahmans since public priesthood is regarded as a demeaning activity according to the Brahman point of view (Fuller 1984:23–71). Due to this relative inferiority, Śivācāryas do not have the right to be domestic priests (*sāstri*), who can belong to all the other Brahman castes. Nevertheless, Śivācāryas very frequently perform domestic rituals (such as marriages or *Gaṇapati homa*<sup>14</sup>) in the diaspora where ritual rules are much more flexible than in India, which shows—as we will see later—that migration provides them with economic opportunities and may improve their social status.
- 10 An internal hierarchy also exists among the Śivācārya temple priests. It is based on their competence in ritual and their authority in the temple, which depend on their degree of initiation (*saṃskāra*, *dīkṣā*) and their matrimonial status (which are linked one to the other). For instance, bachelor Śivācāryas (*brahmacārya*) cannot officiate alone and cannot touch the temple statues (*mūrti*), unlike married Śivācāryas who become fully Gurukkaḷ after undergoing a consecration ritual (*acāryabhiṣeka*) alongside their wife. However, the majority of the diaspora temples hardly ever have more than three or four regular priests. In Mauritius, most of the Tamil Hindu temples have only one

regular priest. But when several priests work in the same temple, there is always a distinction between the chief priests and the assistant priests.

- 11 Caste considerations also play a role in the social behavior and personal identity of migrant Śivācāryas. They remain vigilant about physical contact with non-Brahmans and non-Hindus, as well as about the purity of their food (Trouillet forthcoming). Endogamy still prevails too, for they hardly ever marry outside their caste (and outside their country of origin, see below). Caste identity also remains important among the second generation of the migrant Śivācāryas, such as Chandran<sup>15</sup> who was born in Canada after his parents migrated from Sri Lanka and whose father runs his own temple in Toronto. He works at the Toronto airport, but he is following a training course<sup>16</sup> on temple priesthood and the Vēdas in Toronto every Saturday. When I asked him if it was in order to quit his job and to become a full-time temple priest, Chandran explained that this course was mainly a way to keep his specific identity of Śivācārya. He said: *“That I don’t know yet. It is not something I am planning. But for me I have to know who I am, what I am, where I come from. So, that’s the reason why I am learning. But if it does so happen, definitely that’s the path I will take.”*

### Brahmanizing global Tamil Hinduism beyond regional origins

- 12 The training course followed by Chandran also shows that the internal borders within the Hindu Tamil diaspora, particularly between Sri Lankans and Indians, are quite porous. Indeed, Chandran explained that this course on temple priesthood was given by two Indian Śivācāryas and one Sri Lankan Śivācārya who collaborated in spite of their different regional origin. It was their caste identity, as well as the Brahmanical texts, values and practices they share, that prevailed. This was also true for the “students” since, among the eight Tamil Brahmins who followed this course, six were Indian and two Sri Lankan (four were born in Canada).
- 13 More broadly, the most important thing for the diaspora temples’ managers and devotees is to recruit Śivācāryas, regardless of their regional origin. Caste transcends regional differences in the transnational recruitment of these temple priests. This is true for former British and French colonies as well as in contexts of recent immigration. For instance, some Tamil Mauritians of Indian origin employ Sri Lankan Śivācāryas in their temples. And although these Sri Lankan Śivācāryas are a minority compared to Śivācāryas recruited in India (only three out of forty), they are very influential in Mauritius. At the time of the fieldwork, they were employed in two of the island’s largest Tamil temples—in Port-Louis (*Kailasson*) and Quatre-Bornes (*Kovil Montagne*)—and one of them was even the oldest Śivācārya living in Mauritius, and has acquired citizenship. Actually, these priests are regarded much more as śivācārya Brahmins than as Sri Lankans.



Figure 1 – Indian Śivācārya working in a Sri Lankan-run temple in Toronto, (2014, Author)

- 14 In Toronto, reciprocally, many Indian Śivācāryas are employed in temples run by Sri Lankan Tamils (Fig. 1). A number of Indian priests also work alongside Sri Lankan priests, and the few of those who preside over temples (as we will see in the last section) may even employ Sri Lankan Śivācāryas as assistant priests. (The devotees also participate in this gathering of Tamils of different regional origins in temples, since many Indian Tamils worship in reputed Sri Lankan-run temples and even take part in the sponsorship of festivals). So, to sum up, if the institutionalization of Hinduism in the diaspora through the recruitment of Brahmans has already been noted (Narayan 1992; Kurien 2007; Baumann 2009), it must be specified that Śivācāryas are specifically concerned in the Tamil context, and that they federate beyond the different regional origins of the Tamil communities.
- 15 But one consequence of this general consensus on the ritual need for Śivācārya priests, whatever their origin, is the standardization of overseas Tamil Hinduism. Indeed, as these migrant priests work in almost every country of the Tamil diaspora (see following sections) and generally perform the same type of rituals in the same kind of temples, there is a strong tendency for practices in overseas temples to become homogenized under their influence. This is especially the case in Mauritius, where, in addition to the numerous renovations of old Tamil temples of the colonial period into the standardized “Dravidian” style, Śivācārya priests are actively involved in stigmatizing animal sacrifices, which do not meet their standards but which have been practiced there since the arrival of the first Tamils in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This is a primary example of the influence of this migrant Brahmans on the shaping of contemporary overseas Tamil Hinduism.

## Duplicating specific temples and reproducing social networks

- 16 The transnational recruitment of Śivācāryas is not only a matter of homogenization. It also sometimes responds, to the need of some overseas Tamil communities to reproduce the social links and the ritual specificities of their particular locality of origin. Indeed, while most overseas temples serve as a means of social integration for all Tamils through the meeting opportunities they offer, in recent immigration contexts, such as Toronto, the solidarity ties recreated at the temple may sometimes concern only members of the same extended family, clan or caste. And in such contexts, the transnational recruitment of a śivācārya priest can serve to recompose the social network based on the collective patronage of a specific temple in the locality of origin. Such temples are called “*kuṭi ūr kōyil*” in Sri Lanka, for they are owned and controlled by a specific matriclan (*kuṭi*) originating from a specific place (*ūr*) (Whitaker 2015). It is precisely to replicate this kind of temples that some Tamil communities in the diaspora recruit śivācārya priests from their country of origin.
- 17 This is the case, for instance, of one Toronto temple dedicated to Nagapūśani Amman (or Nagammal). Nagapūśani Amman is the local goddess of an island in Northern Sri Lanka called Nainativu, from where many families have fled since the beginning of the civil war and the establishment of a navy camp on the island in July 1983. Today, approximately fifteen Śivācāryas officiate in this famous temple, which is said to date from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century and to have been attacked and set on fire by the Sri Lankan army in 1958 and 1986. The forms of the deities represented in the new Nagapūśani Amman temple of Toronto are exactly the same as in the Nainativu temple, and festivals are celebrated at the same time. More interestingly, the new Toronto temple was founded by a community of twenty-one former residents<sup>17</sup> of Nainativu who succeeded in recruiting a Śivācārya priest from precisely the original temple in Sri Lanka, where his family enjoys the hereditary right of priesthood (his brother is now the chief priest of the original temple). This transnational recruitment was facilitated by the social links that this local Tamil community has kept with its native island and by two of the founding members having been patrons of the original Nainativu temple. Of course, recruiting a priest from the original temple reinforces the quality of this diasporic replication of the initial shrine, improves its ritual value, and strengthens the social cohesion between its members.
- 18 Such a “temple replica” is far from an exception in Toronto. There are at least four other community-based temples, as, for instance, a replica of the Nallur<sup>18</sup> Murukan temple whose śivācārya chief priest also comes from the original Sri Lankan temple. But these replicas of “*kuṭi ūr* temples” should not be assimilated to the widespread tendency to name overseas temples after famous Indian or Sri Lankan temples, with which the founders have no social ties. In these cases, reusing the name of a famous temple depends rather on a strategy to maintain a “collective memory” (Halbwachs 1992) of the original places and to gather as many devotees as possible (Trouillet 2012). For instance, copies of famous Tamil Nadu temples, like those of Madurai or Palani, have also been built in Mauritius, but the recruitment of priests from the specific native places of diasporic communities is not possible there, since most Tamilians are descendants of South Indian indentured laborers who rarely know the precise locality their forefathers had emigrated from. These temples reusing names of famous temples generally meet the agamic standards, but the transnational

recruitment of their śivācārya priests is more in line with the overall trend of Brahmanization of the overseas temples' priesthood than with the reconstitution of former social networks based on caste.

- 19 Now that we know to which particular caste the migrant priests of the Tamil diaspora temples belong, and why overseas temples' managers recruit them from India or Sri Lanka, let us see why these priests increasingly want (or need) to work abroad.

## Why work overseas? Social changes, personal motivations and new representations of abroad

- 20 In addition to the contemporary increase in the demand from abroad for priests, the transnational migrations of Śivācārya priests have also developed in response to various social dynamics in South Asia. In South India, they respond both to their low remuneration and to the changes in the status of temple priests since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as to the evolution of Brahmanic representations of travel outside India, which has long been proscribed for high castes. In Sri Lanka, while some priests have also chosen to emigrate in order to earn a better living abroad, the civil war is by far the main reason for expatriation for most of them.

### Status issues and civil war: the origins of migration

- 21 Christopher Fuller (1984 and 2003) demonstrated that the life condition and status of Śivācāryas in Tamil Nadu have undergone several important changes throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The increasing control of the state over Hindu temples since the colonial period (Presler 1987) as well as the anti-Brahman ideology which has been growing and spreading in the Tamil region since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, strongly depreciated temple priests' status, especially between the 1960s and the 1990s when the first Dravidian political party (the DMK<sup>19</sup>) came to power. Śivācārya temple priests were then relegated to the marginal role of civil servants and were stigmatized as incompetent by the anti-Brahman leaders who emphasized their lack of knowledge of the religious texts and rituals. Additionally, their hereditary rights of priesthood were abolished and the temple priesthood opened to non-Brahmans, which has progressively dissociated the Śivācārya priests from their hereditary temples and impoverished many of them, rendering them more mobile, however, and more interested in working abroad.
- 22 Since then, the progressive weakening of anti-Brahman considerations, the political alternation (with several mandates of the Brahman Jayalalithaa as Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu), the political and cultural valorization of Hinduism all over India as well as the multiplication of specific Āgama-based<sup>20</sup> training schools for temple priests (*vēdāgama-pāṭacālai*<sup>21</sup>) have contributed to the improvement of their image and status. These schools have enabled Śivācārya temple priests to have access to broader networks of recruitment, in Tamil Nadu and also in the diaspora countries where they can work for better incomes.
- 23 In Northern Sri Lanka, agamic schools of priests have not really developed because of the small number of Brahmins, even in Jaffna. The main reason for Sri Lankan Śivācāryas to emigrate is linked more closely to political and survival issues than to

reforms of religious institutions. Indeed, although recent information on Śivācāryas in Northern Sri Lanka is very rare, Jane Derges (2013:77) observed that many of them fled during the civil war, as did a million other Tamils.

## The economic motivation

- 24 If the civil war and its political issues are the foremost explanations for the migration of the Sri Lankan Śivācāryas working as priests in the diaspora, the economic criterion proves to be the main motivation for Indian Śivācāryas. Indeed, priesthood is a rather badly paid occupation today in Tamil Nadu, except in large sanctuaries, which represent a small proportion of the temples. This is another reason for this profession becoming less attractive throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Christopher Fuller (1984) pointed out. For example, Velmurugan, who was working in a Toronto temple in 2014, told me that he had chosen to emigrate in order to earn a better salary, like so many other Indian priests. He explained that temple priests earn an approximate average of 10,000 to 15,000 rupees (125 to 190 Euros)<sup>22</sup> monthly in South India, whereas he can earn six to ten times more in Toronto (1,000 to 2,200 Canadian dollars, which is equivalent to approximately 50,000 to 120,000 Indian rupees). Nevertheless, such amounts are not the norm in all the diaspora countries. For instance, in Mauritius, the average monthly salary is much less attractive (6 to 9,000 Mauritian rupees,<sup>23</sup> which is equivalent to approximately 12,000 to 18,000 Indian rupees), although many other economic advantages are provided.
- 25 Indeed, these average monthly salaries paid by temples do not include the relatively large amounts the priests can earn when they perform domestic rituals (since Śivācāryas can conduct such rituals in diaspora) or special *pūjās* for important festivals (*tiruvilā*). Such opportunities depend on their level of initiation, competence, and reputation, and can considerably increase their incomes. In some Toronto temples, for instance, devotees have to pay 300 CAD dollars to temple trusts for the realization of a *Gaṇapati homa*, and 750 to 1,000 dollars for a wedding ceremony (which costs around 5,000 rupees in Mauritius or 125 Euros), from which the priests receive a commission. The priests can also keep the total amount if the devotees pay them directly, without the intervention of any temple. They can even manage the entire revenue generated by the temple rituals and activities if they are presidents of the shrines (as we will see later).
- 26 Moreover, the trusts managing the temples often provide their salaried priests with accommodation (generally in the temple premises or vicinity), food, social security and a thirteenth month, which helps them save more money and makes migration more lucrative. Besides, as is the case in India, regular priests also receive special bonuses from their temple (up to a month's pay) when they supervise or take part in important festivals (such as *Tai Pūcam*, *Navarāttiri*, etc.). The priests also of course keep for themselves the various amounts of money donated by the devotees in the ritual plates (*taṭṭukkācu*) used for temple worship.

## Symbolic motivation and new Brahmanic representations of abroad

- 27 The enhancement of social and symbolic capital benefit is another important motivation for migration. As with the economic motivation, it also concerns mainly

Indian priests whose ambition is to improve their image and their career with professional experience abroad. Indeed, working in overseas temples has become a gratifying experience for most of the Hindu Tamil temple priests, whereas travelling outside India has long been regarded as a sin<sup>24</sup> for high castes (*dvija*) such as Brahmins, especially between 1850 and 1920 (Clémentin-Ojha 2011 and 2012).<sup>25</sup> This taboo is well known under the terms *samudrāyana* (“travelling by sea”) or the famous *kālāpāni*, the “black waters” of the Indus River and the Indian Ocean that should not be crossed. This ban on migration is based on several sections of the *Dharmaśāstra*,<sup>26</sup> and considers that “crossing the sea” implies the non-respect of caste observances concerning food, ritual behavior and physical contact with non-Hindus (*mleccha*). Migration could thus lead to the loss of one’s social respectability, and thus to rituals of expiation or even caste excommunication (*ibid.*).

- 28 Nevertheless, as Catherine Clémentin-Ojha (2012:373–74) demonstrated, “today leaving India is not generally perceived as endangering one’s caste status, even among such communities that still maintain caste purity,” although “it is not to say that the old sea-voyage prohibition has lost all moral significance for high caste Hindus.” With regard specifically to migrant Śivācāryas, I have shown in a separate analysis (Trouillet forthcoming), that today crossing the *kālāpāni* is far from dissuading these temple priests from travelling or emigrating. On the contrary, working overseas has become more positive than demeaning for most of them. Many ambitious young priests have the clear objective of leaving to work in diaspora countries, which is indicative of a major change in the representations of “abroad,” and of Hinduism’s ritual and territorial boundaries, compared to the recommendations of the *Dharmaśāstra*.
- 29 For example, what Sivakumar shared with me about his motivations for going abroad to work is particularly telling with regard to these changes in representations. Born in 1981 in Trichy (Tamil Nadu), he worked in a temple in the suburbs of Toronto (Brampton) after having trained at the famous Pillayarpatthi school for priests. When I asked him if he chose to work abroad to get a better salary, he answered: “*Salary? No, this is for image. I worked in Paris and now I am working in Canada, this is for image. If you work in foreign countries, this is good for your image in India.*”

## How do Brahman priests manage to emigrate? Mechanisms and patterns of transnational migrations

- 30 Let us now turn our attention to how these Tamil priests manage to go abroad to work. This requires identifying the (social) resources they mobilize and the migration strategies they develop, as well as the main features of the legal frameworks set up by the host countries to regulate their transnational circulations.

### Transnational recruitments relying on middlemen

- 31 The majority of migrant priests are employed by the managing boards of overseas temples, which are generally composed of three people at least (the president, the secretary and the treasurer). These priests can be considered professionals insofar as they are recruited by the temple presidents or committees, from whom they receive a remuneration every month (although, as I have just explained, they can also receive money directly from the devotees who employ them for domestic rituals, or from those

who consult them as astrologists [*jōsyar, cōtitar*]). Such employed migrant priests are Indians as well as Sri Lankans.

- 32 Most of the time, priests manage to find employment abroad through intermediaries who are of three main types. First, they may be relatives of the priests who already work abroad, who are aware of the wants and needs of the local communities regarding temple priesthood, and who can be influential locally. This configuration is the most frequent, which shows the importance of family relations in the structuration of these priests' migrations. Indeed, many Śivācāryas employed in Mauritius or Toronto have family links with other Śivācāryas also working there. For instance, the first South Indian temple priest I met in Mauritius had immigrated thanks to his brother's brother-in-law, who was already working in a Mauritian temple and who also helped his own brother to work in another temple in Mauritius. Similarly, Velmurugan, who mentioned the wage differences between India and Toronto, had the opportunity to work in a temple in Scarborough thanks to his uncle who was already working in another temple nearby, in Richmond Hill. He also explained that one of his brothers was officiating in another temple in Scarborough and his father in a temple in the USA. This illustrates how transnational the family networks of these migrant priests can be and how family represents one of the main resources they can mobilize to go and work abroad.
- 33 Their second main social resource is the priest's guru himself, who trained him in his own school of priests (*pāṭacālai*), following more or less the tradition wherein a pupil or a student lives in his guru's house as a disciple (*gurukulam*). Indeed, some famous priests' schools in Tamil Nadu are well known in the diaspora (such as the *vēdāgama-pāṭacālai* of Pillayarṣatti), so that overseas temple committees often contact these schools or their gurus directly when looking for a qualified Indian Śivācārya. These priests recommended by their gurus are generally young men who have just completed their training in these schools with the best grades (whereas many Indian Śivācāryas are trained only by their fathers in the temples where they work, and where they can still eventually enjoy the hereditary right of priesthood). In Northern Sri Lanka, due to the lack of *pāṭacālai*, most young Brahmans attend these schools only before and after regular school (especially in Inuvil).
- 34 The experience of Balasubrahmanyam (Fig. 2) is representative of such young Śivācāryas (*brahmacārya*) who graduated from these schools whose gurus have connections in the diaspora. He was born in 1983 in a village near Tanjore and was trained in the Tirupparankunram school for priests, near Madurai, which is quite famous (the *Veda Sivaagama Tirumurai Padasalai*). When we met for the first time in Mauritius, his cousin who was visiting him, explained to me that Balasubrahmanyam was so brilliant that he had received the best distinction from his guru when he graduated and that he had been chosen to stay one more year in the *pāṭacālai* as a teacher. Then Balasubrahmanyam explained how he was able to work abroad thanks to his guru's network: "In 2005 and 2006, I began to work in foreign countries by doing short professional trips to Sri Lanka, in Kandy and Kataragama. Then I went to Thailand, in the Mariyamman temple in Bangkok, to help as an assistant priest for temple festivals' special prayers. Then my guru informed me about the opportunity to come work here [in Mauritius]. So, I accepted and I came in 2008."

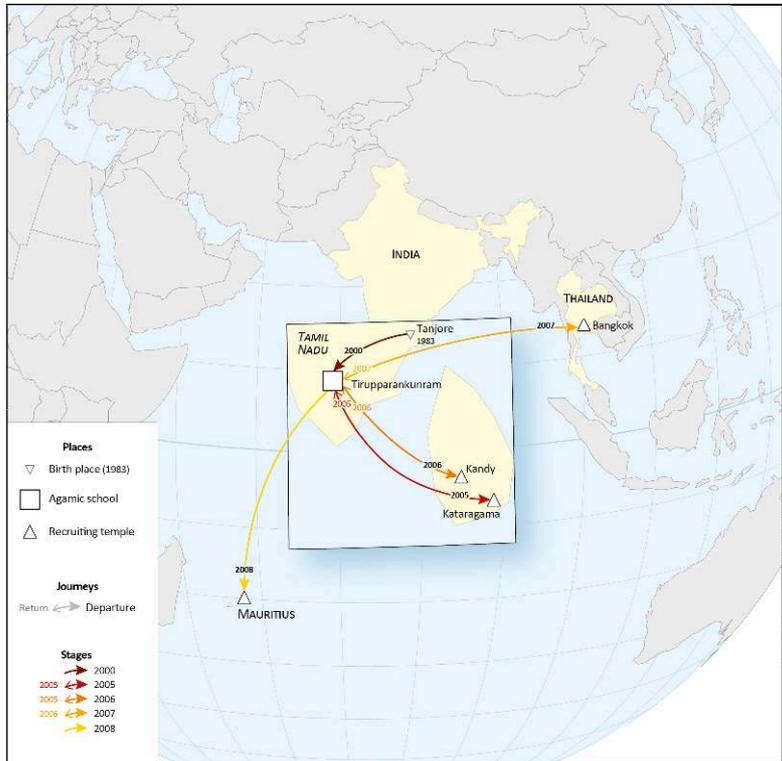


Figure 2 – Professional migrations of Balasubrahmanyam (2000–2013)

- 35 The third main category of go-betweens concerns other influential people involved in local temple activities in the diaspora and who have transnational relations. They may be acquaintances or members of overseas temple committees who have contacts in India and thus can be middlemen between presidents of temples and recruited priests or their guru. They can help presidents to publish job proposals in Tamil Nadu newspapers and to accompany them in India to interview priests and appraise their qualifications (sometimes as translators) before the signature of the contract of employment, as Florence Callandre (2009:112) noticed in La Réunion. In Mauritius, such middlemen may be members of the Mauritius Tamil Temples Federation, which has been the main body of the “Tamil community” since 1960, and from which temple committees can ask for help in their recruitment of foreign priests.
- 36 It is also worth noticing that these different middlemen and medias can be mobilized together by migrant priests during their career path. This happened in the case of Sivakumar (Fig. 3), the Indian priest who said he was working abroad for his “image.” He explained as follows how he managed to work in Mauritius, Paris and then Toronto:

It was my guruji [from Pillayarpatti] who sent me to Mauritius [in 2003]. Someone from Mauritius asked for a priest at my pāṭacālai, then he sent me. I worked there for a year. Then after one year of service there, I went back to India. Two years later I saw an ad in a Tamil newspaper [*Dinamalar*] about a priest vacancy at the Māṇikka Vināyakar Paris temple, then I did the interviews. Mr. Sanderasekaram [the Paris temple president at that time] selected me and then I was an assistant priest there to perform the rituals for Māṇikka Vināyakar. After working there for five years, I returned to India to get married [in 2011]. I’ve had a daughter since then. And then here also there was a vacancy [in Canada]. One of my relatives informed me and asked the president [of this temple] to take me. And I’ve been working here for two

years now [2012–2014]. In fact, after the five years in Paris I was thinking of settling in India. But after two years I had this opportunity in Canada, so I came.

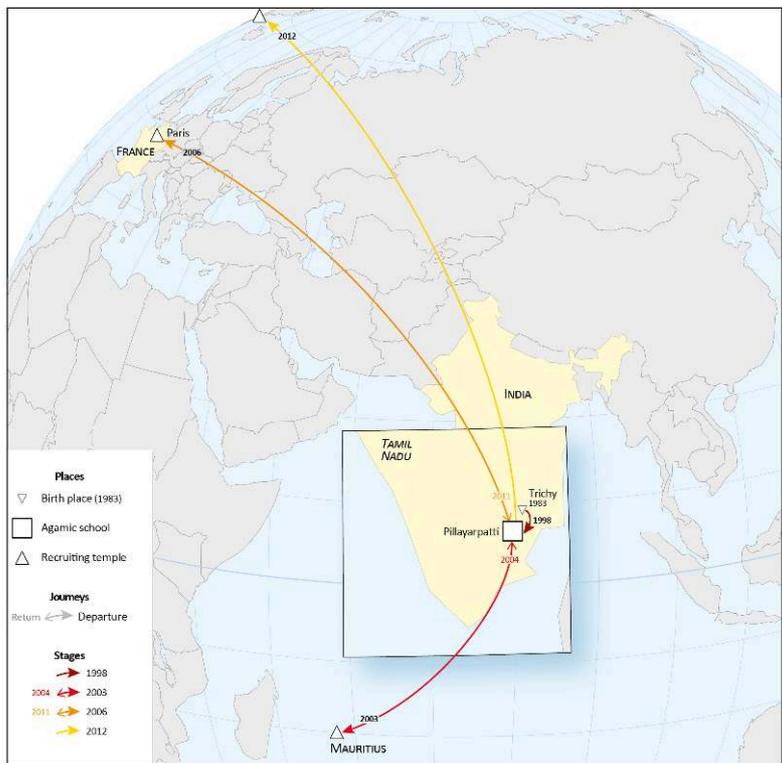


Figure 3 – Professional migrations of Sivakumar (1998–2014)

## Local needs and state regulation: migration frameworks, constraints and strategies

- 37 Migrant priests of Tamil temples are not totally free in their migrations, especially because they are mostly (but not always, as we will see in the last section) employed and salaried migrant workers, which implies some constraints. One result is that the duration of these priests' migrations depends on the local ritual needs, the willingness and satisfaction of employers, and the state regulation of the priests' immigration. For instance, if many priests migrate with a contract of one to four years, many others have contracts of only a few weeks, as Balasubrahmanyam explained when he mentioned his first professional trips abroad (to Sri Lanka and Thailand). Such professional circulations (rather than expatriations) happen for temple consecrations and inaugurations (*mahākumpapiṣēkam*), ritual renovations (*kumpapiṣēkam*) or any other important festival (*tiruvilā*) of the Tamil ritual calendar which necessitates the presence of more priests than usual. In general, most of the priests who travel for such short periods regularly work in South Indian temples. (Besides, it is also very frequent that, once settled abroad, migrant priests working in the same country help each other during festivals, due to the strength of family ties as well as caste networks and solidarity among Śivācāryas overseas).
- 38 More broadly, the migrations of the salaried priests are confronted with the control exerted both by state authorities on minority religions and on foreign religious actors, and by the temple administrators on their religious specialists. Indeed, all these priests

must obtain a working visa or permit from the immigration services and the Ministry of Labor of the foreign country concerned. Their migrations are framed by the diverse national legislations of these countries and, generally, it is the temple committee which applies and which is in charge of these formalities. The committee has to express its need to recruit a foreign priest and to take responsibility to sponsor the priest's coming. In Canada, as in Mauritius, most of those documents are valid for a maximum period of four years, but they are renewable if the employer expresses the demand. As a consequence, since the renewal of their contracts and visas depends on the will of the temple committees, some employed priests have little visibility over the duration of their presence abroad and limited capacity for action. Moreover, the nature, issue and extension of such visas or permits also depends on the legislation of the country of immigration. For instance, in Mauritius the salaried migrant priests must be aged between 20 and 60 years and they have to leave the country on expiry of their permit and to stay abroad for six months before eventually coming back for another four-year permit, which is not the case in Canada. There they can obtain the status of permanent residents after a three-year working visa, and even Canadian citizenship after two years of permanent residency and at least two years of working visa.<sup>27</sup>

- 39 But one consequence of such legal frameworks is that, despite the power exercised by states and temple administrators over their migrations, priests can establish different strategies for emigrating, which are not limited to migrant worker status. This is particularly the case for those who manage to become permanent residents or even citizens of the host country, including most of the “entrepreneur priests” who succeed in founding their own temples there (I will discuss this in the last part). This is also the case of Sri Lankan priests, who generally emigrate for political (or even survival) reasons, and whose complex itineraries also reflect this diversity of migration strategies.

### The Sri Lankan refugees: the many ways to emigrate

- 40 Most of the Sri Lankan priests I interviewed had gone abroad for political or survival reasons because of the civil war. However, not all of them emigrated as political refugees; some did so through family reunification, or even on a work visa. Most of them are employed and salaried in diaspora temples, but their stories and their specific migratory profiles distinguish them from the other salaried priests who migrate for economic and professional reasons only. Broadly speaking, they mainly work in the new Hindu temples established in Europe and North America, where most of the Sri Lankan Tamil communities have settled.
- 41 In Canada, Sri Lankan Tamils have officially two main ways to seek for asylum. First, they can apply once they are in Canada. Then they have to explain their story to the Refugee Board which decides whether they can benefit from the protection of Canada or not. If accepted, the refugees can even apply directly for Canadian citizenship. The following migration story of Arumugan, chief priest of a Murukan temple in Toronto, illustrates such a situation. His history also testifies to what the professional life of a śivācārya priest in Sri Lanka may have been like at the beginning of the war, and to the importance of Colombo in his escape strategy. If agamic schools often serve as intermediate stages in the professional migration of Indian priests, it is certainly the

capital, Colombo, that plays this role for Sri Lankan Tamils seeking to flee the war in the North (Fig. 4).

- 42 Arumugan was born in Northern Sri Lanka in 1968, in Nallur, where he also received his priestly training from 13 to 20 years of age, in parallel with his education at regular schools. (During this time, he used to work in the main Gaṇeśa temple of Nallur and five other smaller temples in the Jaffna area). In 1988 in order to flee the conflict in the North he went to Colombo, the capital city, where he was assistant priest in several temples. In 1991, he went for one year to Singapore and Malaysia, where he worked in two different temples. Then he came back to Colombo, where he worked in two temples with his father. But the situation was too tense, so he decided to go back to Malaysia and from there came directly to Canada with a fake passport bought from “an agent.” He applied for political asylum in 1996 and found a job in a large Hindu temple in 1997. Since then, he has been working there and has never gone back to Sri Lanka.

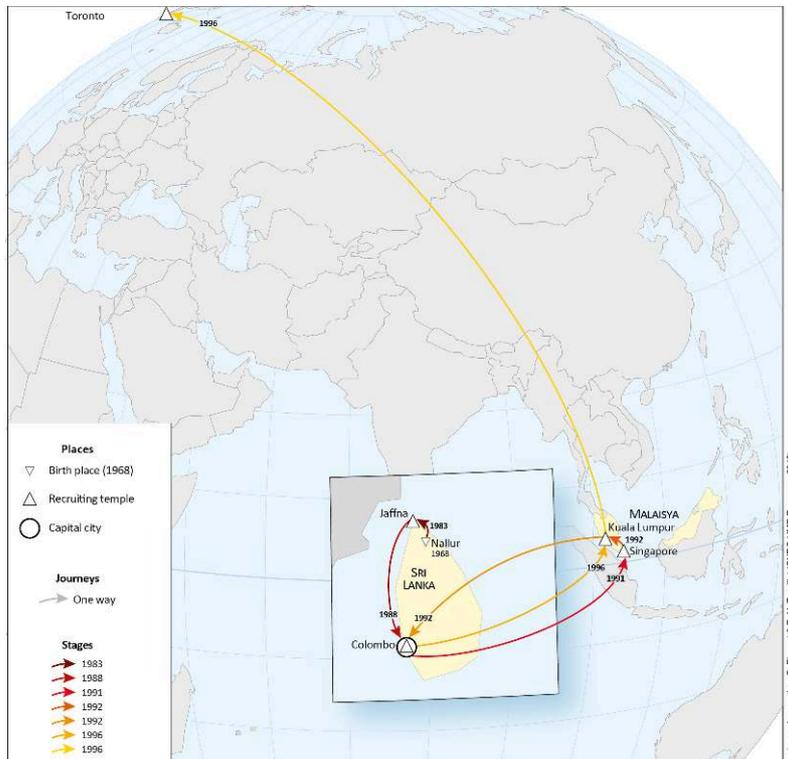


Figure 4 – Migrations of Arumugan (1988–2014)

- 43 The second possibility for Sri Lankan Tamils to be welcomed as refugees in Canada is to be sponsored by a group of five citizens or permanent residents of Canada who apply on behalf of the asylum seeker and who testify that they can meet his needs for one year without any help from the Canadian Government. Natharajan, for example, who worked as an assistant priest at another temple in Toronto and had spent his entire life in Jaffna before having to leave for Canada because of the war, obtained a permanent resident visa mainly thanks to the sponsorship of his cousin (which illustrates again the importance of transnational family networks in the priests' migration strategies).
- 44 Nevertheless, many refugee priests with comparable stories and itineraries have been able to come to Canada not as refugees but with work permits. This is the case of Sharma, the head priest of one of the largest Hindu temples in Toronto, whose story is

also typical of many Sri Lankan Śivācāryas' professional paths. Sharma is a native Sri Lankan (born in Mannar) but his family originates from Tirunelveli (Tamil Nadu). He followed his *gurukulam* between 17 and 21-years of age in his village. He was married at 24 and received his consecration (*ācāryabhiseka*<sup>28</sup>) in his family temple. In 1990, because of the war, he had to leave his village for Colombo, where he worked in a temple for five years. In 1996 he came to work in the large Toronto temple with a work permit. In 2000 he, with his wife and three children, obtained a residence permit. In 2005, he became a Canadian citizen.

## From service to power: social life and agency of migrant priests

- 45 The priests employed by temple committees represent the most common model among Śivācāryas working abroad, because, as Manauguru and Spencer (2018) formulated, these priests are usually “servants rather than leaders” in diaspora, as they are in Sri Lanka and India (Derges 2013:77; Fuller 1984 and 2003). Indeed, migrant Śivācāryas are often considered only as “ritual technicians,” which is their primary role “in most temples of diaspora Tamils around the world” (Clothey 2006:121), as in South India. Nevertheless, some charismatic migrant priests manage to gain reputations as influential men within the overseas Tamil communities, and even to become temple presidents.

### Social relations and social mobility of the employed priests

- 46 In terms of social relations, the employed priests have, in general, few contacts with the local population, and some can even feel very isolated. This is especially the case in Mauritius, where the Tamil community does not speak Tamil anymore, but to a much lesser extent in Canada, where most Tamils are first generation migrants, which compensates for the fact that many Tamil priests speak little English. Moreover, whatever the country, the salaried priests often reside on the premises of the temple, which implies that they remain almost always in the temple buildings whereas they have to adapt to a new social environment. But in countries of recent immigration, such as Canada, Tamil Hindu temples are generally located in areas where a Tamil community has settled, like Scarborough in the Toronto area, which enables migrant priests to live in a rather friendly space of solidarity. (This is less possible in lands of long-term immigration such as Mauritius, where people of Tamil origin are spread all over the country). Sivaratnam, who arrived in Canada in 2008 as a Sri Lankan refugee and who officiates in a Scarborough temple, explained the interest he finds in such ethnic neighborhoods as follows:

In Toronto, most of Sri Lankans are living in Scarborough. So, in busy temples I can get in touch with the people. I came to Canada but here [in Scarborough] I didn't get a chance to speak English because everywhere is our community people! You see the bank or the doctor where you don't need to speak English because you can speak your own language! So, I am more happy [sic.] because it is like that. You don't even miss your own land.

- 47 Nevertheless, despite this enthusiasm, Sivaratnan was actually very sad alone in Canada without his wife and family. Indeed, some of the priests who migrate for several years can feel a real loneliness, especially because their families rarely accompany

them abroad. Many migrant Śivācāryas are married and fathers (*grihastha*), but their wives and children rarely migrate because they prefer their children to finish their schooling before going abroad, or due to the difficulty of obtaining their own visas.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, when the migrant priests obtain a residence permit or the status of citizen—or even political refugee as regards the Sri Lankans—the migration legislation of the host country generally allows family reunification, which prompts priests to think about a migration project for their family even if it may mean years of loneliness beforehand.

- 48 On the other hand, many priests are able to build new social networks abroad and to progressively recover their self-confidence and social well-being. Sivaratnam explained as follows his sense of belonging to a community he thinks he is helping and of which he considers himself completely a part.

I've got to know the devotees so I know them, and they know my story and everything. So, every single devotee who comes here, I know them. I know their families, and everything. Because 90% of the devotees are very close to me. For example, I know their problems, what they want. The people who don't have kids, those who cannot get married, and so on... I know their problems.

- 49 Some priests also manage to improve their local reputation, which can provide them with opportunities to significantly increase their incomes. Actually, it seems that the degree of the priests' isolation or integration within overseas communities depends on their will and capacity to transcend their basic status of ritual technicians. Indeed, those who manage to build a good reputation are regularly solicited by local devotees to conduct rituals for marriages or other domestic rituals, to perform special (charged) *pūjās* for devotees in temples, or to hold astrological consultations addressing different kinds of problems (regarding family issues, health, money, etc.). Thus, they can become rather influential actors in the local Tamil community and even help fellow Śivācārya priests to migrate and work in the diaspora temples. Although some can blossom into such gratifying roles, this is not the case for all migrant priests. The young and less experienced priests (*brahmācārya*), who generally stay for a short period in the same overseas temple, are less solicited by locals, as are those priests who are not able to talk to devotees in their language. But experienced and married priests, and those who make the effort to learn the language of the local community when it does not speak Tamil anymore, as it is the case in Mauritius, are more likely to have such opportunities. These examples of upward social mobility can go as far as the case of “entrepreneur” priests that I will discuss now. In any case, even if all migrant priests do not become temple presidents abroad, it would be wrong to consider all priests working in diaspora temples today only as servants or ritual technicians who do not enjoy any prestige or social influence.

### The “entrepreneur” priests: challenging the distribution of roles and power in temples

- 50 In parallel with the Śivācāryas employed in overseas temples, some migrant priests are themselves the presidents of diaspora temples. In these situations, they are often also the founders of the temples they preside over, and always the head priests. In Mauritius as well as in Toronto, they become prominent figures of local Tamil Hinduism.

- 51 President priests are rather frequent in Toronto, but much rarer in Mauritius, where only one Tamil Hindu temple is presided over and managed by a migrant priest. This is the Chebel Parāśakti Kāḷiyamman temple (Fig. 5), which is located in a village near Beau-Bassin. Its reputation has increased in recent years especially because its architecture has become massive and sophisticated, following its renovation under the direction of its president and chief priest, Muthulingam.
- 52 Muthulingam was born in 1960 in Southern Tamil Nadu (Tirunelveli) where he was trained to the priesthood by his śivācārya family and his guru. According to him, the temple he now presides over in Chebel was formerly a small shrine (*kalimai*) founded by Indian laborers in 1847, composed merely of several stones dedicated to Kāḷī and the Seven Sisters (Sapta/Jeju Kanniyaṁman). The temple is still located in a sugar cane plantation but it was enlarged and renovated by Muthulingam in the early 2000s in an impressive Dravidian style following the *vāstu śāstra* and the architectural principles of the *Āgamas*,<sup>30</sup> as are many other Tamil Hindu temples in Mauritius (Trouillet 2014; Claveyrolas 2017). As with most temple renovations, a temple architect (*stapati*) and temple craftsmen (*śilpin*) were also recruited from South India.<sup>31</sup> Actually, Muthulingam explained that he had been asked by the Tamil Mauritian family who formerly managed the small Chebel shrine, to make it a great Dravidian Hindu temple. The least one can say is that he has succeeded in Brahmanizing the “popular” practices of the former *kalimai*. Today, the temple has a fairly large audience, especially among the upper middle class in Mauritius, among which Muthulingam has developed an important social network since his arrival in Mauritius in 1993 and his first employment contract in the main Tamil temple in Port Louis. The president priest now has permanent resident status in Mauritius.



Figure 5 – The new agamic architecture of the Chebel temple in Mauritius (Author, 2013)

- 53 This migrant priest is thus the reformer, the manager, the president and the head priest of one of the biggest and best-known Hindu Tamil temples in Mauritius. Through his personality and his social status, Muthulingam now corresponds to the South Indian archetype of the “big-men” (*periyar*, *periyavar*, or *periyadanakārar*) who “attract followers and enact their roles as generous leaders through the ‘charitable’ institutions that they control,” as Mines and Gourishankar (1990:761) pointed out. The way in which the Tamil community and the temple devotees speak about him and his activities, or the way in which his assistant priests behave in his presence, correspond to social behaviors linked to charismatic personalities such as Tamil big-men. For instance, among the Tamil community, Muthulingam’s rivals (in particular those who are opposed to the recruitment of foreign Brahman priests) warn everyone to be suspicious of him while emphasizing his great intelligence and his political influence. Indeed, he is said to be very well integrated into the political elite (in particular with at least one minister). All the temple employees, including the other priests, obey his orders submissively, and one of the regular devotees of his temple once told me, full of conviction: *“He is the number one priest in Mauritius! He is trained, he knows how to perform rituals, and he knows where to find the right priests to bring them from India. A friend of mine even managed to get elected district councillor after coming here to pray!”*
- 54 The absence of immigrant priests presiding over other temples in Mauritius can be explained by the age of the Tamil temples in the island that have been managed mainly by indentured laborers since their origin and are now controlled by their descendants. In addition, as I mentioned in the first part, the majority of the Tamil Hindu shrines in Mauritius (especially those that have not been renovated in the Dravidian and agamic style) still have non-Brahman priests (*pūcāri*). And, as in South India, Tamil Mauritians generally value older temples that are locally known to be effective in addressing various issues (fertility, health, success, etc.) more than new temples founded by religious entrepreneurs, whose reputations have yet to be built and proven.
- 55 In Toronto, in contrast, where the Tamil presence is much more recent, several migrant priests have taken advantage of the absence of ancient Tamil Hindu temples and of the increasing needs of new ones, to found their own temples. As the Chebel temple in Mauritius, most of these temples are not managed by committees of lay trustees but by the migrant priests themselves. Such temples are so prevalent in Toronto that they are commonly called “priest temples,” in contrast to the “committee temples.” The reputation and the intensity of ritual activity of these temples rely on the variable status of their president priests, some of whom are charismatic and famous. One of the best-known Vināyakar temples of Toronto attracts a lot of devotees owing to the legitimacy and reputation of its founder Śivācārya priests, whose family has a hereditary right of priesthood in a famous temple of the Northern province of Sri Lanka (in Pungudutivu), just like the priests of the Nainativu and Nallur temples I mentioned earlier. This temple and its priests share such a positive image and reputation that it regularly attracts devotees originating not only from Pungudutivu but also from other places in Sri Lanka and South India. And the activity of this temple is so dense that eight priests regularly officiate there (in addition to the four brothers who have hereditary priesthood rights at the original Sri Lankan temple, the temple employs four Indian priests from Pillayarpatti).

- 56 Moreover, today in Toronto, some charismatic priests can be influential even in temples they do not preside over. Mark Whitaker (2015:1379) showed that, in a temple run by a committee but founded by two migrant priests, the priests prove to be the actual leaders who make decisions while the committee has no real power. This observation is very interesting because it confirms the trend of empowerment of some influential migrant priests, which can be observed elsewhere in Toronto as well as at the Mauritian temple in Chebel.
- 57 More broadly, the main lesson to be learned from these examples is that migrant entrepreneur priests are the actors of a significant change in the distribution of power and social roles in Tamil diaspora temples. Indeed, the traditional and exclusive function of the Brahman priests of Tamil temples has long been to perform only rituals, while the management and financing of temples were the responsibility of kings and other dominant caste rulers. Such observations have been made in South India (Appadurai and Breckendridge 1976; Reiniche 1976; Fuller 1984; Presler 1987) as well as in Northern Sri Lanka (Saveri 1996). Even today, it is still very rare for Brahman temple priests to be presidents and managers of temples in Tamil Nadu, where they are often rather poor and hardly ever become big-men, unlike the leaders of monastic institutions (such as the Śaṅkarācārya of Kanchipuram, for instance). In the Jaffna peninsula too, śivācārya priests have no real power over the temples. As in so many villages in South India (Trouillet 2008), they depend on the local dominant castes, such as the Veḷḷāḷars who employ them, who are the leading patrons of the temples and who provide money for the construction and maintenance of them (Derges 2013:77). Therefore, what we observe in the diaspora temples ruled by entrepreneur priests challenges the social organization that has been in place for centuries in Tamil temples. This change in the distribution of power and social roles testifies to the potential empowerment and upward social mobility of temple priests, who are thus far from all being mere servants and ritual technicians. On the contrary, they actively influence the forms that transnational Hinduism takes in the immigration countries of the Tamil diaspora.

## Conclusion

- 58 Nearly three decades ago, Peter Van der Veer and Steven Vertovec (1991:164) concluded their precursory article on Brahmanism overseas by arguing that “the anthropology of Hinduism [could] no longer be exclusively tied to the anthropology of India” due to the “constant flow of persons, goods, and information between India and the rest of the world which now makes Hinduism transnational.” This article fits in with the continuity of this assertion by promoting an analysis focused on transnational religious actors involved in such flows, in order to better know these actors and their circulations, and also the mechanisms and trends currently at work in the shaping of transnational Hinduism, which is not only based on community logics, but also on individual ones.
- 59 The first important element to remember concerns the fact that most of the migrant priests who officiate in the Tamil diaspora temples belong to the same Brahman subcaste of Śivācāryas. This echoes the broader trends of Brahmanization (or “Śivācāryazation”) of global Tamil Hinduism which transcends the differences of regional origins within overseas Tamil communities, and of duplication of specific

existing temples to maintain a collective memory of the original places and to rebuild networks of solidarity and (caste) alliance. Nevertheless, one of the main results that must be emphasized is that, despite the fact that the migrant priests share the same caste and ritual practices, they have neither the same migration profile nor the same social status, for they can either be economic migrants salaried by temple committees, religious entrepreneurs managing their own temples, or political refugees.

- 60 Moreover, the mapping of these priests' migrations (made possible by the biographical interviews) shows how these circulations take place in major centers of the Tamil diaspora (such as Mauritius and Toronto of course, but also Singapore, Malaysia, and Paris), and that these centers are not isolated from each other but linked by transnational exchanges of Brahman priests, which contributes to the homogenization and standardization of overseas Tamil Hinduism. The association of ethnography and mapping also demonstrates that these priests' migrations fit into "transnational social spaces" (Pries 2001; Faist and Ozveren 2004; Levitt and Shiller 2004) structured by specific places, such as agamic schools which prove to be springboards for many Indian priests to work in the diaspora, and by social networks based on kin and corporatist solidarities as well as on caste and ethno-linguistic belonging. Indeed, an important element that emerges from the exchanges with these migrant priests is, notably, the diversity of the social resources they use to mobilize to find work abroad. These resources include the priests' family networks, their fellow Śivācāryas, their agamic schools' gurus, as well as other acquaintances and middlemen. In the end, together with overseas temples committees and presidents, and the host countries that regulate the development of religions on their territory, all these actors combine their activities at the local, national and transnational levels to structure not only the "everyday" life of Tamil diaspora temples but also, more broadly, a large part of transnational Tamil Hinduism.
- 61 In this context, migrant priests are ritual, economic and social agents involved in local hierarchies within which they occupy varying positions. But in general, migrant priests are far from being only passive and dominated individuals, merely reacting to the constraints of their country of origin and obeying the actors supervising their recruitment. On the contrary, they are actors who increasingly know how to make optimum use of the resources of their socio-cultural universe and of globalization to achieve their personal goals. They know very well how to mobilize their networks to carry out their migration project, whether it is personal or family, and whether it is motivated by a socio-economic ambition or by a necessity for survival. And among these major religious actors of transnational Hinduism, the category of "entrepreneur priests" represents the most successful example of their empowerment, agency and upward social mobility.

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## NOTES

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2. For the sake of clarity, I have chosen to use the term “Tamil diaspora,” in the singular, to refer to all groups of Tamil origin who no longer live in Tamil Nadu or Northern Sri Lanka.

3. Tamil migrant priests have only been studied in works that are more broadly focused on the development of Hinduism in a particular host country (Kurien 2007; Callandre 2009; Baumann 2010; Whitaker 2015), or in Christopher Fuller’s work on Brahman priests in Tamil Nadu (Fuller 2003; Fuller and Narasimhan 2014).

4. The semi-structured interviews were all conducted in the temples where the priests worked or in their homes, which were usually located nearby. They could last from half an hour to several hours. There were questions regarding their places of birth and their training, temples where they had already worked, their motivations for migrating, how they were recruited abroad, and their views on their integration in the host country and on the local ritual practices. Repeatedly spending time in temples also allowed for personal observation and informative exchanges with the devotees and the various people involved in the management of places of worship (presidents, secretaries, trustees, volunteers, etc.).

5. Most of the interviews were recorded, which made it possible to extract the quotations included in the article.

6. In Toronto, where most of the Hindu temples run by Tamils have migrant Brahman priests, I interviewed the priests in large and famous temples as well as in smaller and lesser-known temples. I also interviewed chief priests as well as assistant priests, in different parts of the Greater Toronto Area (Scarborough, Brampton, Mississauga, Richmond Hill, Etobicoke and Downtown Toronto). I used the same method for selecting participants in Mauritius, but I first had to identify the temples where migrant Brahman priests had been recruited (thanks to friends and informants I have known since my doctoral fieldwork in 2008), because Hindu temples employing such priests are still a minority there. These interviews were conducted in 2013 and 2014, but complementary interviews have also been conducted during shorter fieldwork trips of a couple of weeks in Tamil Nadu (in 2012, 2013 and 2019), Paris (in 2011, 2016 and 2017) and La Réunion (in 2018).

7. Anouck Carsignol (2011) also stressed the value of the complementary nature of the Canadian and Mauritian contexts for studying Indian transnationalism.

8. Statistics Mauritius and Statistics Canada.

9. There was no other reliable data on the Śivācārya subcaste when I wrote this piece in 2019, since no results from the 2011 census had been published about Tamil Brahman castes.

10. The Tamil Renaissance (or Revival) is a literary, cultural, political and social reform movement which developed in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Tamil-speaking districts of the Madras Presidency and in Jaffna.

11. (1822-1879).

12. The Vellāḷars are mainly farmers and traders. They represent 50 percent of the population of the Jaffna peninsula.

13. This was particularly the case in the Caribbean (Singaravelou 1987. Vol 3:16) and Fiji (Lal and Yadav 1995:99), where they were nicknamed “ship Brahmins.”

14. Worship of Gaṇapati associated with a fire sacrifice and carried out by a group of at least two priests.

15. The names of the priests interviewed and of the temples they work in have been changed to protect their identities (except for the Chebel temple in Mauritius, mentioned in the fourth section of the article).

16. This training course has been set up by the Hindu Priest Association of Canada which federates most of the Tamil Hindu temple priests officiating in the country.

17. They paid 1,000 \$CAD each for the application and construction of the temple that began in 1998 and was completed in 2005.
18. One of the most important temples of the Jaffna region.
19. *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam*, the “Dravidian Progress Federation.”
20. Narasimhan (2015), <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/temple-worship-focusses-on-agamas-not-idols/article7997393.ece>.
21. In general Tamil Brahman priests’ training in such schools lasts seven years: three years dedicated to theory and four years to practice. For more information about these *agamīc* schools, see Fuller (2003:80–113).
22. For comparison, the monthly per capita income in Tamil Nadu was Rs 9,400 in 2014 (Source: Department of Economics and Statistics, Chennai-6).
23. The median monthly salary in Mauritius was Rs 12,500 in 2016 according to Statistics Mauritius.
24. For more details on this “sin,” see Clémentin-Ojha (2011 and 2012). For a specific discussion on the negotiation of this classical ban on migration by the *śivācārya* priests, see Trouillet (forthcoming).
25. The Indian press relayed several conflicts between such migrant priests and their temple, as in 1997, when a Kerala temple priest was banned from entering his temple upon returning from England. Similarly, in 2008, an abbot of the sectarian monastery of Puthige in Karnataka was banned from performing important rituals (touching the image of the deity) because he went to the United States a few years before. It is also well known that the priests working in the Tirupati temple (Andhra Pradesh) who have travelled abroad cannot officiate in the *sanctum sanctorum* (Gopalakrishnan 2008; Clémentin-Ojha 2012).
26. Especially the *Baudhayana sūtras* (II.1.2.2).
27. Furthermore, in Canada, the immigration of the Tamil Hindu priests fits specifically into the Religious or Charitable Work visa program that is exclusively dedicated to the entry of foreigner workers who aim to carry out duties for religious or charitable organizations on a temporary basis.
28. Consecration ritual (bathing) for new priest.
29. Moreover, *śivācāryas* seldom marry outside their homeland (except for second-generation immigrants). All the wedded priests I met had married before migration or gone back to India or Sri Lanka for their marriage, since most of their family stay there and because *śivācārya* women hardly ever migrate for that purpose. The situation is rather different for the political refugees who do not have the right to go back to Sri Lanka. Sivaratnam experienced this predicament since he had to marry in Tamil Nadu due to his refugee status, whereas his wife lived in Sri Lanka. They even met in Tamil Nadu for four years, before she could join him in Canada through family reunification statutes.
30. The temple is supported by 28 pillars, in reference to the 28 *Āgamas*.
31. From Devakottai in Tamil Nadu.

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## ABSTRACTS

Many aspects of the contemporary transnationalization of Hinduism have already been well studied, such as long-distance nationalism or the sense of belonging to a transnational

community, but very little attention has been paid to the ritual actors who actually circulate within the diaspora space. Based on biographical interviews conducted in two major countries of Hindu immigration (Mauritius and Canada), this article proposes to shed light on the Hindu temple priests who migrate from South India and Northern Sri Lanka to meet the ritual needs of the Tamil diaspora, which is particularly involved in the Hindu temple constructions that have multiplied throughout the world since the 1980–1990s. By focusing on their caste, their migratory profiles, their circulation, and their agency, the article shows that these “migrant priests” actively contribute to shaping the forms that transnational Hinduism takes in different Tamil immigration countries. More broadly, it is argued that it is necessary to pay attention to this type of “circulating” religious actors to fully understand the current stakes, trends, and mechanisms of the transnationalization of Hinduism.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** migrant priests, transnationalization, Hinduism, Hindu temples, Tamil diaspora, Tamil Nadu, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Canada

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