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South Indian Ritual Dispels Negative Karma in the Birth Chart

Lilan Laishley

Abstract: This paper examines the practice of celestial magic in contemporary South India as it relates to the individual birth chart. Specific celestially oriented rituals are understood to minimize the unpleasant effects of the birth chart and positively influence the planetary deities. The rituals incorporate various magical objects and actions including *puja*, *mantras*, prayers, *yantras*, ceremonial offerings, icons, gemstones, and shrines. This paper is based on participant observation during a research trip to Tamil Nadu, South India, where an astrologer suggested a ritual was needed to clear the negative *karma* he saw in my birth chart. This led to a multifaceted ritual at a 9th century snake temple that I documented with photos and interviews. This specific site was chosen because the celestial snake *Rahu /Ketu* in the Indian astrological system was identified as the cause of the difficult *karma* and would need to be approached for help in clearing it. I will share the stages of this ritual, including the symbolic meaning of the objects used and actions taken. I conclude with my proposal that ritual is both a container and vehicle for celestial magic.

In the summer of 2004 I went to Tamil Nadu in South India for six weeks on an educational research trip with two other professors and twelve students. We based ourselves in Madurai, a traditional city that is both physically and spiritually situated around the site of the ancient and beautiful temple dedicated to the goddess Meenakshi. During those six weeks I researched Jyotish, the form of astrology that is practiced in South India. The term Jyotish, often translated as ‘science of light,’ refers to the light from the Sun, Moon, planets and stars.¹ Jyotish is also referred to as Indian Astrology or Vedic Astrology, though Jyotish is a more accurate term since it is practiced in countries other than India and by people that are not necessarily rooted in Vedism such as Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, Muslims and Christians.²

¹ Hart de Fouw and Robert Svoboda, *Light on Life: An Introduction to Astrology of India* (Twin Lakes, WI: Lotus Press, 2003) p. xxii.

² de Fouw and Svoboda, *Light on Life*, p. 4.

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As an American astrologer trained in the Western European tradition I knew very little about Jyotish and was curious how it was practiced in India. I did not concentrate on the technical workings of Jyotish which are different from Western astrology in many ways, including in its use of the stars (sidereal) instead of the Sun (tropical) to orient to the night sky. Instead I was interested in observing how astrology was part of the life of the Tamil people and how it was integrated into their society. I was pleased to discover that astrology in Madurai was widespread. Astrologers commonly held consultations outside of temples. Astrological *yantras*, diagrams for magical incantation, were for sale in sidewalk markets, and planetary shrines were prominently placed in all the temples.³

My research during those six weeks led me to the conclusion that the rich and varied ritual practices currently found in South India provide a window into the types of astrological magic that were part of ancient, medieval, and Renaissance astrology in Western Europe. It felt like I had tapped into fertile ground that, if explored further, could lead to a better understanding of how ritual magic can still be a potent force in the practice of Western astrology.

Some define magic as the belief that supernatural or spiritual forces can be controlled through rituals and incantations with the goal of power over nature and the circumstances of life; in this way magic can be understood as a technology since it aims for change or manipulation, not just for knowledge.⁴ Others reject magic as simply a technology of rites but instead understand magic as a worldview of living in an enchanted world of participation, where persons and things have sympathy and correspondence to each other.⁵ Celestial magic directs its worldview and rites toward the cosmos through stellar, planetary or celestial symbolism, influences or intelligences.⁶ As Keith Thomas wrote,

... the astronomers of the ancient world had been impressed by the regular behaviour of the heavens, in contrast with the flux and mutation of life on

³ For *yantra*, see *Tamil Lexicon* (Madras: University of Madras, 1963), Vol. 3, p. 3393.

⁴ Dan Burton and David Grandy, *Magic, Mystery, and Science* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 36–37.

⁵ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), p. 394.

⁶ Conference Programme for Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture's Eleventh Annual Sophia Centre Conference 'Celestial Magic' 22–23 June 2013 at Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institute, Bath, England.

earth. They accordingly assumed a division of the universe whereby the superior, immutable bodies of the celestial world ruled over the terrestrial or sublunary sphere, where all was mortality and change.⁷

Astrology is based on the idea that what happens in the celestial world corresponds to, reflects or influences earthly events. This relationship between heaven and earth is a doctrine of universal sympathy. As Diogenes Laertius put it:

The world has no empty space within it, but forms one united whole. This is a necessary result of the sympathy and tension which binds together things in heaven and earth.⁸

This finds its expression in the Emerald Tablet's aphorism 'As Above/So Below', a shorthand way of saying that all that happens in the realms of the universe above us, such as the doings of the gods or the movements of the stars and planets, is directly reflected in what happens down here on Earth, and vice versa.⁹ This macrocosmic/microcosmic connection is one way we are able to know the universe, since we are like it and have an affinity with it.¹⁰ One of the benefits of celestial magic is to create a link between the interconnected dual realities of As Above and So Below, Macrocosm and Microcosm, Spiritual and Physical, or Heaven and Earth, thereby providing a way for individuals to engage actively with the cosmos and establish a meaningful placement in and relationship with that cosmos.¹¹

The ritual in which I participated was intended to influence positively the planetary deities in order to clear the *karma*, fruits of my past deeds, in my astrological birth chart.¹² This intention clearly fits into the definition of celestial magic. Since the ritual took place within the broader context of

⁷ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), pp. 284–285.

⁸ Diogenes Laertius' biography of 'Zeno' in *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans R. D. Hicks (London: William Heinemann, 1925), Vol. 2, pp. 110–263 (para. 140).

⁹ Jabir ibn Hayyan, 'The Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus' in E. J. Holmyard, *Alchemy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1957), pp. 97–8. See also Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), p. 82; and Burton and Grandy, *Magic, Mystery, and Science*, p. 43.

¹⁰ Burton and Grandy, *Magic, Mystery, and Science*, p. 47.

¹¹ Lilan Laishley, *Religious Diversity on the Labyrinth: Rituals that Engage a Sacred Cosmos* (Saarbrücken: LAP Lambert Publishing, 2011), p. 76.

¹² For *karma*, *Tamil Lexicon* (Madras: University of Madras, 1963), Vol. 1, p. 762.

astrology in India, specifically Tamil Nadu, I will first provide some general observations about astrology in Tamil Nadu and then describe the ritual.

Astrology has been part of the social and religious fabric of India since the second millennium BCE. It remains of paramount importance for traditionally minded Hindus and an astrologer is consulted before any trip, activity, or ritual.¹³ Astrology has status in the culture because it is part of scripturally sanctioned Sanskrit literature and is recognized as orthodox in the Brahmanical tradition. Astrology is also offered at the Master's and Doctorate level at various universities. The planets are not just celestial bodies but are considered anthropomorphic deities that protect or afflict humans.¹⁴ They are referred to as *Navagraha*, or nine planets. These *Navagraha* are the seven visible planets of Sun-*Surya*, Moon-*Chandra*, Mercury-*Budha*, Venus-*Shukra*, Mars-*Mangala*, Jupiter-*Guru*, and Saturn-*Shani* as well as the Moon's north node, *Rahu*, and the Moon's south node, *Ketu* (the nodes are two points where the Moon's orbit intersects the ecliptic and they lie at opposite points in the birth chart). *Rahu* and *Ketu* have no physical substance since they are positions on the ecliptic, but are given equal status with the planets due to their impact on the Sun, Moon, and Earth through eclipses.¹⁵ The *Navagraha* are considered deities and are as respected and worshipped as other divine beings in India.

In Tamil Nadu most temples, from the very large temple in the city to the small village temple, have a shrine to *Navagraha* (see Fig. 1, Village Shrine to the planets). When visiting a temple I was told to first visit the Shrine of *Navagraha*, even before I went to any of the other deities, even the main deities of Shiva, Ganesh, or Meenakshi. There are also major temples in South India that are dedicated to each of the *Navagraha*, so the planets have their own dedicated places of worship as well as being represented in other temples.

In the United States people who engage astrologers will go for a consultation maybe once a year to understand current planetary cycles and

¹³ Stephen Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), pp. 3, 5.

¹⁴ Caterina Guenzi, 'The Allotted Share: Managing Fortune in Astrological Counseling in Banaras', in *Cosmologies of Fortune: Luck, Vitality and the Contingency of Daily Life*, ed. G. Da Col and C. Humphrey, Special Issue of *Social Analysis* 56, nos. 1 and 2 (2012): pp. 41–42.

¹⁵ Komilla Sutton, *Indian Astrology: How to discover the secrets of your Vedic star sign* (New York: Penguin Group, 2000) p. 15.

get a pulse on what is happening in their lives.¹⁶ There is also interest in using astrology as a psychological system of self-knowledge and to gain new perspectives and insight.¹⁷ Typically, astrologers in the West are expected to describe a problem, lay out a timeline of planetary significance, and suggest some possible course of action; but they are not expected to fix the problem.



Fig. 1. Village Navagraha shrine.¹⁸

In India, however, astrology attaches great import to fixing the problem that is seen in the birth chart. In India, astrology not only points out what the problem is so that a client can understand and accept it, but it also suggests corrective curative opportunities. It offers a remedy. Judy Pugh in her study of astrological counselling in contemporary India sees consultation with an astrologer (diviner) as a therapeutic process which not only includes identifying client ailments and obstacles but also includes remedial measures. Pugh states:

¹⁶ For an in-depth analysis of the popularity and practice of astrology in Western culture, see Nicholas Campion, *Astrology and Popular Religion in the Modern West* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), especially Chapters 11 and 12.

¹⁷ Nicholas Campion, *Astrology and Cosmology in the World's Religions* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), p. 197.

¹⁸ All images in this essay were taken by the author.

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While diviners may in fact send clients to other healers, there are also many cases in which the diviner himself takes sole responsibility for the client's ailments and problems. Not only does the diviner engage the client in a communicative interaction in which problems can be explored and clarified, but he may also use the dialogue to organize for the client ameliorative patterns of thought and behavior. In addition, he may recommend and actually prepare for the client various amulets, potions, and other protective devices;...¹⁹

In Joytish there are many remedial measures.²⁰ These measures include: *yoga* postures; *pranayama*, the use of controlled breath to access the life force; meditation; *mantras*, sacred formula for the invocation of a deity; and *yantras*, diagrams of numbers, words and symbols that contain the energy of a particular planetary quality (see Fig. 2, *Yantra* of Navagraha).²¹ A *yantra* is made more powerful if a *mantra* is chanted in association with it. There are also icons, which are visual representations of the planetary deities and *puja*, which is worship and adoration of gods with proper ceremony.²² A very simple *puja* I often saw in India was the lighting of an oil lamp in front of the icon of a deity; an act which reminded me of lighting a candle in front of a statue of Mary, Mother of God, in many Christian churches. Another remedial action is a visit to the temple on the day that is dedicated to a planetary deity. For example, if you are having trouble with Saturn, you would go to the temple on Saturday, Saturn's day and do *puja* for Saturn. Another remedy is the use of gemstones that have associations with particular planetary deities. Using Saturn as an example, one might wear Saturn's stone, a blue sapphire, to help alleviate a negative Saturn influence. These remedies are a type of celestial magic since they are actions directed to the planetary intelligences – deities – to gain knowledge, benefit, or advantage.

¹⁹ Judy Pugh, 'Astrological Counseling in Contemporary India', *Journal of Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 7, no. 3 (1983): p. 280.

²⁰ Komilla Sutton, *The Lunar Nodes: Crisis and Redemption* (Bournemouth: The Wessex Astrologer Ltd., 2011) pp. 149–153.

²¹ For *mantra*, see *Tamil Lexicon*, Vol. 3, p. 3068.

²² For *puja* see *Tamil Lexicon*, Vol. 3, p. 2826.



Fig. 2. Yantra of Navagraha.

While in Tamil Nadu I had decided that in addition to observing evidence of astrology in Tamil culture I would also have my chart analysed by several astrologers. This led to a total of three astrological consultations. The first was by an astrologer who was seated on the ground outside of a temple, which is a fairly common sight in South India. He had with him a parrot and a deck of cards. If I had been Tamil he would have talked to me about my astrological chart, but since I was a foreigner he utilized his parrot to discover my fate. The astrologer spread out the cards in front of him and had the parrot walk over all the cards and peck at one to indicate that was the chosen card for my reading. The astrologer then described the meaning of the card through our group's interpreter. The interpretation was very broad and general, but had a positive note about the influences of Venus, which was then prominent in the night sky.

My second chart reading was from a professor in the Mathematics Department at a local university. I asked him if there was a conflict with him being both an astrologer and a mathematics professor, but he assured me there was not, since astrology is linked to mathematics in India. He spoke excellent English and no interpreter was needed. We met in his home in a suburban area and the whole visit had a very utilitarian feel to it, almost as if I was visiting an accountant. I did not get any major insights into my chart or find any mystery in the reading that I received from the professor, but I did enjoy the fact that astrology was accepted in an academic environment.

For my third reading, our group's interpreter, a college age woman from Madurai, introduced me to her family astrologer. He was a caste astrologer, which means that he came from a family of astrologers from a specific caste and learned his skill from a guru. There were four generations of astrologers in his family: his grandfather, father, himself and his son were all astrologers. His extended family had three children who had also learned astrology. The reading with the caste astrologer took place in a meeting room at the hotel where we were staying. He only spoke Tamil, so everything was translated for me. I took notes and recorded the consultation. When he examined my astrological chart he immediately focused on what he termed my difficult *karma* in dealing with relationships. He said that relationships do not stick to me and that they roll right off me. It was true that I had multiple unsuccessful relationships and had been divorced twice. I was then in the second year of my third marriage.

The astrologer said that the problem with my relationships was due to *Rahu* and *Ketu*, the Moon's North and South nodes. In Jyotish, *Rahu* and *Ketu* are symbolized by a *Naga*. *Nagas* are like snakes but they stand erect; they are thought to be evolved beings, and due to the shedding of their skin they symbolize the transformation of death and rebirth and as snakes they also signify poison and wisdom and are able to influence events both positively and negatively.²³ Given the great antiquity and the immense corpus of Indian mythology there are contradictory stories about the origins of *Rahu* and *Ketu* but the most well know myth is the story of the 'Churning of the Ocean'.²⁴ The story has variants, but basically relates how the gods and demons were fighting over who would first discover the hidden nectar of immortality. The gods did not want the demons to get it,

²³ Sutton, *The Lunar Nodes*, pp. 2, 10.

²⁴ Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities*, pp. 57–58.

since it would make them immortal. Once the nectar was found, *Rahu* tricked the gods and drank the nectar, making himself immortal. The Sun and Moon found out about *Rahu's* trick and told Lord Vishnu, who was so furious that he cut *Rahu* in half. But since *Rahu* was now immortal he could not be killed and remained alive in two separate parts which remain in the sky as two separate halves, *Rahu*, the head of the serpent, and *Ketu*, the tail of the serpent. Since the Sun and Moon were the ones who reported the deception, they became *Rahu* and *Ketu's* enemies. The ability of *Rahu* and *Ketu* to create eclipses and darken, even devour, the Sun and Moon is one reason why *Rahu* is considered the Demon of Eclipses and they are particularly powerful in the birth chart (see Fig. 3, *Rahu* – the serpent's head, and Fig. 4, *Ketu* – the serpent's tail).²⁵



Fig. 3. *Rahu* – the serpent's head (from author's shrine).

²⁵ Sanjay Patel, *Hindu Deities* (London: Plume, 2006), pp. 117–119.



Fig. 4. *Ketu* – the serpent’s tail (from author’s shrine).

The position of *Rahu* and *Ketu* in the birth chart is associated with *karma*, the ‘action’ we take in past, present and future lives and the consequences of that action. *Rahu* and *Ketu* indicate internal struggles with our *karma*. It is through our struggles with *Rahu* and *Ketu* that we have the opportunity to uncover the hidden wisdom of our past life experiences. According to Komilla Sutton, *Rahu* and *Ketu* are the karmic axis of our lives.

Like beads on a necklace, previous lifetimes are interconnected by an invisible thread – which is *Rahu/Ketu*. As the indicator and the Lords of Karma in the birth chart they represent the stumbling blocks which, when overcome, eventually lead to liberation and maturity of the soul. *Ketu* deals with the past karma and *Rahu* with the need to create new karma.²⁶

²⁶ Sutton, *The Lunar Nodes*, p. 4.

The remedial measure for my relationship troubles that the astrologer suggested was a clearing ritual at a temple well known in the region to dispel the problems created by the karmic issues of *Rahu* and *Ketu*. As Judy Pugh suggested, the astrologer not only diagnosed my trouble, he was also taking responsibility for the remedy.²⁷ This remedy included referring me to a specialist, since only a Brahmin priest could enact the ritual. But the astrologer also took on the responsibility of the remedy by organizing the ritual in all aspects, from deciding the place of the ritual, securing the specialist, and creating the ritual offering.

In the study of religion, my field is Ritual Studies, which means that I view religious phenomena through the lens of ritual. Ritual Studies is a complex field since there is a vast variety of rituals throughout history in multiple cultures that express the psychic, social and religious world of its participants. Different types of rituals include festivals, celebrations, healing, and rites of passage (such as marriages and funerals).²⁸ I define ritual as a structured series of symbolic, embodied actions that are directed with intention toward a specific goal. The goal of a ritual varies based on the type of ritual and can be to transform (rite of passage), cure, celebrate, empower, and engage in physical and metaphysical realities. Ritual Studies is a multi-disciplinary field in that one must engage many different disciplines in order to understand a ritual. There will often be philosophical/religious meanings, historical significance, a special text from which the ritual is drawn, material objects that are used, art that is representative of the event, as well as the community context which includes social implications and political hierarchies; see for example the work of Victor Turner, who studied the Ndembu.²⁹

Ritual Studies has a strong association with Anthropology and utilizes ethnographic fieldwork in research, which includes the methodology of participant observation.³⁰ Participant observation is a method whereby the researcher is both a participant in and an observer of a ritual. There are challenges to being both a participant and an observer, in maintaining both

²⁷ Pugh, 'Astrological Counseling', p. 280.

²⁸ Fred Clothey, 'Ritual, Nature and Theories', *The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions*, ed. Keith Grim (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1989), pp. 624–628.

²⁹ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969; Chicago, IL: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995).

³⁰ Russell Bernard, ed., *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1998)

an insider and an outsider perspective at the same time.³¹ Holding these dual perspectives can be like walking a narrow path since it can be difficult to keep an objective, intellectual awareness of an event in which one is subjectively and emotionally involved. The researcher can take an etic approach and analyse a ritual while the ritual is occurring using existing theories, but this tends to emphasize the outsider point of view. Or the researcher can engage in a emic approach and let go of preconceived notions and engage fully in the ritual, carefully documenting the ritual as a phenomenon by keeping field notes, collecting photos, gathering material objects, and conducting interviews in order to analyse the data after the fact. This is the approach that I took. I was interested in the subject of Jyotish and brought an open-minded curiosity to the ritual, an ideal attitude for engaging in ethnographic research.

A simple way to analyse this ritual, or any ritual for that matter, is to break it down into its component parts. I will examine this karmic dispelling ritual by looking at 1. The Goal, 2. Place/Time, 3. Participants, 4. Material Objects, 5. Structured Actions, and 6. Conclusion.

1. The Goal

The caste astrologer who suggested the ritual made clear that the goal of the ritual was to clear the negative *karma* in my birth chart caused by *Rahu* and *Ketu*, especially surrounding marriage. Before the ritual began I very clearly set my intention that my *karma* be cleared so that I have a stable, joyous, and long-lasting marriage. I silently repeated this intention to myself during planning, preparation, and implementation of the ritual.

2. Place/Time

The place for the main ritual was the Peraiyur Sree Naganathar Temple near Pudukottai in Tamil Nadu. This is a Snake Temple dated ca. 9–12th century (see Fig. 5, Snake Temple). Lord Shiva, known by the name *Naganathar*, the Snake Lord, resides at the temple with his Royal Consort. This temple is considered a holy place. It is a '*parigara thalam*' which means it is a place of intercession where one can plead to get rid of *tosham*, which is a fault, blemish or transgression.³²

³¹ Barbara Tedlock, 'From Participant Observation to the Observation of Participation: The Emergence of Narrative Ethnography', *Journal of Anthropological Research* 47 (1991): pp. 69–94.

³² *Tamil Lexicon*, Vol. 2, p. 2508.



Fig. 5. Snake Temple.

The temple is well known in the region for rectifying any malefic effect in an individual's horoscope by the offering of prayers. The temple is especially good at rectifying the ill effects caused by *Rahu* and *Ketu*, as well as problems such as hindrance in marriage and delays in childbirth. People come to the temple on their own to worship the deities and it is also possible to pay for a special ceremony led by a priest.³³ The astrologer set up such a special ceremony with a priest for my ritual. The date and time for the ritual was 3 July 2004. We left Madurai at 7:30 in the morning for the approximately two-hour drive to the temple. The timing for this event

³³ YouTube video of the Sri Naganathar temple near Pudakkottai http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-d6_OHQugq [accessed 1 June 2016].

appears to be one of convenience for all participants since it was scheduled on a Saturday, not Thursday which is the special day dedicated to *Rahu/Ketu* at the temple.

3. Participants

I was the main participant since it was my *karma* that was negatively effected and needed to be cleansed. The astrologer was a central participant in that he made the observation that such a ritual would be beneficial to me. He also organized the entire ritual, which was quite elaborate. In many ways he acted like a producer. He made the arrangements for the pre-ritual of prayers and *mantras* by Brahmin priests that occurred in Madurai the day before we left for the temple, and he made arrangements for the priest to lead the ritual at the temple. The astrologer did not lead the ritual; rather the Brahmin priest associated with the temple led the ritual. The astrologer also gathered the items needed for the offering, many of which were purchased near the temple, and he prepared the offering. The astrologer's son, who was around twelve years of age, accompanied us as an observer. There was also a college-age Hindu woman who was our translator and had connected me to the astrologer. My husband Bill also accompanied us to the temple. I had thought Bill would simply be an observer and we were both surprised when the astrologer let us know that Bill was to be a participant in the ritual. Neither of us had expected this, but the astrologer explained that since a successful marriage was one of my desired outcomes, it was important for my husband to go through the ritual with me. This fits with Pugh's contention that the astrologer and 'client participate together in an integral process which weaves supportive continuities between the scene of the advisory session and the scene of the client's everyday life'.³⁴

An interesting question is whether to consider the deities as participants in the ritual. Represented materially by stone icons, someone might consider them objects, rather than participants. But since they were the deities to whom the prayers, *mantras*, offerings and requests were made, many would consider them participants. The main deities at the temple were two forms of Shiva – *Naganathar*, the Snake Lord and *Kasi Vishvanathan*, and his Royal Consort, *Parvati*. There were other deities worshipped at the temple including *Rahu* and *Ketu*.

³⁴ Pugh, 'Astrological Counseling', p. 281.

4. Material Objects

The offering that was made to the deities was the main object in this ritual. The offering was a collection of items arranged on a brass platter; some items we brought with us and some were purchased at a small stand outside the temple (Fig. 6, Author and husband with offering). Each of the items in the offering had a symbolic meaning. Victor Turner calls symbols the basic building-blocks of ritual. He also states that analysis of the symbols needs to be based on the culture that designed the ritual, an emic/insider perspective, not the symbolism that an outsider like myself might attribute.³⁵



Fig. 6. Author and husband with offering.

For this reason I interviewed the astrologer a few days after the ritual and asked him about the meaning of the material objects and the ritual actions. These meaning are: bananas represented food for the deities; limes drive away debt and keep good friends coming and bad ones going; coconut brings in links with government related things; and Beetle Leaf brings in a good relationship with God and asks God to accept what the priest says that I deserve, which is good health and wealth. There was a small brass snake that sat in the palm of our hands that was used during the ritual. We

³⁵ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, pp. 9,14.

also had flowered garlands to place on the deities as an offering, and flowered garlands for my husband and me after the ritual was completed. There were costs involved including a fee for the Brahmin priests who did the pre-ritual, a fee for the temple priest who led the ritual, and a fee for the astrologer. I also paid fees for the translator, car rental, and purchase of items in the offering.

5. Structured actions

Ritual action is embodied, which means it engages the body through the five senses of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch and includes what is said, done, and seen.³⁶ The actions of a ritual, which also have symbolic meaning, form the ritual's structure. Turner has shown how these ritual elements combine into patterns that essentially blaze a trail that 'connects the known world of sensorily perceptible phenomena with the unknown and invisible realm... It makes intelligible what is mysterious.'³⁷ Ritual structure weaves together the goal, place, participants, and objects, bringing the separate parts into a meaningful whole.

The first action was a pre-ritual done by Brahmin priests prior to going to the temple. Ideally I should have done *puja* and recited a *mantra* for 108 days as a preparation for this ritual. But since I was not going to be in India for 108 more days, the astrologer retained priests to do a condensed version of the *mantra* and *puja* for me by repeating the *mantra* 108 times over a 24-hour period. The *mantra* they chanted was *Om. Srim. Su. Saravana Bhava Nama Om*. This means 'Blessed Goodness Divine'. I was not with the priests and I did not see this take place. But the ash from the prayers and burnings were placed on a small metal *yantra* that had the symbols for the *Navagraha* on it. The ashes and *yantra* were folded neatly together into a paper envelope. This ash was meant to drive away all evil things of the snake, and to bring in all good things. The priests used sacred water from Alagarkoil (an ancient healing site) in their ritual, which was also part of the offering.

On the morning of the ritual we rented a car and driver to take the astrologer, his son, the translator, Bill and me to the snake temple. We left at 7:30 in the morning and drove several hours to the temple. The temple was in a rural setting with small street markets geared to temple visitors. From these markets we bought the bulk of the objects for our offerings, such as the coconut, garlands, and limes. We entered the stone temple and

³⁶ Clothey, 'Ritual, Nature and Theories,' p. 625.

³⁷ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, pp. 10, 15.

sat in a quiet place while the astrologer arranged the offering. We said prayers over the offering, asking for a successful ritual and clearing. After our offering was arranged on a brass plate the temple priest joined us and led the main ritual.

For the main ritual we went to the three main deities who each had their own section in the temple. First we went to *Naganathar* the Snake Lord, who was the central deity of the temple and the focus of the ritual. *Naganthar* was a stone image about five feet tall and similar in appearance to the smaller snake icons that surround the temple as seen in Figures 6, 8 and 9. Bill and I sat cross-legged in front of *Naganathar*, each holding in the palm of our hand a small brass snake. We said a *mantra* for 108 times while holding the little snakes. The *mantra* was *Om Nagarajaya Nama Ha* which means 'Praise to the name of the Snake King'. This *mantra* was asking the snake to reside in me and do good things for me. Bill and I lost count of how many times we said the *mantra* and were stopped by the priest, who seemed surprised that we did not know when we had reached 108 repetitions.

Then the priest poured oil over the Snake Lord. The oil is to keep things from sticking to the snake and to help block evil things and to abolish evil things. Then the priest poured the water from the fountain at the centre of the temple over the Snake Lord. This action was to take evil from my past lives and help guide me in the future. Next the priest poured the water the Brahmin priests had charged in the pre-ritual from Alagarkoil, which was to connect me to the snake. The next step was that the priest poured milk over the Snake Lord to give us long life and grant all my wishes. After that, a paste of rice flour mixed with water was rubbed over the Snake Lord. This was to release all evil things I have done in this life, even if I did not know about them or know they were evil, and also to release all the evil things done in past lives. Then turmeric powder mixed with water was rubbed on the Snake Lord. This was to bring good friendship, a bright face and blessings from the goddess. Then rose and sandalwood were put on the Snake. This was to protect my body since sandalwood is a luxury and brings a sense of satisfaction. Then a garland was placed over the Snake, which was meant to please the God so he will be happy and bless me. After this conclusion we went to the two other deities and did a smaller version of the offering and worship (*puja*).

After we finished with *puja* at all three deities, the very last act was to go to the *Navagraha* shrine, which was positioned prominently in the temple.



Fig. 7. Snake Temple Navagraha shrine.

At the shrine the astrologer placed the *yantra* and ash from the pre-Brahmin ritual (see Fig. 7, Snake Temple Navagraha shrine). The astrologer prayed to the *Navagraha* and told the nine planets that we had just finished a ritual to take away the bad things related to my past lives. He told the *Navagraha* that we did this ritual for the best of intentions and we did it the best that we could. However, he asked the planets, if we did something wrong with the ritual, please make it right for me. This final appeal to the planets gave me a sense of how important the planets were in the scheme of things. The astrologer told me that the *Navagraha* have the power even to shake the gods and goddesses, who each have their own horoscope. The astrologer's description of the primacy of the planets is

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different from Guenzi who states the planetary deities are hierarchically subordinate to the major gods and goddess of the Hindu pantheon.³⁸

6. Conclusions

There is usually an assumption that rituals will be effective in meeting their intended goal. It is not common to question whether a ritual was a success or not. But Ron Grimes is a ritual scholar who believes it is important, even necessary, to be critical of ritual and to question whether or not it was successful.³⁹ Was the ritual efficacious? Did it accomplish what it set out to accomplish? And how does one decide if a ritual ‘worked’? There is a very clear way to judge whether a ritual at the Snake Temple was considered efficacious. If the goal of a ritual participant was successful, for example a marriage took place or a baby was born, then the satisfied ritual participant will return to the temple and offer a snake icon as a symbol of success and gratitude.



Fig. 8. Snake Icons at street market.

³⁸ Guenzi, ‘The Allotted Share’, p. 43.

³⁹ Ronald Grimes, *Ritual Criticism: Case Studies in its Practice, Essays on its Theory* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2010).

These icons are available for sale at the street markets near the temple, and are miniature versions of the larger Snake Lord in the temple (see Fig. 8, Snake icons at market).

The temple's apparent success in taking away negative *karma* and hindrances is seen in the large number of snake icons that are placed everywhere around the temple, along the walkways and on top of walls, which you can see in Figure 5. There are also snake icons outside of the temple walls and underneath trees around the temple (see Fig. 9, Icon offerings under tree).



Fig. 9. Snake icon offerings under tree.

There are so many snake icons adorning the temple that there is not enough room to display them all, leaving many icons in piles around the temple (see Fig. 10, Author after ritual in front of icons).

It has been over twelve years since I participated in this ritual to dispel the negative relationship *karma* associated with *Rahu* and *Ketu* that the astrologer identified in my chart. Do I consider it a success? Yes, I do. I am grateful for the care and attention to detail that was given to this ritual. I am grateful for the effort that was taken on my behalf. I am in a happy, prosperous marriage that has outlived in years any of my previous relationships, combined. Is this a coincidence? Is it the result of the ritual?

I will never know. But if I were to go back to India I would return to this temple, purchase a snake icon and place it as an offering.



Fig. 10. Author after ritual with icons behind her.

In summary, there are many ways to participate in celestial magic. In South India today celestial magic is found in the numerous remedial practices, including meditation, *mantras*, *yantras* and *puja*, which are used to counter negative influences in the birth chart. These remedies become a ritual when they are combined into a structured series of symbolic embodied actions that are intentionally directed toward a specific goal. Ritual is a container for celestial magic because it provides an overarching structure that brings together and organizes the participants, objects, and actions. Ritual is also a vehicle because ritual takes this container of celestial magic and blazes a trail with symbolic, embodied and progressive actions toward a *telos*, an end result that links the participant with their cosmos.