

Wearing the Shikha: Guruization and Sanskritization in a Transnational Guyanese Hindu Community

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1. The Kali *koiloo* in Guyana

In 2016 a small but neat and elaborate, octagonal building was constructed on the premises of a Kali *koiloo* (temple) in Berbice, eastern Guyana. Its location in the proximity of the gated entrance and its bright orange and peach colors ensure that every visitor and attendee of a regular Sunday service must take note of it and pays some kind of attention: while some people specifically approach and honor the building, others at least have to glimpse at it while walking towards the main area of the premise, where various small temple buildings house a variety of Hindu deities. The building consists of white-framed glass windows, stone walls and a pointed roof, standing on a raised, tiled floor with two stairs leading up to the swinging glass door, usually opened on service days and granting view of the life-sized statue of Ramkissoon Sahadeo¹. The statue, standing on a low pedestal, depicts the recently deceased head *pujari* (ritual practitioner) of the Kali *koiloo* with his hands folded to the namaste greeting. He is adorned with *malas* (flower garlands), his walking stick rests at his side, his original glasses have been placed on his nose, and he is depicted as wearing the Madrassi uniform: a *dhoti* (waistband) and t-shirt. Hidden from view at first, but visible when one approaches the doorway, is a remembrance plate donated by one of his daughters, who has been living with him in the US. The plate is engraved with some details of his biography deemed relevant to claim *guru* (spiritual leader and guide) status, as discussed in this article, as well as a small color photograph portraying him as a young man.

Ramkissoon Sahadeo, born in 1943 and deceased in 2016, was trained early to become a ritual practitioner in the Madras tradition, also referred to as Kali-Mai Puja, in rural Berbice. His community proudly emphasizes that

1 All names have been changed to ensure my informants' anonymity.

it was due to Ramkissoon that “the worshipping of the Mother”—Mother or Mai referring to the main deity Kali—has spread to foreign regions such as Trinidad, where he lived from 1977 for several years, and New York City, where he lived from 1996. He is also said to have established other affiliated temples in Florida, Canada, and the United Kingdom. As I discuss in detail elsewhere (Kloß 2016), Ramkissoon’s and his family’s migration to the US has enabled the development of a transnational religious community, in which contact between the members of the affiliated temples is maintained via communication, material exchange practices, and visits. The sending of monetary remittances has further enabled the constant “improvement” of the temple buildings, infrastructure, and *murtis* (representations and manifestations of Hindu deities).

According to my argument in this essay, in the past decade there have been tendencies to position Ramkissoon and previous head pujaris as gurus. His son and successor Raj as well as other members of the community are now engaging in what may be labeled as a process of guruization. This process needs to be regarded in the wider context of standardization processes that have been prevalent in the Madras tradition at least since the 1970s and that are a means of facilitating respectability to this otherwise marginalized and stigmatized religious tradition and its adherents. I emphasize, amongst other things, the role of dress as part of the guruization process, as the result of my anthropological fieldwork in Guyana, New York City, and in social media between 2011 and 2017.

2. The Making of a Guru

The statue of Ramkissoon is placed in the premises of his “home” temple in Guyana, to where he returned and conducted the Big Puja each year, the major annual three-day celebration. On these occasions Ramkissoon—a humble man from the rural Guyanese working-class community—started to be addressed as “our guru” in presence or absence, particularly by his son and residing head pujari Raj. I had met Ramkissoon a couple of times in his home temple in Guyana and also had a chance to engage him in informal interviews during my doctoral research in his temple in New York in 2012. Following the development of these affiliated temples and being friends with some of his children and grandchildren on social media, I learned of his death in New York through photographs and words of farewell posted

on Facebook in 2016. Ramkissoon's immediate family members received hundreds of condolences and comments as reaction to his death from the various members of the transnational network that this religious community has developed into since the 1990s. To ensure that everybody could follow the funeral of Ramkissoon, which would take place in Guyana, sequences of his body's transfer from New York to Guyana as well as the funerary rites, including the gathering of the community at his family's house in Berbice, were filmed and streamed live via Facebook to an interested, semi-public audience. While this unprecedented streaming and the digitization of a pujari's funeral already bore an air of iconization and status enhancement, photographs of the life-size statue in the Kali koiloo posted a few weeks later, confirmed what I interpret to be a process of guruization within the religious community².

Guru is a Sanskrit term that refers to a spiritual teacher or charismatic leader. A guru may be understood to be a divine manifestation or embodiment of god (Narayanan 2004), a channel of the divine (Babb 1989: 65), or an "elevated being" (Gold 2005: 219). A guru has the capacity to see beyond the phenomenal illusion which humans regard as "reality" and continuously experiences "the real", conceptualized to be *brahman*, "the subtle, sacred essence that pervades the universe" (Pechilis 2004: 4f). A guru may enable and assist others in experiencing the real for "spiritual advancement, total self-realization, or evolution as a human being" (ibid.). He or she assists in reaching awareness and liberation from *samsara*, the circle of reincarnation, and to thus achieve immortality (Forsthoeftel and Humes 2005: 1). Beyond his transformative power and on a formal level, a guru is a representative of a specific religious tradition (Pechilis 2004: 26).

Guru-centered Hindu traditions are becoming increasingly popular in South Asia, Europe, and North America and exert a growing influence over practices and social structures of the Guyanese Hindu diaspora in the US. Through practices of transnational exchange these transformations are also noticeable in Guyana. Here, guru movements such as the International

2 Maya Warrior discusses for the context of guru-centered traditions in North America: "Devotees and disciples of *gurus* increasingly express their *guru*-devotion through these media, performing for instance, cyber-*bhakti* and cyber-*seva* to the *guru* in multiple ways and participating (across vast geographical distances) in a plethora of *guru*-centered rituals and festivals that become instantly accessible in virtual time and space" (2012: 170).

Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)—often referred to as “Hari Bol” or the “Hare Krishna Movement” in Euro-American contexts—is attracting an increasing number of followers since the 1990s³. The first ISKCON temple was opened in 1976 near the capital Georgetown (<<http://news.iskcon.org>>; Last visit: November 19, 2013), and today ISKCON owns four centers along the eastern coastline of Guyana (<<http://centres.iskcon.org/centre-region/guyana/>>; Last visit: July 16, 2018). Although still claiming a rather marginal position in contemporary Guyana, male ISKCON members can be distinguished visibly through their particular dress customs, especially by wearing the hair style of *shikha*, a lock or tuft of hair on the back of an otherwise shaven head. Shikhas are a traditional hair style of Hindu men, but today are worn primarily among Hindu temple priests and Brahmins in South Asia. In Guyana, they have been associated only with ISKCON until recently. However, upon a return visit to the Kali koiloo of the late Pujari Ramkissoon in September 2017, I met my acquaintance and informant Raj, Ramkissoon’s son and successor as head pujari, wearing a shikha. I met him within the temple premises during a regular Sunday service, which I attended regularly during my long-term fieldwork (Kloß 2016). I had witnessed over the years how Raj’s dress became increasingly “elaborate”—a term Guyanese people use to express a high level of refinement and ornamentation. Bearing signs of conspicuous consumption at first, his dress has changed from the standard dhoti, waistband, and t-shirt, which all male pujaris and ritual practitioners (continue to) wear, to for example “elaborate” *kurtas* (upper garments for men). In 2017, standing in front of the gathered audience to deliver his sermon, he was donned in a white cotton shirt, a white but embroidered dhoti, a *madraskerchief* (checkered waistband), a folded scarf laid over his right shoulder, one bangle around each wrist, a *japa mala* (string of prayer beads) around his neck, and the shikha hair style. His dress and overall appearance reminded me immediately of orthodox Hindu pandits and seemed to be an eclectic mix of various (Hindu) styles. His choice of dress reflected his family’s general practices of claiming Ramkissoon’s guru-hood. These included the construction and importation of his father’s statue from India, the repeated reference to him as “our guru,” and other honoring practices such as hanging his photograph on the wall of the main altar, aligned in height

3 The Sai Baba Movement, as has been documented for Trinidad and Tobago, did not have a major or long-lasting influence in Guyana (Klass 1991).

with the photograph of the previous “guru” and pujari Jamsie Naidoo⁴. His sartorial practices, I argue, are part of a general tendency to guruize (previous) leaders of the Madras tradition. As a consequence, Raj is also able to claim the status of being the tradition’s next guru. Emphasizing the guru-hood of his deceased father, Raj may claim and consolidate his own guru-hood as a kind of lineage guru (Copeman and Ikegame 2012; Gold 2012; Lucia 2014).

This becomes particularly relevant in the contested religious environment of Guyana, in which Hinduism has always been a minority religion and in which the Madras tradition has been doubly marginalized due to its stigmatization within Guyanese society as well as within the Hindu community⁵. There exist various strands of Hindu traditions in Guyana: the Sanatan, Madras, and Arya Samaj traditions, as well as the ISKCON movement. The Guyanese Hindu community thus cannot be perceived as a homogeneous group, and, as I argue elsewhere, members of the Sanatan tradition have consolidated their practices and beliefs as the ‘Great’ or Sanskritic Hindu tradition over the course of the twentieth century (Kloß 2016, 2017a). This consolidation of the Sanatan tradition was influenced by the various socio-historical contexts including the dominance of Christianity exercised by the majority population (Younger 2009). Efforts of proselytization during colonialism, after independence, and in contemporary society have significantly influenced the standardization processes, necessary to create and maintain a unified Hindu identity. Additionally, the Hindu reform movement Arya Samaj has played a significant role in these processes at the beginning of the twentieth century and, as Steven Vertovec proposes, has been “the chief catalyst for the institutionalization of a unitary, standardised Brahmanic Hinduism” (Vertovec 1994: 136). Specific rituals and deities were defined as “inappropriate” and were excluded from mainstream Hinduism, such as healing rituals (including the manifestation of deities), fire walking, and animal sacrifice. Various practitioners continued to conduct these “inappropriate” practices however, which have consolidated into a range of practices that have become known as the “Madras

4 Elsewhere I discuss how Jamsie Naidoo and the alleged ancestral homeland of the tradition, Tamil Nadu, have become inflated. My informants reveal this when they (unconsciously) refer to the state in India as Tamil Naidoo (Kloß 2016).

5 Hindus remain a minority in Guyana with 24.8 per cent in 2012. 63.9 per cent of the population is Christian and 6.8 per cent is Muslim (Bureau of Statistics 2012).

tradition” or Kali-Mai Puja over the course of the twentieth century⁶. Keith McNeal confirms that

from a society-wide historical perspective, Kali puja has gone from being an openly practiced ritual performance observed on behalf of entire communities to a marginalized, somewhat clandestine therapeutic ritual carried out weekly on behalf of individuals and families in peripheral temples dedicated primarily to Kali and her most important spiritual associates. (McNeal 2005: 224)

In this context, it is necessary to highlight that historically and in contemporary Guyana Christian groups have formed and form the core constitutive others for Hindus. On the micro level of social organization and within the Hindu community, the Sanatan and Madras traditions are constituted through differentiation. They are constructed in opposition to each other and are based on othering processes (Kloß 2017a). Part of the othering discourse is the conceptualization of the Madras tradition as a “South Indian” and the Sanatan tradition as a “North Indian” tradition. My informants consider the North Indian Sanatan traditions to have been imported by indentured laborers leaving the port of Kolkata, and oppose this to the South Indian traditions, allegedly imported through indentured laborers leaving via Chennai, then Madras.

3. Respectability through Sanskritization

Madrassi practices continue to be devalued and stigmatized as “uncivilized” and “uneducated” within the general population. In informal conversations, most Guyanese openly dismiss Madrassi practices and caution anyone to “not visit” these “dangerous” places. They explain the existence of these practices as based on a lack of knowledge and education among the—supposedly—working class population who attends and engages in these “kinds of” practices. Madrassi rituals are denoted as superstitious and *Obeah* (“black magic”), hence do not meet the criteria necessary to be labeled a

6 Practices of Kali worship can be found in contemporary India as well, however it goes beyond the scope of this essay to discuss its local status and development there, which may differ due to different socio-historic developments and contexts. It should be noticed that Guyanese Madrassis associate Kali with the deity Mariyamman, who is part of popular practices and pantheon in Tamil Nadu.

“respectable” religion, such as Christian traditions or the orthodox Sanatan tradition. Respectability is a standard and concept on the basis of which society is stratified in Guyana and in the wider Anglophone Caribbean. Respectability is represented and performatively created through for example education, religion, or dress. It is based on concepts of morality, strongly influenced by Christian English standards, and is often considered to be a colonial legacy (Wilson 1969, 1973; Stoler 1989). Peter J. Wilson proposes for the Caribbean context that “respectability is a value derived from conformity to the ideals of the total society or the legal society” as represented by marriage and the Christian church (Wilson 1969: 78) and that “[t]he closer one comes to the definitions of the church the more completely one is respectable” (Wilson 1973: 103).

In British Guiana, non-Christians were denied access to high status positions and to achieve upward social mobility due to aspects such as race and a supposed lack of respectability. However, Guyanese Hindus have challenged this definition of respectability and have conceived of alternative respectable standards, according to which Hindu morality is considered to be on a higher level (Kloß 2016). In this context and to challenge the Christian-dominated notion of respectability, Guyanese Hindus have been engaged in highlighting the “ancient” and “civilized” past of Indian culture and Hindu religion and have been standardizing contemporary practices and the canon of Hindu deities. This process of standardization included, as mentioned before, the exclusion of elements that were labelled “uncivilized” in the colonial Christian society. This process of exclusion, standardization, and hence the institutionalization of the Sanatan tradition have been discussed in terms of Brahmanization in the Caribbean. For example, Cors van der Burg and Peter van der Veer describe for the Surinamese context that the “Surinamese Brahmins have made Surinamese Hinduism brahmanical by purifying it from unacceptable aspects as for example the offering of cattle to ‘illness deities’” (1986: 517). Also, Steven Vertovec attests to the process of ‘Brahmanisation’, “whereby throughout the Hindu community a corpus of Brahmanic ritual directed toward Sanskritic gods—became a characteristic process marking Caribbean Hinduism” (1994: 135). This process has been discussed in terms of Sanskritization for the Indian context, in which it refers to the process of a “low” Hindu caste adapting its customs and way of life to those of a higher caste in order to achieve upward mobility and a higher status position in caste hierarchy (Srinivas 1966). Sanskritization processes furthermore include,

for instance, the adoption of “vegetarianism, teetotal rules, and the deities, rites, and myths of ‘Sanskritic Hinduism’ as defined in Sanskrit literature and philosophy and as practiced by Brahmins” (Singer 1972: 260). As no caste system has been implemented in the Caribbean, only caste identities prevail⁷. Van der Burg and van der Veer however conclude that, “[f]rom our perspective it is better to call this a process of *brahmanization* [not *sanskritization*], since this term emphasizes the growing power of Brahmins” (1986: 517)⁸. A Sanskrit tradition is characterized by containing a “body of sacred scriptures and texts”, a “class of literati who have authority to read and interpret the sacred scriptures”, “[l]eading personalities, (...) who convey their vision of the Great Tradition to the masses of the people”, a “‘sacred geography’ of holy places” and a “‘sacred calendar’ of rites and ceremonies marking the important occasions of the individual life cycle and of the seasons” (Singer 1972: 56).

These characteristics can be found in the standardized Sanatan tradition of contemporary Guyana. However, members of the Madras tradition also actively engage in promoting and standardizing their practices and beliefs by implementing these criteria. Ritual practitioners and lay devotees seek to raise the status of their tradition to challenge the persistent stigmatization and inferiorization by creating a Madrassi orthodoxy and by emphasizing the tradition’s South Indian origin. Madrassi standardization practices have become particularly noticeable from the 1970s during a revitalization phase that occurred under the leadership of Pujari Jamsie Naidoo, introduced earlier in this essay (see note 4), who has become the pujari whom most of my Madrassi informants refer to as guru⁹.

7 Guyanese Hindus sometimes refer to the concept of ‘nation’ in terms of caste identity, which indicates caste-like social groups. ‘Nation’ has never had the same structuring and restricting impacts compared to the caste system in e.g. India however. For a detailed discussion of ‘nation’ see Kloß 2016, pp. 265f. For elaborations of caste in Guyana see, for example, Smith and Jayawardena 1967.

8 For detailed analyses of the development of caste in the Caribbean see for example Singer 1967; Smith and Jayawardena 1967; Speckmann 1967; Vertovec 1992.

9 There have been various phases of Madrassi revitalization, especially during the 1920s, 1960s and 1970s (Vertovec 1994; Kloß 2016). These phases were influenced by the various socio-historic conditions that caused a need for group solidarity, for example, during the rise of Forbes Burnham’s authoritarian rule and the related economic crisis of the 1970s.

One characteristic of Madrassi standardization is the expansion of temple infrastructure. While at the beginning of the twentieth century Kali-Mai Pujas had been conducted as an annual ritual in temporary sites and places of worship, several permanent concrete temples with small *mandirs* (temple buildings) have been built in the outdoor premises and are continuously improved in contemporary Guyana¹⁰. If funding is available—usually donated by members of the diaspora in North America—, these structures are often rebuilt and repainted, usually with an increase in size. A similar increase in size and “elaborateness” can be noticed among the murtis of deities, housed inside these structures. Besides signaling divine grandness, this emphasis on large, concrete buildings reinstates the community’s respectability, for there exists an understanding that a respectable religious tradition has to own permanent churches and buildings. As I discuss elsewhere, this link between physical infrastructure and respectability is not exclusive to the Madras tradition, but has been documented also as a reason for the building of Christian mission churches (Dunn 1971; Kloß 2017a). In the various Hindu communities in which I conducted research, the community’s status is enhanced through continued improvement and beautification of temples. This is neither surprising nor specific to this context and community but can be understood as a general process of conspicuous consumption. The display of elaborate murtis and buildings is not only a means of distinction and creating social, economic, and cultural capital (Bourdieu 2010), but is also a sign of ritual efficacy, blessing, and the benevolence of deities towards the ritual practitioners and the specific community.

Besides expanding temple infrastructure and adapting to a weekly schedule, the relevance and discovery of Tamil scripture such as the *Mariyamman Thalattu* from South India as basis and foundation of the tradition is increasingly emphasized (Kloß 2017a). Religious scripture generally serves as a source of legitimacy and basis for standardization in Guyanese Hinduism. Ancient Sanskrit scripture, for example, emphasizes the old age and greater sophistication of Hindu-Indian culture in comparison to Christian culture. Madrassis, in a similar vein, highlight their foundational scripture to emphasize their tradition’s authenticity and respectability in relation to Christians and Sanatan Hindus. By proposing one’s tradition as ancient and authentically (South) Indian, Madrassi ritual practitioners

10 In the North American diaspora, the temple is usually turned into an indoor temple due to the different climatic conditions (Kloß 2016).

challenge their alleged inferiority and seek to contest the established standard of Hindu respectability in Guyana.

Yet another element necessary in establishing an orthodoxy, as discussed earlier, is the necessity of “[l]eading personalities” (Singer 1972: 56). As already indicated, during regular Sunday services both living and deceased pujaris are increasingly addressed as gurus, who are sources of authority and charismatic leaders of the community. It could be considered self-evident that these leaders represent the “Brahmans” of the tradition, similar to the role of pandits in the Sanatan tradition, who have “monopolized the sacred knowledge of rituals and Sanskrit texts” (van der Burg and van der Veer 1986: 517) and the tradition is in itself undergoing a process of brahmanization. Particularly when the appropriation and transformation of the head pujari’s dress are taken into consideration, a brahmanization of his appearance seems obvious. Pujari Raj’s dress—his emphasis on (embroidered) white cotton cloth, his dhoti, the prominent *tilak* (colored, temporary marks) on his forehead and the japa mala (necklace of prayer beads) around his neck—seems familiar from contemporary sartorial practices of Guyanese Sanatan pandits. Can we thus speak of a brahmanization of Kali Puja and the Madras tradition? In my opinion, although these transformations seem to be indicative of brahmanization, it is more useful to discuss the development of the Madras tradition in terms of guruization.

4. Guruization and Sartorial Appropriation

The emergence of guru-centered traditions in Guyana through the establishment of ISKCON centers, the visibility of Hindu guru movements in social media, as well as the growing influence of guru movements in North America, where the vast majority of diasporic Guyanese Madrassis live today, have evidently had an impact on the Madras tradition. The transformation of the head pujari’s status into guru-hood and hence of the tradition into a guru-centered tradition serves as a means to consolidate Madrassi respectability and to challenge its subalternized position in Guyanese society. As the “institution of guruship has come to be seen as a quintessentially Hindu phenomenon” (Warrier 2012: 169), it furthermore also emphasizes Madrassi Hindu-ness. Van der Burg and van der Veer highlight in their elaboration of brahmanization that in the absence of guru movements in Suriname “the Brahman priest became the monopolist of Hindu religion in

the last decades of the previous century and the first decade of this century” (1986: 517f) and that in India, where guru movements have been on the rise since the early twentieth century, the “leader of a sectarian movement, the ascetic *guru*” has functioned as the “Brahman’s rival” with regard to sacred knowledge (1986: 517). Thus, in Guyana, where the Sanatan and Madras traditions are constructed in opposition to each other, I argue that the Madrassi emphasis on religious leadership in terms of guru-hood takes place in opposition to the institution of the Brahman pandit. This can be interpreted as a subversive means to challenge the higher status of Guyanese Sanatan pandits and their monopoly of ritual and spiritual authority.

The Madrassi head pujari’s wearing of the shikha may be seen as a symbol of this. The shikha is a traditional Hindu hair style, which is linked to Brahmanical authority in contemporary India. Today, it is primarily seen among members of guru-centered traditions in the Caribbean and North America. The self-confidence with which head pujari Raj has started to wear the shikha recently expresses his pride of being (visibly) different from not only lay devotees but, as I argue, also Sanatan pandits. The shikha becomes a means of embracing otherness, an otherness that in the past has often induced feelings of inferiority and stigmatization. The visibility of the hair style outside the ritual context makes it different from other kinds of Indian Wear, which are worn only temporarily during Hindu functions and pujas (Kloß 2016; 2017b). The shikha remains a visible symbol of Hindu-ness and respectability in everyday life. This is a novel development in the Madras tradition, in which practices of changing into Madrassi uniforms after arrival on the temple premises has long been common practice. During my visits between 2011 and 2015 my informants regularly expressed their concern with regard to their visibility, describing for instance that they would feel “ashamed” when they were to be seen in their Madrassi uniforms in public due to the tradition’s stigmatization. Other parts of (Indian) dress, for example dhotis, have been and continue to be a discredit to a man’s respectability when worn outside a ritual context and are thus—and for reasons of purity—only donned prior to the ritual¹¹. Pujari Raj’s sartorial appropriation expresses his Madrassi consciousness and

11 Today the dhoti is a type of garment used exclusively among ritual practitioners in Guyana, especially the Madras pujaris and ritual practitioners as well as Sanatan pandits. The extent of its stigmatization is for example reflected by Arthur and Juanita Niehoff, who describe that pandits sometimes wore English pants over the dhoti before

pride in the tradition. This eclectic clothing style highlights the creativity of sartorial inventions that are common in the Madras tradition. For instance, the Madrassi vestment worn by ritual practitioners was adapted from Indian-style clothing and standardized to include, for men, a white or light-yellow dhoti, a waistband (red or Madras cloth), and a white or light-yellow t-shirt, and for women, a yellow *shalwar* or *gharara* (types of Indian clothing consisting of shirt, scarf, and pants or skirt) with a red or Madras waistband (Kloß 2016). This style of clothing was standardized during the revitalization of the 1970s under Jamsie Naidoo. Head Pujari Raj's sartorial practices and appropriations may further be interpreted as a kind of 'creole dress'. Creole dress is a "product of a conscious effort to maintain, preserve and support" (Buckridge 2004: 60) different cultural elements in dress in contexts of asymmetrical power relations, making it a subversive and creative practice that enables the maintenance of tradition by adapting and applying specific new components from a dominant, or in this context, orthodox cultural context.

Pujari Raj's legitimacy to induce such sartorial transformations is rarely contested within the religious community. This is certainly a result of his authority, which is based on a variety of factors. First, his family has acquired 'outside status' despite the fact that he has not personally migrated, but because he regularly receives gifts and donations from relatives in North America and has travelled "outside"¹² himself. He has thus "become big" (Halstead 2011: 279), meaning that he has gained higher social status by acquiring capital through his transnational network and connectedness. Second, he is the son of the late head pujari Ramkissoon, has experienced his training, and has served as a pujari of the local Guyanese Kali koiloo since his father's departure to the US in the 1990s. Being at the forefront of claiming his father's (and relatedly Jamsie Naidoo's) guru-hood, materialized by the life-size statue, he implies and generates personal guru-hood. As in this religious community "guru" is a title acquired by being defined and denoted as such by others, Raj does not refer to himself as guru but uses tacit implications. Claims for his high(er) status are also a result of the heavily contested leadership within the Madrassi community itself, in

leaving the house. This practice resulted from the men's feeling of being "too conspicuous with their traditional garments" (Niehoff and Niehoff 1960: 74).

12 "Outside" usually refers to anywhere outside of Guyana, however Guyanese most commonly relate "outside" to industrialized countries such as the US and Canada.

which various subgroups and private, so-called “bottomhouse practices” compete for devotees and social status within the (Madrassi) socio-religious hierarchy both in Guyana and North America (Kloß 2017a).

The emphasis on guru-hood thus can be regarded as a means to acquire and reinstate power and leadership in the transnational community. It is influenced by the religious environment of Hinduism in North America, particularly New York City, where guru-centered traditions continuously gain in popularity among Hindus and non-Hindus. The fact that non-Hindus are attracted to guru-centered movements conveys additional respectability to the status of gurus and their traditions from the perspective of most Guyanese Madrassis. The respected status of guru, acknowledged in Hindu-Indian and ‘Western’ contexts (although at times drawing heavily on orientalist othering discourses), serves as a means for Madrassi leaders to contest Guyanese socio-religious hierarchy. As gurus are social actors who have an extraordinary capacity for social and cultural transformation, they can induce change in ritual, structure, and styles more easily than lay practitioners and pujaris despite being conceived as representatives and purveyors of tradition and ancient culture. This results from the competition between contemporary guru movements, making it necessary for gurus to distinguish themselves from others “in a sea of competing voices” where they “must present and represent a publicly visible uniqueness that sets them apart from established tradition, a uniqueness that inherently includes novelty and innovation” (Lucia 2014: 224). In this context, Pujari Raj’s (re-)appropriation of dress and sartorial styles can be interpreted as an innovation, which is framed as the recreation of ancient traditions, demonstrating greater sacred knowledge in relation to other religious leaders.

5. Conclusion

We have seen that the Madras tradition is currently undergoing a process of guruization. This has to be read in light of the contested socio-religious hierarchy of the transnational Guyanese Hindu community, in which the Madras tradition has usually only been able to claim a marginal role and inferior status position due to its society-wide stigmatization. Through the transformation of Madrassi ritual authority into guru-hood, and thus by approaches to transform the tradition into a guru-centered religious tradition, Madrassi leaders and lay practitioners actively claim agency and

challenge the tradition's constitutive other, the Sanatan tradition. The Sanatan tradition, which has evolved out of a sanskritization process over the course of the twentieth process to claim respectable status in the predominantly Christian society, has excluded elements later unified and labeled as Madrassi. It has emphasized the role of Brahmans and pandits, for which this process of sanskritization has been labeled brahmanization. With the appearance of guru-centered movements both in Guyana as well as in the US, where numerous Guyanese live and have formed transnational networks, Madrassi religious practitioners today claim the respected status of guru-hood for (deceased) head pujaris to contest Sanatan ritual authority and the institution of the pandit. Guruization thus has to be regarded as a counter process to brahmanization in the Guyanese context, expressed, for example, through visual and material practices of building guru murtis or (re-)inventing a specific guru dress, thus revealing a mix of demonstrating economic and cultural forms of capital.

Claiming guru status certainly has also other implications than challenging socio-religious hierarchy and contesting asymmetrical power relations. As gurus are viewed as embodiments or representatives of the divine, specific practices of guru devotion are likely to develop or may have possibly already developed at the time this article is written. The building of Ramkissoon's statue, for instance, raises questions of whether or not the statue may facilitate (guru) darshan, the mutual and divine seeing, described for example by Lawrence A. Babb (2000) or Maya Warriar (2013). These and similar related practices promise relevant and interesting perspectives for future research.

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