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SPECIAL SECTION

The obligation to act

Gender and reciprocity in political mobilization

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This article draws on ethnography of a South Indian mass-literacy movement to develop an argument about the role of obligation in the political mobilization of marginalized subjects. It seeks in particular to understand the use of language in a literacy movement that ended up being more important for being a women's movement than for the literacy it tried to impart. The article begins by examining two different modes of address in the activism I studied, one premised on modernist self-assertion in the name of society and the other by appeals to culture as a propelling resource. It then turns to a third type, based on reciprocity, which is underdeveloped in much thought on agency in contemporary politics, and the analysis of which might help us escape some of the logics of late liberal governmentality in our ethnography.

Keywords: Activism, gender, reciprocity, mobilization, India

Anthropology's interest in questions of agency has moved away from a once-dominant focus on the dialectic of social structure and event, and it has done so in at least in three different directions. The first, broadly Foucauldian move has been to conceptualize agency "not as a synonym for resistance to relations of dominance, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (Mahmood 2001: 203). In this now familiar story, discursive structures are productive of actions that are also effects of power, drawing our attention to subjection in projects of self-making. The second, critical comparativist path that was forged by Marilyn Strathern's (1988) *The gender of the gift* interprets personhood and agency as objectifications of social relations, and has since resurfaced in a more radical fashion in various ontological turns. A more recent, vital materialism, that bears genealogical relations with the first two trends, trains its lens on contingently assembled forms of agency that are distributed across actants, human

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and nonhuman, in a critique of anthropocentrism. All three lines of argumentation have effectively accused older theories of reifying both the human subject and the social in the very same gesture. One salutary effect of the turn toward a distributed conception of agency that can be found in all three moves has been to further displace the sovereign subject of human freedom as the standard against which the value of life is determined. But the questions of why people act and how they attribute value to their actions nevertheless retain their urgency for anthropologists, or indeed, for anyone interested in politics.

In the ethnography that follows, I take up the questions of why people who would be characterized stereotypically as "unfree"—women from oppressed castes in rural South India—acted in a social movement and how they interpreted their willingness to act.[1] In an attempt to further explore what the critiques of the reification of both the social and the human subject of freedom might mean for the problem of political mobilization, I focus on modes of address in the making of a mass-literacy movement called the *Arivoli Iyakkam* (The Enlightenment Movement).[2] This was a movement that ended up being much more important for becoming a charismatic rural women's movement than for the literacy it tried to impart. More specifically, as the title indicates, the aim of this essay is to develop an argument about the defining role of reciprocity, and hence obligation, in the interpellation and mobilization of marginalized subjects. My claim, at the broadest level, is that the logic of the gift outlined by Mauss ([1954] 2011), which appears to be freely given but in fact requires a response, can help us better understand a gendered logic of social action in this political movement. By approaching questions of agency from this slightly different angle, retooling a classic concept in anthropology, I hope to refine our understanding of the enabling aspects of relations of subordination beyond the classic Foucauldian position, although I do also borrow from the critique of governmentality. I also aim to extend the second critical insight that agency is always-already distributed, by paying attention to the fundamentally relational aspects of its emergence. I do so, however, without committing to a radical posthumanism or to a fundamentally comparative project insofar that such positions do little to help us understand my main concern here: the ethical issues and paradoxes, worthy of reflection, that arise in a type of activist mobilization that seeks to compel the very people it would also claim to empower.

Echoes of the humanist left after liberalization

Over the course of nearly twenty years, from 1990 until the movement ended in 2009, the Arivoli Iyakkam managed to mobilize huge numbers of people in an attempt to enlighten the Tamil countryside of South India through the spread of literacy and scientific thought. In the small, rural district of Pudukkottai, where I did

1. The ethnographic vignettes in this article draw substantially from my book (Cody 2013).

2. The word, "arivoli" can be more literally translated as "the light of knowledge," but it has become the most commonly used Tamil word to refer to the Enlightenment since this social movement.

fieldwork, over three hundred thousand villagers participated in literacy lessons and other Arivoli events. Across southern India the number reached the millions. Influenced mainly by Left thought, and especially by the Brazilian philosopher, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1970), volunteers from a range of backgrounds went out into Tamil Nadu's villages to teach women who had never gone through formal schooling how to read and write, in addition to conducting basic science demonstrations in an effort to diminish the role of what they saw as "superstition" in making life choices. An activist NGO devoted to fostering a critical rationalist ethos, called the Tamil Nadu Science Forum, had initiated the movement. Whereas activists in the movement were drawn from a number of different castes and communities, including men and women in fairly equal proportions, the majority of learners in the movement were women from the most marginalized castes, with an especially large proportion of Dalits attending classes. The Arivoli movement was resolutely humanist in its orientation and devoted to a pedagogy in which a technology of mediation, writing, was meant to unleash social energies that had until then been submerged in what activists took to be the narrow confines of caste, kin, and the world of face-to-face interaction. In fact, as we will see in more detail below, one of the primary goals of this activism was to teach villagers that they were members of a large-scale society in which they could also be active citizens through their literacy practice, and hence agents of change. In this Freirean dialectic of liberation, tied here to the nation-state form, such enlightened persons would be made aware of their position in a larger social system, more free than they were before to reflect upon social facts, and contrastively, upon themselves as human subjects.

If the issue of human agency is one that defined the movement in explicit terms as a result of its humanist pedagogy, the other major problematic that came to define the scope of political action in this era was that of neoliberal governmentality. Perhaps the most often used (and sometimes abused) label in political anthropology at the turn of the millennium, the concept of neoliberal governmentality is easily applied to make sense of the types of activism I write about. Arivoli activists, villagers themselves and often members of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), were acting in a political environment shaped by a shift in regimes of government away from Nehruvian state-led developmentalism to a more NGO-based management of populations, and even to fully privatized poverty reduction programs. The interests of a Left NGO, named the Tamil Nadu Science Forum, and the Government of India had first coalesced around a language of empowerment through literacy and science education in 1990, at the precise moment of economic liberalization and when government strategy was shifting toward this devolution of the state's development functions. One reason the Arivoli movement is of historical interest is because it marks a key moment in the ruralization of nonparty left political pedagogy in the context of development work, that is, by using the resources of the development state. In this respect, the movement was very much like the *Mahila Samakhya* women's movement studied by Aradhana Sharma, where she shows that recent attempts to reshape development as an issue of "empowerment" and individual responsibility are not only characterized by "anti-politics," but may in fact "spawn political activism centered on redistribution and justice" with older roots in the Nehruvian state (2008: xxi). This is, by now, a fairly well-known story

in anthropology about the productivity of development encounters, and I need not rehearse its details here. I merely note that the Arivoli Iyakkam was animated by a politics of emancipation, understood as a reshaping of the commons that stood in constant tension with the neoliberal conditions of possibility that allowed the movement to grow so rapidly.

Having learned a great deal from studies like Sharma's (2008) and Akhil Gupta's (2012), my concern when analyzing the Arivoli Iyakkam has been that too strict an adherence to the analytic of neoliberal governmentality might easily obscure a politics that is neither about a demand for state welfare nor about the rhetoric of "self-help" and entrepreneurship that has been propagated as a technically superior form of development. The lens of governmentality, neoliberal or otherwise, does relatively little to illuminate why people might join such a movement as activists and learners. My search has been for other ways to understand a mass movement that arose in direct conjunction with the establishment of neoliberal environments in India, without assuming a monolithic theory of governmentality or appealing to reductive concepts of Tamil or Indian "tradition." The task of avoiding culturalist interpretation is made all the more urgent to the degree that this was a distinctively gendered movement in which women, the stereotypical bearers of cultural tradition in India and elsewhere, participated with much greater enthusiasm then men.[3] This was one of the great surprises for early organizers of the Tamil Nadu Science Forum, who had assumed that it would be more difficult to mobilize women than men for literacy classes and other public events. How, then, might one pay attention to alternative logics of mobilization without slipping into easy culturalist arguments about the rural Tamil ethos or damaging generalizations about the docility of marginalized women?

In seeking an answer to these types of questions, the theorist whom we often turn to in South Asian studies is Partha Chatterjee (2004), who argues that those people who are thought of primarily as populations under developmentalist regimes of governmentality are far from being passive objects of discourse and policy. They participate actively, and creatively, in what he terms "political society." This form of politics among those he calls "the governed" is a result of the legacies of colonial and postcolonial statecraft, and it contrasts with the norms of civil society inhabited by the national elite and premised on free associational life and the rule of law. Political society assumes deep inequalities between the governed and those who govern, and it does not assume individual freedom as the basis of democratic politics. In this mode of political action, which Chatterjee argues defines democracies in much of the postcolonial world, people make claims on the state through idioms of community, often on the fringes of legality, and not through the abstract principles of an unmarked national citizenship that is denied to them.

There are three sticky issues that arise with this otherwise persuasive and very capacious theory. One of the difficulties is an ambiguity about whether "the governed" and their "political society" are demographic categories referring to types of people, or whether this is rather a pervasive style of political action. Chatterjee tends toward demographics. But, as several scholars have noted, even the well-heeled

3. Note how differently configured this movement is from the masculinist political public in Kerala's colleges analyzed by Ritty Lukose (2005).

bearers of corporate capital who make up the civil society of India also partake in an oftentimes less than legal politics of negotiation, as populations, and through idioms of community (Baviskar and Sundar 2008; Menon 2010). My research on the Arivoli Iyakkam furthermore illustrates how the working poor and even the most marginalized communities can also articulate their political aspirations in oftentimes universalist terms of humanity, citizenship, and civil society (Cody 2013). This was, after all, the "Enlightenment Movement." A second issue is that by taking the state/society distinction as given, Chatterjee's conception of political society as a mediating field of action ends up acting as a remainder category with very little positive content (Gupta 2012).

The final, here I should say "potential problem," is with another distinction, and I believe Chatterjee is aware of it even if it is never directly addressed in his writing. The community/civil society binary that animates his formulation of political society has a tendency to resonate all too easily with the categories that lie at the core of what Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) has identified as late liberalism: where the politics of allochronism, the sense that some societies have to "catch up" in the race to be modern, animating earlier developmentalist modes of domination have managed to incorporate a politics of cultural recognition within their fields of power. That is, one's "culture" and "community," are not only idioms infused into categories of population management from below, à la politics of the governed in political society, nor are they to be seen only as barriers to the emergence of a modern, developed nation. These idioms of solidarity or belonging can be both officially celebrated *and* taken as a sign of backwardness *within* the logic of late liberalism. The stuff of community no longer marks a limit to a liberal capitalism that was expected to melt such solid social relations into air. And this strategy of government, in fact, rests on the sovereign capacity to positively value a reified version of culture-as-community and compel its performance at some moments, while deploring community's restraining effect on the autonomous subject of society-at-large at other moments. Now, this is a rather abstract argument that certainly works out differently in agrarian or urban India than it does in the forms of settler colonialism Povinelli is writing about, but it will help us get into my materials quickly and aid in organizing the ethnography.

The stories I will now share to develop my broader argument about agency under the rule of this type of governmentality consist of three brief sketches of three different modes of address in the activism I studied. In the first mode, one premised on modernist self-assertion, village women are addressed as potential autological subjects (to use Povinelli's term) capable of freely determining their own future. In this mode it is the inculcation of a wider sense of "society" that is meant to act as the mediating trigger in the production of human agency. The second mode of address appeals to Tamil culture as a propelling resource and to women in particular as genealogical bearers of tradition, and for that reason stronger than men. I will then turn to the third type of address, based on reciprocity, which I find to be underdeveloped in much thought on contemporary politics in India, and the analysis of which might, I hope, help us escape some of the logics of late liberalism in our ethnography. Reciprocal agency is a form of social action that is not about personal choices, indirect relationships to the abstractions of social theory, or individual desires; nor is it about adherence to tradition, some preexisting community, or the

constraint of desire. Rather, this form of agency is essentially interactional and collective, catalyzing social forces that are immanent in the field of activist mobilization, and not reducible to the binary trap of freedom versus cultural constraint. But this formulation too remains quite abstract at this point in my narrative. Let me now turn to examples of pedagogy among young women in the Arivoli Iyakkam in order to flesh out these three modes of address.

Learning gender: The social as malleable

One day I accompanied the Arivoli Iyakkam activists Neela and Ramalingam to the village of Tuvarappatti, just outside of Pudukkottai Town, for a "gender awareness training" session that they had decided to organize as part of the Arivoli Iyakkam. They had chosen this village for their training session because Ramalingam had already been working with many of the young women for nearly one year. The Arivoli Iyakkam office, in conjunction with the rural development office, had already established a tailoring training center in this village. The young women whom Ramalingam had recruited to join the tailoring program, and who would now attend the gender awareness training, were all in their late teens and early twenties. They had all joined self-help groups to contribute the money they earned doing tailoring work to a collective bank account. None of the trainees had gotten married yet. Most had gone to school until the tenth standard, though at least two among them had dropped out of school much earlier and were thus not completely at ease with writing. The reason for their meeting that day, however, had little to do with literacy or training in practical skills. The training session, Neela explained to me, was rather meant to raise their consciousness about "women's situation."

Ramalingam had already asked the local Arivoli volunteer, a young woman from this village, to have the trainees assemble by the panchayat office by ten o'clock in the morning. After introductions, the first activity of the training session, led by Ramalingam, consisted of getting the trainees to talk about the different varieties and amounts of work men and women are expected to perform. He began by distributing white chalk to everyone. He then asked them to draw a giant circle on the concrete floor of the panchayat office. Having drawn a circle the trainees were then asked to draw and number twenty-four tick marks around the edge. These would represent the twenty-four hours of the day. Ramalingam then divided the young women into two groups. One group was to use red chalk to divide the day into activities that women do, including all forms of work, rest, eating, and so on. The other group would do the same for men. They were asked to divide the clock using their chalk and write out what each chunk of time was normally devoted to. The young women worked on this task for a good fifteen minutes, discussing among themselves what they did over the course of the day. Their fathers and brothers served as reference points for what a typical man's day would look like. Once they had finished their respective time maps, Ramalingam and Neela called for their attention and began a discussion.

Neela began by asking the trainees who had mapped a typical man's day to walk everyone through their map. The day began quite early with manual work in the fields such as plowing or supervising transplanting, followed by some time at the

local teashop reading the newspaper and discussing politics with neighbors. After a late breakfast at home men often took a nap during the hottest part of the day. They would then do some lighter work in the fields such as shifting irrigation patterns by damming sections of irrigation ditches to assure an equal distribution of water. This was followed by more social time at the teashop in the evening and an early bedtime.

The other group was asked about their day next. The typical woman's day, once mapped in this manner, clearly consisted of much more work and much less time socializing. Women's days started earlier than men's with the fetching of water from the local well. This was an especially arduous task in this village where all the nearby wells had run dry and where a government-supplied public faucet connected to a water tower worked only for one hour in the morning. They often had to cook both in the morning and in the evening, in addition to helping out in the fields. Women would also be doing some sort of housework, such as peeling tamarind pods or winnowing rice, while the men slept in the middle of the day, and then again well into the evening after many of the men had gone to sleep. These were the times during which women socialized, while also working. All this did not include the fact that they were also always responsible for younger children, a constant task that the young trainees also mentioned in their report. Although the young women seemed genuinely surprised at the difference in time spent working once quantified, when asked why it was this way, they unanimously responded that it is simply because "we are women and they are men."

This response gave Neela the opening she had been looking for. She proceeded to ask every one of the young women who had gathered to describe when they first began to sense that they were different from their brothers and the boys around them. Responses from the trainees all tended to focus on late childhood and early adolescence. For example, one of the women said, "I used to be free like the boys to go out and play. There was no difference. Then after I became of age [referring to her first menstruation], my mother told me that I had to stay away. After that I was not to go out, I had to help her with cooking at home." Others remembered how they would be sent out to graze the goats while their brothers were allowed to play cricket with their friends after school. Another sign of difference that the young women remembered was when their families first told them that they should be "shy in front of boys, or others will talk." Neela then asked them about other differences, such as the practice of men and boys eating before the women and of women eating in the cooking area rather than out in front on the veranda like men. Neela had been writing a list of everything the young women had said regarding differences between boys and girls that only became apparent later in childhood and into the adolescent years.

She repeated the list, and then, using a distinction that has been foundational for a number of feminist visions of agency, at least since Simone De Beauvoir's *The second sex* ([1949] 2011), Neela proceeded to try to explain that these differences were in fact socially constructed rather than natural. She asked everyone what the word "*pāliṉam*" (sex category) means. The word *pāliṉam* is a compound of two roots: *pāl*, the root used to refer to gender classification in language or to sex, and *iṉam*, the Tamil equivalent of the Sanskrit *jāti*, which can be used to refer to any natural kind, though it is most often used with reference to caste. One of

the trainees responded that *pāliṇam* is the "difference between men and women." Neela then clarified saying that the differences they had all been listing were in fact "*camūka pāliṇam*" (social sex category), adding the modifying word *camūka*, an adjective meaning "social," as Neela was trying to use it in this context. The difficulty in this delicate exercise arises from the fact that Neela was marking a very important distinction using a word, *camūka*, the adjective form of *camūkam*, which in other contexts would *also* have referred to caste or more broadly to community. In everyday talk one might refer to someone's *camūkam* just as one might refer to one's *iṇam*. However, Neela was using this adjective in the radically different sense of referring to "the social" *in the abstract*.

In this instance we can see how this variety of Arivoli activism relies on wresting words from the vocabulary of caste, relational forms of belonging that presuppose no choice or exertion of will, in order to invoke a more universalizing principle of "society." Society, in this understanding, is something that everyone belongs to equally once realized in its highest form, and that can potentially be remade (cf. Strathern 1988: 318–25).[4] The differences that the trainees had listed between men and women, Neela explained, were a product of a social situation. "*Pāliṇam*" on the other hand, refers to differences in our body, she told them. "So, for example, it is because of your *pāliṇam* that you menstruate. But it is because of your *camūka pāliṇam* that you do the amount of work that you do and that you are secluded when you menstruate." Neela went on to argue that gender norms had in fact changed over time. She used the example of women now riding scooters whereas in the past, in their mothers' generation, women would not even have ridden bicycles. "But so what?" said the looks on their faces, well aware of historical change but maybe not convinced that it turns on this type of conceptual distinction.

To understand that gender is socially constructed, Neela argued, was to understand that the differences that the young women had listed were not inherent but rather open to change through the exertion of a subject who has been made aware of her freedom and power to engender change. This subject of sovereign agency relies on an understanding of autonomy that is not a self that is the product of accumulated transactions, specific relations to kin, affines, to the qualities of the soil of one's village, to the local deity, or more generally to one's *camūkam* in colloquial uses of the term. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991) and Saba Mahmood (2005) both offer classic critiques of this model of agency as it has been developed in feminism and elsewhere.[5] But developing an ethnographic critique of the normative

4. I point readers to Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay's (2005: 44–47) discussion of how "*samāj*," was reformulated as "society" in Bengal. Mukhopadhyay comes to this point through an ethnography of miscommunication between himself and contemporary Bengali villagers, turning on different visions of the semantic field and pragmatics of "*samāj*." See also Gyan Prakash (2002) for a "Colonial genealogy of society," in which he analyzes the contrast between "society" and "community" in the making of a specifically colonial governmentality that would render South Asian social institutions as "archaic failures."

5. It is also worth noting earlier critiques that emerge out of British feminism, such as Perveen Adams and Jeff Minson when they criticize celebratory narratives of women's

liberal individualism that sits at the core of many modernizing movements and feminist projects presents anthropology with a particular set of problems.

Many of the alternative models of personhood that previous generations of anthropologists developed to account for the conduct of rural social life in Tamil Nadu were comparativist, but without the reflexive critique of epistemology that Strathern (1988) developed even when she was borrowing the concept of "dividuality" from this very tradition. Ethnosociological analyses largely derived from McKim Marriott's (1990) argument that Indian persons are best made up through transactions of "coded-substances" appear, in retrospect, not too different from Indology that would paint the Indian villager as the mirror opposite of an egalitarian individual insofar as both perspectives are profoundly ahistorical.[6] Since this time, a great deal of work on the contested quality of caste relations and on the effects of violence in molding ethnic identity certainly opened the field to more politicized approaches to the Tamil person (Daniel 1996; Kapadia 1995; Mines 2005; Pandian 2009). Studies of colonial governmentality and its modes of reification have also inspired new approaches to the postcolonial social life of bureaucratic categories of sociality and personhood (Dirks 2001; Scott 1999). Anthropology can no longer point with the same ease to some coherent Tamil "culture" as a means of explaining what are, in fact, overlapping and competing models of sociality and personhood that are already at play in villages, even prior to interventions like the Arivoli Iyakkam.

Although the young women who attended the session described above certainly are, in some meaningful senses, the product of accumulated transactions and of specific relations to kin and to gods, they are equally produced through their intensive engagement with the categories of a governmentality that has sedimented itself in the practices of everyday life in rural Tamil Nadu. We have seen, for example, how the ubiquitous categories of "*camūkam*" through which people speak of social formations, are used in official survey forms that the young women from Tuvarappatti would have been used to filling out or even administering themselves. The use of such terms and ideas to identify people in official contexts must also certainly affect the pragmatic uses of these terms in other contexts.

To continue and move beyond this earlier work, it is helpful to develop ethnographic accounts of the very processes of entextualization that allow categories like "*camūkam*" to circulate and rearticulate with a number of discursive formations, ranging from everyday speech about castes in a village, to government surveys and textbooks, and on to progressive feminist attempts to inculcate a "social perspective" on sex and gender. New values for such concepts are produced at every step of this process, through the very act of recontextualization, which is not to say that concepts are empty or infinitely malleable.[7] To speak of "*camūkam*" as the

liberation for their reliance on "the tradition in which humanity is composed of 'subject' as individuals and upon which society acts" (1978: 44).

6. Valentine Daniel's (1984) semiotic approach to substance and personhood was an early attempt to reorient the ethnosociological paradigm away from earlier obsessions with caste hierarchy and toward a more open-ended theory of culture.

7. Here I draw on a tradition in linguistic anthropology inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin, among others, which has focused our attention to processes of entextualization and

imaginative means by which one can learn to inhabit an enlightened consciousness is certainly different from invocations of this category in explanations for why a young woman should marry one person as opposed to another, for example, even if there is a certain stickiness to the concept such that the latter usage sometimes bleeds into the former. Following Mikhail Bakhtin, we can see how, as it circulates, "each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life" (1981: 293). It is through the very interplay of past contexts of use and new attempts at rearticulation that we can understand the difficult epistemological work of Arivoli Iyakkam's cultural politics. I now turn to investigate the ongoing stickiness and rearticulation of a few other key concepts in the discourses on gender and Tamil culture, concepts that are more closely identified with womanhood itself. In the following cases we will see how it is the very aura of tradition that adheres to the concepts at hand that is attractive to Arivoli activism.

Invoking tradition: The feminization of culture

Here, we can turn briefly to the second, traditionalizing mode of address I would like to note. Among the most ubiquitous concepts associated with Tamil culture that were positively valued and taken up in Arivoli Iyakkam activism was that of feminine power: *Shakti* in Sanskrit, or *Cakti* in Tamil. As in the SUTRA women's organization in northern India described by Kim Berry, symbols of *shakti* had been harnessed to an imagination of national development in the Arivoli Iyakkam to craft what she terms "hybrid feminist discourse" (2003: 87). The greater capacities for self-sacrifice and social service that are attributed to women in particular are, in fact, also connected to this broader concept of feminine power, in a staging of tradition for modernist ends. Let us turn to a particular encounter between an activist and some learners in the movement to see how this staging works in practice.

One evening, early on in my fieldwork, I accompanied Murugan, an older man who worked closely with the literacy movement as a field-worker in the rural development office, to a relatively remote village in the southern part of Pudukkottai District. The reason for our visit was to encourage these groups to start holding literacy lessons at least once a week when they met as a self-help group. On the ride out from town in a government-owned jeep, Murugan explained, "I'm from a village myself, so I understand what works and what doesn't." He told me how his office had been working very closely with the literacy movement in recent years and that members of self-help groups would all need to know how to sign their names in order to secure a loan. They would also need numeracy skills that they could learn through the literacy movement.

On arrival we met with a group of twenty women who had recently formed a self-help group. After introducing himself, Murugan proceeded to introduce me to the group as a researcher from the United States who had learned to speak Tamil.

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the objectification of stretches of discourse (Silverstein and Urban 1996; Bauman and Briggs 1990). But I do so with greater attention to what I think of as the density of key concepts in the narrative of modernity, and in this sense practice a sort of microconcept history also inspired by the work of Reinhart Koselleck (2004).

He told them how he had noticed a few thumbprints in the group's attendance book and that the bank they hoped to secure a loan from would find this unacceptable. They would also all need to learn how to handle money and hence work on their numeracy skills. He then handed the group a stack of literacy primers, with the title "*Shakti*" written in bold on the cover, and told the volunteer to make sure that they start lessons, at which point he invoked the virtues of womanhood:

> Women know how to measure just enough masala and salt to make food taste just right. You know how to draw beautiful *kōlams* [rice flour designs], how to keep your house and gardens clean. Women work harder than men and they save money for family needs. So you can easily learn to read and write. Truly, women's power [*cakti*] is limitless. . . . I came from a very poor family in Ramnad and it was all due to the strength [*cakti*] and toil of my mother, who raised my sisters and me, that I now have a government job. This is why I work for women's equality [*camam*] to men.

In Murugan's speech and actions, we can see many of the major themes that characterize a form of activism that is "hybrid" in several senses. First, the work of literacy activism is tied to that of promoting a microcredit-based development strategy, one aimed more at alleviating poverty through local entrepreneurial initiative than at engendering critiques of structures of economic distribution. The work of enumerating populations and training these women to think in terms of how they could "help themselves," for example, seems like a rather far cry from the sorts of radical politics that motivated the founders of the Tamil Nadu Science Forum. Second, we can see how "working for women's equality to men" entails an invocation of their difference from men, insofar as Murugan argues that "women's power [*cakti*] is limitless," allowing them to work harder than men and to lead a more disciplined domestic life. Here, Murugan draws on a discourse that attempts to fuse aspects of the feminist critique of male dominance with qualities of womanhood that are widely taken to be traditionally Tamil.

The *kōlam* that Murugan had mentioned in his little speech was among the symbols of Tamil women's capacity to maintain domestic discipline and auspiciousness that were often used in Arivoli activism. These rice-flour designs, often complicated, repetitive, and maze-like, can be found in front of the doorway of just about any house in the morning. Women draw *kōlams* every day at the crack of dawn. Through the course of the day they disappear as people walk in and out of the house. *Kōlams* are not particularly sacred, although they might be drawn in front of offerings to deities for worship on certain ritual occasions. On collective festive occasions such as the village temple festival, and in the Tamil month of *mārkaḻi* (Dec./Jan.), women often draw more elaborate designs that include bright colors. Insofar as they are not drawn if there has been a recent death in the household or some other *tīṭṭu* (pollution), these quotidian products of embodied, feminine craft can be interpreted as signs of domestic auspiciousness and of the power of women to maintain auspiciousness.

Groups of women would be recruited to draw *kōlams* for any literacy movement event or even for special Arivoli celebration of public holidays like Deepavali or Independence Day. However, Arivoli *kōlams* operated a little differently than their quotidian models. An everyday skill that is usually taken for granted as "what women do," was revalorized by virtue of being tied both to a celebration of Tamil

culture as well as to the end of proclaiming women's capacity to participate in development through self-help groups and literacy lessons. The *kōlam* pictured below is typical of Arivoli *kōlams* in its incorporation of the National Literacy Mission's emblem around the edges, bringing the state home, as it were. The Tamil text below the design—also made from rice flour—reads, "Arivoli House." At the center of the *kōlam* are two women.

Figure 1: A *kōlam*. The text below reads "Arivoli House."

The medium of the *kōlam* itself and the mode of life it is connected to are an important part of the message. Part of the performative power of Arivoli *kōlams* is derived from the very use of a quintessentially traditional and feminine everyday craft of domesticity to deliver a universalizing Enlightenment and liberation, celebrating the coexistence of dual temporalities and the palpable tension thereby produced in a distinctly modernizing mode. Consider the following lines of a song sung at many Arivoli Iyakkam mobilization functions: *kōlam pōtum kaikaḷukku āṉā pōṭuvatu kaśṭamā?* (Do the hands that draw a *kōlam* find the letter "A" difficult?).

Using an argument very close to that Murugan had been using with the self-help group, the song both proclaims difference (the verse aimed at men is about tractors) while arguing that it is *through* their embodied cultural skills that women can be incorporated into the world of literacy and into the Arivoli movement. In their attempts to localize the drive for women's empowerment, activists were aligning ideas about tradition and womanhood in a modernizing fashion familiar from studies of nationalism (Chatterjee 1989; Sarkar 2008). Drawing on the texts of anti-colonial nationalism in Tamil Nadu, especially Subramaniam Bharathi's early twentieth-century nationalist devotional poetry, Arivoli activists often invoked women's "*cakti*" as a resource in building a modern India.[8]

8. Activists frequently sang Bharathi's songs of praise to *tamiḻttāy* (Mother Tamil) and *pārata mātā* (Mother India) at Arivoli Iyakkam meetings. Bharathi was both an Indian

So far, the ethnographic sketches I have shared illustrate two familiar ways of figuring the subaltern woman as agent. In the previous section on learning gender she is figured, as in many varieties of developmentalist thought, as an autonomous subject-in-waiting. In this second section, the subaltern woman is the embodied bearer of traditional culture, a figure that is more familiar from anticolonial thought, but one that is increasingly recognized within the frame of late liberalism. But like many who study similar programs and movements, I found that these varieties of hailing the women who were the so-called targets of mobilization to be less than compelling for everyone involved. I was still left with the question why women participated in the first place.

Binding relations: Responses to a call

A better entry point into this question only began to emerge for me when reflecting on an encounter I had with a group participating in the Arivoli Iyakkam just five kilometers down the road from where I was living. This group had begun as a self-help group and had already received a loan to start a small business even though not all of them knew how to read and write. By this, the second visit I had made to meet with the group, they had all learned how to sign their names. When I asked them why they joined the literacy program, which appeared to them and in retrospect to me as a stupid question, no one responded.

It was only when I asked one of the more talkative members, whom I will call Cintamani, about her education prior to joining the literacy group that she gave me a sense of why she had joined. She had gone to school for a couple of years as a child, but said that she had forgotten everything since then.

C: Then once I joined the group, so Arivoli came right? So then, OK, it became important to sign my name (*ceri kaiyeḻuttu pōṭa vēṇṭiya vanticcu*). Before that, our signature was useless.
F: So you wouldn't sign before?
C: We would sign (*pōṭuvōm*)! What would we sign for (*etukku pōṭa pōṟōm*)? Who would *call* us to sign our names (*nammaḷai yār kaiyeḻuttu pōṭa kūppiṭuṟāka*)? After we joined the group, only then we learned how to sign well. After Arivoli came (*atukku piṟpāṭu aṟivoḷi vanticcu*) I read and write a certain amount.

For Cintamani, it was the "call" to sign her name that seems to have motivated her sense of the importance of joining the movement. She explains her need to sign and her own actions as a response to this call. She has thus given us a sense of how a context has been created in which more and more women feel the need to learn how to sign their names, if not necessarily to become fully literate. But Cintamani was also telling me something more.

No one had ever bothered to call these women before in this fashion, and it was the call itself that seemed to matter to her. The Tamil verb that Cintamani had

nationalist and a devotee of the Tamil language itself, as embodied in the feminized character of *tamiḻttāy* (Ramaswamy 1997: 194–204).

used, "*kūppiṭu*," which I have provisionally translated as "call," could just as well be translated as "invite." It is the word that one would employ when inviting a guest to a wedding, for example, or when a woman is "called" by her natal family to return home for a festival. To "*kūppiṭu*" someone in this fashion is actually to put them in a position of obligation.[9] It can be done effectively by someone of relative social proximity, like Neela, who had "called" or "invited" this group to come to sign their names so that they could open an account. Neela was probably more successful with this group than Murugan had been with the group described above, for example. Neela lived nearby and she had been working with this group for over a year. Cintamani and her fellow group members had taken it as their duty to respond to her invitation (in addition to economic incentives).[10] In describing the invitation to join a self-help and literacy group and to sign her name in this fashion, Cintamani was in fact drawing on a language of reciprocity common to other domains of life.

As I talked to Cintamani and the other learners in L. N. Puram more that evening, they repeatedly spoke of a "*kaṭṭāyam*," a responsibility or obligation—literally, a "tying"—binding them in a relationship to the bank and to the literacy movement.[11] For example, another group member said, "We have a *kaṭṭāyam* to put our signatures and to deposit (*kaṭṭu*) money at the bank." The bank would give them loans and the literacy movement would give them primers and training. It was their responsibility to reply; they would sign their names, return money, and so fulfill the obligations of a relationship. Just as a woman is "tied" (*kaṭṭu*) to her husband and his family in marriage, these women had entered into an unequal relationship of exchange. The very same verb, *kaṭṭu*, to bind or tie, is used to refer to the acts of depositing money (*paṇam kaṭṟatu*) and to be given in marriage (*kaṭṭikkoṭukkiṟatu*). These are both relationships of mutual obligation. Writing about "mutuality" in the caste-based division of labor in a Tamil village, Diane Mines describes lower-caste families as "'attached' or 'tied' (*kaṭṭu*) to certain [upper-caste] families" such that they have certain "responsibilities (*kaṭṭāyam* or *poruppu*) to those families or to the ūr [village] as a whole" (2005: 64).[12] This model of mutual or reciprocal responsibility contrasts with other modes of exchange, such as "*tāṉam*" (from the Sanskrit *dān*), through which faults or inauspiciousness can be transferred to service castes (Mines 2005: 68–69; Parry 1994; Raheja 1988).[13]

9. "Just as a courtesy has to be returned, so must an invitation" (Mauss [1954] 2011: 63).

10. I do not want to ignore economic incentives, but I want emphasize that such incentives are interpreted through values that are not reducible to economic interest alone.

11. It is worth remembering in this context that the Latin etymology of "obligation" also carries with it a sense of binding, or being tied to. I thank one of my anonymous reviews for this observation.

12. Diane Mines is here using the concept of mutuality as first elaborated by Raheja (1988: 203–48) in her study of prestations and social dominance in a North Indian village.

13. Examples of *tāṉam* in Tamil villages and elsewhere also include gifts made to Brahman priests on completion of rituals associated with death. Brahman priests have a larger capacity to "eat" the inauspiciousness of such gifts than other people (Mines 2005: 69–71; see also Parry 1994).

The women who had gathered for literacy class that evening had used this very language of unequal but intimate reciprocity, which is by no means limited to talk about caste or marriage, to talk about how they now had a "*kaṭṭāyam*" to sign their names, to pay (*kaṭṭu*) money into the collective account, and to attend literacy class. Other such responsibilities that would be called *kaṭṭāyam* might include fulfilling your community duties by performing certain rituals at a temple festival, or fulfilling your wifely duties to your husband and his family, for example. Any labor that must be done in response to such a call might be called a "*kaṭṭāyam*." To break a *kaṭṭāyam* is to sever a relationship, such as when Dalits refuse to play their ritual role in temple festivals (a common mode of protest in Tamil Nadu). While not socially equal in any respect, these types of reciprocal relationships do not emphasize absolute subordination or the transfer of negative qualities as a *tāṉam* might (Mines 2005: 79, 99). The *kaṭṭāyam* is nevertheless quite different from the sort of agency exercised by a sovereign subject such as that imagined in the gender-awareness session that Neela had led among the younger and more highly educated women of Tuvarapatti.

Cintamani and her fellow group members had talked about writing their signatures on an official form using this language of unequal but reciprocal binding, and I would argue that women feel the sense of obligation or responsibility to respond more than men. Men somehow did not feel bound to respond in the same way when called, especially in a world where a certain "bullish" resistance to authority is so highly prized (Pandian 2009). While men certainly feel a sense of *kaṭṭāyam* in numerous contexts, they had not responded to Arivoli's calls to participate out of a sense of *kaṭṭāyam*. When I asked activists about why men had been difficult to mobilize as learners, they would often respond by telling me that men have "ego" or "head weight" (*talai kaṉam*), meaning that their sense of self-importance is stronger than that of women and that they are less likely to listen to others. Experienced activists would often remark that there was something about the very newness of the public events carried out in the Arivoli Iyakkam that women responded to in a way that men did not. The L. N. Puram self-help group found the fact of being directly addressed as members of a group and not as someone's wife or mother quite significant; they had been socialized to respond to an invitation, but never invited to sign their names. Women also probably had more to gain in terms of social power by responding, but the sense of responsiveness at the root of mobilization seems to me to resist interpretations that would focus either on rational self-interest or appeals to traditional values. What is at stake here is a broader ethic of exchange and responsiveness, a kind of "ordinary ethics" that might well be tacit and immanent to the types of address used to bind people in a social space (Lambek 2010). Nor does the idiom of "docility" capture what was happing in the Arivoli Iyakkam. Much of the Arivoli Iyakkam was really about occupying public space in response to a call from trusted activists, illustrating the degree to which social-movement politics work through both ethical and affective connections (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001; Staiger, Cvetkovich, and Reynolds 2010). Neela had become a "big sister" to the women of L. N. Puram and was not to be ignored when she asked them to hold lessons and to sign their names.

Reflections on reciprocal agency

Mobilization through reciprocity is not limited to the Arivoli Iyakkam or to the other broadly Left NGO movements that proliferated in India's neoliberal political environment. Similar recruiting techniques lie at the core of the Maoist movements of central India and Nepal (Shah 2013; Leve 2007). Hindu nationalist efforts to spread beyond their upper caste-urban core constituencies to attract the rural and disadvantaged have relied heavily on a sense of obligation produced through the provision of education and welfare (Thachil 2014). But in the Arivoli Iyakkam, reflexive activists began to see what they once thought of as mobilizing *means* to create social change in the image of a socialist society in terms of *ends*. The movement came to be about mobilization itself more than literacy, socialism, or even women's emancipation, and I think this part of what made the Arivoli Iyakkam rather particular. Even when calling people to work for the betterment of abstractions like "society," or when encouraging women to draw an Arivoli *kōlam*, volunteers had begun to realize that women were, in some deep sense, responding to them primarily as fictive kin, and not necessarily as representatives of a social movement or government program.[14] Such recognition on behalf of activists in the movement came relatively late, and never expressed itself fully in an explicit pedagogy, apart from the broadly Freirean refrain often found in movement literature that we will "both teach and learn" from each other.

Tamilcelvan was a leader in the movement as well as being an important Marxist literary figure, and he is among those intellectuals who had come to understand how his activism worked more through such direct personal relationships than through any explicit ideology. After years of trying to make villagers feel that they were lacking some essential qualities necessary for modern citizenship, he started to become much more critical of his assumptions about why people should join the Arivoli movement as learners. Such an understanding, he explains in his memoirs, could only come when he had begun to question his own presuppositions about personhood and social action by learning from those he sought to mobilize.

> It was only through visiting again and again and developing intimacy with villagers that I understood: they joined Arivoli without a single guilty feeling in their hearts. They came to study only because our Arivoli volunteers came day after day to call on them, and our Arivoli volunteers themselves had become children of the village (ūr). It was only after a very long time that we understood that people were coming to lessons, out of the kindness of their hearts, to help *us*. (Tamilcelvan 2004: 24–25; my translation)

The guilt Tamilcelvan had expected village women to feel for not being literate in a world that demands the individuation of reading and writing skills is turned back upon himself again and again in his memoirs as he explains how he was remade as a person and a writer through this activism. We can see in the passage above that the help being given is to the activists themselves, and not from some "self" that exists

14. It is worth noting Constantine Nakassis' (2014) recent work on the power of fictive kinship terms to create new social relations in liminal contexts in Tamil-speaking South India.

prior to the relationship that had developed through repeated calling in this fashion. Nor was this sense of duty based on any so-called traditional community or culture. The subjects of the Arivoli Iyakkam's activism emerged, as such, through reciprocity.

Interpellation, here, does not come from a nameless policeman embodying state authority, but from a young volunteer who has become the "child of the village," or from an "older sister" like Neela. Where does this leave the question of agency if women felt compelled or obliged to respond to calls from activists they come to know intimately as kin? Their participation in the Arivoli Iyakkam in response to activists was certainly agentive insofar as it cannot be understood through the lens of social physics, as the mere effect of a prior moving cause.[15] There was always a possibility of doing otherwise, a possibility that was indeed realized by some who refused to participate.[16] Learners' participation in the literacy movement was also agentive to the extent that they forged new social relationships both among themselves as well as with activists and even government officials. What is needed to understand this form of action, however, a conception of agency that is decidedly distributed, nonsovereign, and even born of gendered relations of subordination. This is an understanding of agency that has already been sketched by theorists of gender, notably in the ethnographic register by Strathern (1988) and Mahmood (2005), and in philosophy by Judith Butler (1997, 2010) in her idea of "performative agency." What I hope to have added to the discussion is an ethnographic theorization of the centrality of reciprocity, a specific form of relationality, to the emergence of this variety of what might be called "coperformative" agency in the context of social movement politics.[17] It is critical to understand that the reciprocity involved in this type of mobilization presupposes no prior sense of equality and, in fact, relies on social institutions of hierarchy, even if it ended up acting as the primary engine of what was certainly a profoundly democratizing moment in the Tamil countryside.

The Arivoli Iyakkam was a political project that worked through targeted categories of population in the name of enlightened "civil society." But it took on dimensions that could be reduced neither to the formal logic of governmentality, nor to the ideology of neo- or late- liberalism, nor to the high modernist Left politics that most its activists espoused. In a sense, this looks like Chatterjee's political society insofar as "the categories of governmentality were being invested with the imaginative qualities of community, including its capacity to invent relations of kinship" (2004: 60). We can interpret the movement in these terms only if we push against

15. Which should not imply that women do not exert agency in their immediate social world apart from participation in social movements. Participation in the Arivoli Iyakkam was, however, interpreted by most as a substantive break with previous experience.

16. Refusal might be thought of as a paradigmatic modality of agency in the existentialist tradition, for example, but in this context not participating in the literacy movement would more often be understood as having adhered more closely to traditional gender roles limiting women's capacity to act politically in public.

17. The idea of "coperformative" agency was generously suggested by one of the anonymous reviewers of this manuscript.

the tendency to understand community primarily as a collective inheritance and focus instead on the element of invention that Chatterjee mentions but never elaborates. This requires a corollary shift from thinking about Maussian reciprocity away from its association with simple social reproduction and integration toward an analysis of emergent political action.[18] This reading of reciprocity at the heart of mobilization allows for an understanding that goes beyond narratives resting on preexisting vocabularies of community that enter into contact with new fields of statecraft or governmentality (as in some versions of postcolonial thought), or as a simple harkening back to older socialist politics (as in Left nostalgic thought). To read mobilization this way is to perform a principled ethnographic refusal to separate political practices or agency into modern and nonmodern parts, or to read social action as either reproductive or relations of domination or resistant to them. In the case of the Arivoli Iyakkam, we can see that a language of binding reciprocity and fictive kinship was not simply reproducing social relationships and institutions, rather this language was being reanimated in the performative conjuring of a wholly new set of social contexts.

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18. Of course, Mauss does turn to the question of contemporary politics in the concluding chapter of the *The gift* ([1954] 2011: 63–81), apart from questions of total social reproduction. He does so, especially in the final sentence of the essay, from the perspective of a "conscious direction" of society and common life in what one can assume was a form of socialism, precisely what the Arivoli Iyakkam failed to achieve through its nevertheless transformative mobilization.

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L'obligation d'agir: Genre et réciprocité dans la mobilisation politique

Résumé : Cet article s'appuie sur un travail ethnographique réalisé en Inde du Sud sur un mouvement d'alphabétisation de masse et propose une hypothèse quant au rôle de l'obligation dans la mobilisation politique des sujets marginalisés. Il cherche en particulier à comprendre les recours à la langue dans un mouvement d'alphabétisation qui finit par être plus connu comme étant un mouvement de femmes que pour la transmission de l'alphabétisation à laquelle il était dédié. L'article examine d'abord deux modes d'adresse fréquents dans le type d'activisme que j'ai étudié, l'un présupposant une auto-affirmation moderniste au nom de la société, et l'autre invoquant la culture comme une ressource moteur. L'article se tourne alors vers un troisième type, fondé sur la réciprocité, qui est sous-développé dans la pensée sur l'*agency* dans la politique contemporaine, et dont l'analyse pourrait nous aider à éviter la logique de la gouvernementalité libérale tardive dans nos travaux ethnographiques.

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