Śatābhiṣekam: Ritual Remarriage in South India

Marissa Figlarz, *McGill University*

Women from urban middle class Smārta Brahmin communities in India have traditionally undertaken a category of rituals that serve to safeguard and thus prolong the lives of their husbands. In this paper, I examine *Śatābhiṣekam*, the ritual remarriage of couples. I argue that *Śatābhiṣekam* should be considered within the same category as Brahmanic rites such as the well-known women's ritual fasts, *vratas* or *nōṉpus*, which preserve an auspicious, domestic state for the wife. Although *Śatābhiṣekam* differs from women's ritual fasting because both husband and wife participate in it together, fundamentally it serves the end—namely, to prolong a married status for the woman. The strong influence wielded by Smārta Brahmans in South India as 'cultural brokers' has lead to the practice of traditionally Brahmin rites, such as *Śatābhiṣekam*, by a variety of caste groups. Other caste groups, such as Mudaliyārs, Cheggiyārs, and Vēḷaḷars, emulate Smārta Brahmin rituals, echo their ideas concerning ideal womanhood, and reiterate the emphasis on the domestic roles of women. Smārtas, also known as Aiyars, are a community with roots in Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada speaking areas of peninsular South Asia, and constitute one of the largest Brahmin communities in all of India. My work on *Śatābhiṣekam* takes as its starting point Bourdieu's understanding of ritual as a practice that produces and reproduces meaning.[1] Along these lines, I suggest that the performance of this ritual serves to reify and perpetuate ideas of marriage, womanhood, and domesticity already prevalent in traditional South Indian Hindu orthodoxy.

In order to understand the way these rituals and social ideas are constructed, I begin with some comments on the social and religious significance of marriage, as well as the ritually prominent position occupied by married women in urban middle class Brahmin society. This will lead to

1. P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, 1990).

ARC, The Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University
Volume 37 (2009): 223–235

a discussion of certain rites of passage linked to ideas of womanhood and domesticity in contemporary Tamil Nadu, South India. Finally, I discuss ethnographic research I conducted in the summer of 2008 in Tirukkadaiyur, a village in Tamil Nadu, concerning the performance of *Śatābhiṣekam*. Understanding these rituals provides a pathway into the complex world of women's rituals that serve to construct and dramatize the notion of domesticity as auspicious.

Cumaṅgalī as a Tamil Social, Cultural and Ritual Category

The ideal upper caste Brahmin woman in Tamilnadu is the *cumaṅgalī*, literally, the "auspicious one." This auspiciousness is grounded in two social presences in her life: that of the husband and of children.[2] The former is more auspicious than the latter. The married woman is usually accorded an almost unconditional auspiciousness, and her power is conceived as being basically benevolent.[3] The married woman thus comes to occupy the highest position, both socially as well as ritually. The construction of a married woman as auspicious comes, in part, from the idea that women are seen to possess *śakti*, or creative power. This power is incredibly potent and among orthodox Smārta Brahmins, it is believed that at puberty it can become dangerous and unpredictable if a woman is not under the control of a husband. A married woman's power, on the other hand, is seen as subdued and benevolent in nature. Holly Reynolds calls attention to the fact that the term *cumaṅgalī* does not only refer to a biological and social status, but also and more importantly, "to a particular mode of female being, characterized by [the] beneficent and benevolent uses of power."[4] This power relies not on the woman independently but rather on her in relation to others, particularly to her husband and children. This point is crucial in understanding the

---

2. Vasumathi Duvvury writes that marriage in universally considered as the most important ritual in the life of a Hindu, especially a woman, she is keen to point out however, that while marriage is central to the status and integration of a woman into her community her full incorporation hinges on her achieving motherhood, especially the birth of a son. This idea does not diminish the importance of marriage as a rite but instead, augments the emphasis on domesticity, which is inclusive of both a wifely role as well as a maternal one.

3. Holly Baker Reynolds, "The Auspicious Married Woman" In *The Powers Of Tamil Women*. Ed. Susan Wadley, (Syracuse: Syracuse University, 1980), 35–60.

4. Reynolds, "The Auspicious Married Woman," 38.

tenuous position occupied by a wife in Hindu middle class society who is economically dependent on her husband. Reynolds provides an illustration of this relationship from contemporary South India. During a South Indian wedding ceremony the husband attaches a *tāli* (marriage thread) around the neck of his new wife marking her as a *cumaṅgalī*, and this action makes explicit that the husband controls the auspiciousness of his wife because he confers *cumaṅgalī* status upon her at marriage and he deprives her of it at his death.[5] In an effort to keep her *tāli* strong, a woman not only altruistically seeks to keep her husband alive, but she also attempts to keep hold of her own power or *śakti*.[6] Reynolds writes that, "Women are credited with the power (*śakti*) to control and alter the course of events in order to save their husbands from death and to provide their families with wealth, health, and prosperity. Some say that the power of the married woman is so great, in fact, that no being, animate or inanimate, human or divine, can match it."[7] Marriage and the birth of a son thus ensure that her powers will remain under male control. This ritual potency held by woman can be seen in many different ways, one example is the *poṭṭu*, in fact, "some Hindu women believe that placing a *poṭṭu* on their forehead has a positive impact on the length of life of her husband, present or future."[8]

As a model of womanhood, the married woman bears recognizable marks that announce her auspicious state. Mary Hancock draws a perfect image of a devoted socially respectable woman, one whose bearing is modest, whose hair is neatly plaited, dressed in silk, wearing gold bangles, a wedding necklace (*tāli*), ornamented with a *poṭṭu* and daubs of *kuṅkumam*. These woman are described as "Lakṣmī-like" (*laṭcumikaramāka*) and having living husbands encompass the highest levels of auspiciousness (*maṅkalam*).[9] The privileges and high status granted to a *cumaṅgalī*, as well as the reverence towards her at her death, point undoubtedly towards a culture that greatly emphasizes domesticity. While the status of a married

5. Reynolds, "The Auspicious Married Woman," 45.

6. Reynolds, "The Auspicious Married Woman," 50.

7. Reynolds, "The Auspicious Married Woman," 35.

8. Vijaya Rettakudi Nagarajan, "Threshold Designs, Foreheads Dots, and Menstruation rituals: exploring Time and Space in Tamil Kolams." In *Woman's Lives, Woman's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition*. ed. Tracy Pintchman, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 85–108.

9. Mary Hancock, *Womanhood in the Making; Domestic Ritual and Public Culture in Urban South India* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), 103.

woman is promoted in orthodox Tamil Brahmin society, the widow is disparaged. In fact, the idea of a married woman as auspicious and socially upright is perhaps best illustrated by the contrast in status held by the widow in traditional Hindu orthodoxy.

The word widow (*vitavai*) is most often associated with capricious power; and represents the most inauspicious of all things to orthodox Brahmins.[10] Widows are, for the most part, considered outside the sphere of ritual practice. By becoming an *amangalī* (inauspicious woman), she is no longer considered a part of the normal female world. In her ethnography of contemporary Smārta Brahmin women's rites of passage, Vasumathi Duvvury notes that, "To live and die a sumangali . . . is the greatest ambition of women and their major fear is becoming a widow."[11] Widowhood must therefore be, at all cost, avoided. The significance Brahmanic middle class society places on the married woman is best depicted through the direct worship of the married woman. This temporary deification of married women in ritual practice compounds positive associations with *cumaṅgalī*hood and furthers women's desires to maintain their social and ritual status. The veneration of women is seen occurring in Brahmanic orthodoxy as well as in more radical esoteric traditions.

On the Veneration of Women

The veneration of woman occurs in both Brahmanic and Tantric milieus. Within Brahmanic context the worship of women takes a Sanskritically acceptable form as the veneration of the married woman. This ritual (*Suvāsinī pūjā*), where the devotee asks for the blessing of both living and ancestral *cumaṅgalīs*, highlights the married woman's auspicious nature. The worship of women is also extended to the worship of auspicious young girls, being virgins, they represent all aspects of purity. Within a Tantric context the worship of women includes that of the virgin but extends to all manner of woman and takes on a distinctly antinomian form. These rituals include highly sexualized practices such as *yoni pūjā* that serve primarily as a means for the adept to harness the power of *śakti*. Śrīvidyā,

---

10. Reynolds, "The Auspicious Married Woman," 36.

11. Vasumathi K Duvvury, *Play, Symbolism, and Ritual; A Study of Tamil Brahmin Women's Rites of Passage* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1991), 227.

which straddles the boundaries as both esoteric and Brahmanic in origin has interwoven these two forms for worshiping women. Here, the ritual substance consists of worship oriented towards the married woman with the aim of harnessing her auspicious power.

A) Veneration of Women in a Brahmanic Context

Within a normative Brahmanic context the worship of women is most often directed towards married women. Two epithets for this form of worship are *suvāsinī pūjā* and *cumaṅgalī prārthanā*. In *suvāsinī pūjā*, nine *cumaṅgalīs* are offered food, hena, bangles, and *arati* is performed before them. This ritual is very much part of Smārta religious culture and is very much a part of *Śrīvidyā* as will be discussed in a subsequent section. These rituals, which fall under the category of *cumaṅgalī pūjā*, pay tribute to married women in connection to the past *cumaṅgalīs* of any given lineage. Vasumathi Duvvury explains that *cumaṅgalī prarthanā* is the worship of a group of *cumaṅgalīs* (the number fluctuates from function to function) and one young virgin girl (*kanyā ponnu*) who are understood to collectively represent one's dead auspicious ancestors. These women are fed, presented with flowers, *tāmbūla* [Betel leaves], *dakṣiṇā* [money], and small auspicious items such as bangles, small mirrors etc . . . (133). *Cumaṅgalī prārthanā* can be conducted on any auspicious day during the week before a marriage celebration, but is also performed before *upanayana* and *simantonnayana* (a rite performed in the husband's house by his family during a woman's first pregnancy), and during the performance of *nōnpus* such as *Varalakṣmī Nōnpu*. Duvvury gives the following account of this ritual:

> The sumangalis and the kanya ponnu were first given tumeric to apply to their feet and water to wash their feet. Then they were asked to sit down on planks in the puja room, then in front of each of the invited guests. P served food on the leaves starting from the leaves in the puja room. Next, all the members of P's family—men, sumangalis, and children, threw akshada (rice mixed with turmeric powder, used for all auspicious ceremonies), kumkum, turmeric powder, and flowers on the sari and blouse and the long skirt and blouse, prostrated themselves in front of them, calling out names of the dead sumangalis and praying to all the dead sumangalis and virgin girls in their lineage and seeking their blessings (ashirvada) to ensure that the performance of the marriage will proceed as

> planned and also entreating them to bless the bride and bridegroom with wealth and children . . .[12]

Duvvury notes that although women are the main participants in this ritual, one should not forget that men are still critical players. It is, after all because of them that these woman are considered *cumaṅgalīs*.[13] This point is significant as it calls attention to the fact that it is the position of these women as *cumaṅgalīs* that makes them worthy of worship in this context.

Another occasional form of worship directed toward women is *kumārī pūjā*, this is the worship of young girls as embodiments of the goddess. This ritual is performed within a variety of contexts, the most common example occurring during Navarātri, where the rite feeds into a discourse surrounding purity and the young girl's inactive sexuality.[14] During this festival these young girls are looked upon and worshipped as incarnations of the goddess Durgā, and after the worship is complete, the young girl blesses the devotee who has performed the ceremony.[15]

B) Veneration of Women in Tantric Contexts

The worship of women within the Tantric context takes a radically sexualized orientation. Madhu Khanna writes that:

> One of the most interesting features of Śākta Tantra is that women share with the goddess a continuity of being. All woman, irrespective of their caste, creed, age, status, or personal accomplishment, are regarded as the physical incarnation of Śakti, the divine cosmic energy, the Great Goddess . . . for this reason, respectful sayings and tributes are paid to women exalting their saktihood and their inseparable connection with the divine counterpart in the goddess.[16]

---

12. Duvvury, *Play, Symbolism, and Ritual; A Study of Tamil Brahmin Women's Rites of Passage*, 135.

13. Duvvury, *Play, Symbolism, and Ritual; A Study of Tamil Brahmin Women's Rites of Passage*, 136.

14. For more on themes of purity in kumārī pūjā see Erndl, Kathleen. *Victory to the Mother : the Hindu Goddess of Northwest India in Myth, Ritual, and Symbol.* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1993.

15. Madhu Khanna, "The Philosophical Symbolism and Sonic Theology of the Sricakra." In *Foundations of Indian Art: Proceedings of the Chidambaram seminar of Art and Religion.* Ed. R. Nagawamy (Chennai: Tamil Arts Academy, 2002), 119.

16. Khanna, The Philosophical Symbolism and Sonic Theology of the Sricakra, 114.

Women in Śākta Tantra receive special consideration in the textual tradition: for example, there is an attempt to secure their good treatment in the *Kulārṇava Tantra*. The *Kulārṇava Tantra* offers prescriptive ideas about the veneration of woman stating that, "Kṛṣṇāṁśuka, kṛṣṇavarṇā, Manoharā and young virgins should be worshipped like Deities"(213). The *Kubjika Tantra* outlines worshipping both one's own wife and the wives of others as goddesses, repeating mantras 108 times and seeing the woman as the symbolic form in which the goddess dwells. In the case of *kumārī pūjā* which is often performed during the nine day festival of *Durgā pūjā* it details the worship of young virgins, primarily girls ranging from one to sixteen years, (girls from the ages of six to nine years old are especially to be desired), such worship is said to grant devotees all wishes.[17]Another Tantric text, the *Guptasādhanā Tantra*, speaks of the nine types of virgin girls who may incarnate the goddess, being the actress, prostitute, Brahmin woman, low caste woman, wives of washerwoman and barbers, and daughters of a *kāpālika* (skull carrying) ascetic, cowherds, or garland maker.[18] The *Kulārṇava Tantra* also prescribes *kumārī pūjā* indicating that, "In the month of Aśvin (seventh month of Hindu calendar) one should worship nine virgins. The Sādhaka with pure mind and with devotion extend[s] invitations to them in the morning" (184). It also assures the benefits of such practice promising that, "One who performs the worship of nine Virgins every year, that virtuous Sādhaka obtains the benediction of the Devatā and fulfilling his hearts desire obtains residence in Your proximity" (186). The main differentiation between Tantric *kumārī pūjā* and its Brahmanic counterpart is that in Tantric practice this type of worship focuses on the young girl's sexual potential as opposed to her purity. For the adept, it provides an opportunity to harness the young girl's potential sexual power.

In a Śākta Tantric context, the worship of women becomes a highly sexualized practice. The more radical dimension of female sexuality is iconized in the form of sexual rites such as those outlined in the *Yonitantra*. The *Yonitantra* prescribes the detailed *pūjā* of the female *yoni* as the

---

17. June McDaniel, "Does Tantric Ritual Empower Women? Renunciation and Domesticity among Female Bengali Tantrikas." In *Woman's Lives, Woman's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition*. ed. Tracy Pintchman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 159–176.

18. McDaniel, "Does Tantric Ritual Empower Women? Renunciation and Domesticity among Female Bengali Tantrikas," 161.

microcosmic abode of the goddess. Observed only by extreme Tantrikas of the Kaula sect, this rite centers around the five *pañcamakāra* (wine, meat, fish, parched grain, and ritualized sex) which are made as offerings to the goddess. In this ritual the woman is looked upon as the human embodiment of the goddess on the earthly plane. Madhu Khanna explains that the ritual consists of the arousal and sublimation of latent sexual energy by uniting the twin ideal of the enjoyer and renouncer in *bhogātmaka* yoga, a unique form of Tantric yoga centered on the enjoyment of the sublime senses.[19]

C) Veneration of Women in Śrīvidyā

The sexualized veneration of women found in Tantric practice undergoes a de-radicalization when it reaches contemporary urban *Śrīvidyā*, in which the socially normative worship of the married woman in enjoined to the radical elements belonging to Tantric tradition, are glossed with a more domesticated worship, that of *Suvāsinī pūjā*, popularly undertaken by Smārta Brahmin *Śrīvidyā* practitioners. Here the transgressive elements of Tantric ritual are veiled by the domestic rites of *Suvāsinī pūjā*. The Tantric undercurrents are therefore only recognizable to the initiate. The ritual performance of *Suvāsinī pūjā* within Śrīvidyā is imbued with a Tantric dimension by envisioning the subject of worship as the physical embodiment of the goddess Lalitā. As part of this ritual, the image of the goddess is worshiped and then her power is visualized symbolically transferring to the woman designated as the *Suvāsinī*. The women who receive this ceremonial worship, are empowered by the goddess, and then bless the worshiper. In doing this, the tradition stresses the importance of domesticity, and places positive value on the *cumaṅgalī*. In this reinterpretation of Tantric ritual, instead of the harnessing of sexual power, commonly found in Tantra, the adept elicits transference of auspiciousness.

This ritual accentuates the position of the married woman within society as the woman who is worthy of worship. Madhu Khanna writes that this short spell of goddesshood empowers their [women's] lives with sacred meaning.[20] The meaning of such ritual shifts within the context of Śrīvidyā providing a sanitized middle ground between Brahmanic orthodoxy and the

19. Khanna, "The Philosophical Symbolism and Sonic Theology of the Sricakra," 119.
20. Ibid., 199.

sexualization of esoteric practices. This practice is therefore sufficiently accessible, and can be transported into popular culture. The effect of this type of worship is that it reinforces the status of the married woman as desirable and helps us understand social and religious incentives that cause women to undertake rituals in order to safeguard their married status.

Nōṉpu as a means of Protecting Married Life

Among urban, middle class Brahmans, especially *Smārtas*, the very idea of auspiciousness or blessedness is associated with marriage, married women and mothers.[21] As Nagarajan remarks, "it is traditionally the woman who is understood to be responsible for death, primarily the death of her husband."[22] Therefore a class of women's rituals, whose intention is to extend the life of the woman's husband has evolved thus ensuring her status as a married woman. One example of this is the performance of *nōṉpu* by married women. Holly Reynolds describes *nōṉpu* as "rituals of fasting, worship, praise, and mythic reenactment that women perform without male involvement."[23] Leslie Orr records inscriptions of the performances of such rites as early as the tenth century.[24]

Sāvitrī or *Karadaiyar nōṉpu* is a vow that is a woman's rite, in the sense that the participants and ritual specialists are only women. It is observed at the threshold between the months of Masi and Panguni (approximately March and April). This ritual, revolving around the protection of the husband, finds its origins in the myth of Sāvirtī. Sāvitrī insists on marrying Satyavān even though she has been warned he will die one year after their wedding. In preparation, Sāvitrī undertakes rigorous penance as the day approaches. When Satyavān dies, Sāvitrī follows Yama, lord of death, refusing to leave her husband. Her devotion and intelligence ultimately convince Yama to return her husband to life. Along similar lines, the ritual I will be focussing on for the remainder of this paper also focuses on themes of longevity and shares a parallel thematic narrative with that of *Sāvitrī nōṉpu*.

---

21. Duvvury, *Play, Symbolsim and Ritual*, 227.
22. Nagarajan, "Threshold Designs, Foreheads Dots, and Menstruation rituals," 87.
23. Reynolds, "The Auspicious Married Woman," 50.
24. Leslie C Orr, "Domesticity and Difference/Woman and Men: Religious Life in Medieval Tamilnadu." In *Woman's Lives, Woman's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition*. ed. Tracy Pintchman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 109–130.

A striking parallel to this narrative of Sāvitrī occurs in the context of the performance of the *Śatābhiṣekam* ritual. In Tamil Nadu, *Śatābhiṣekam* has been connected to the temple of Siva in his form as Amṛtaghateśvara ("Lord of the Pot of Ambrosia"). Devotees at the temple explain the connection between the temple and the ritual of *Śatābhiṣekam* by recounting a myth that echoes with the story of Sāvitrī and Satyavān: Mārkaṇḍeya, a young boy, was predestined to die on his seventeenth birthday. The boy was devoted to Śiva and one year before his appointed death undertook a pilgrimage leading to Tirukkadaiyur where Yama came to end his life. Mārkaṇḍeya pledges loyalty to the Śivalinga at Tirukkadaiyur and Śiva emerges, killing Yama and granting Mārkaṇḍeya eternal youth. For this act Śiva is given the name Kalasamhara "death of death".

These myths share both narrative and ritual parallels. Thematically, they are based on rescue from untimely death, in the case of Sāvitrī, by a wife for her husband, and in the case of Mārkaṇḍeya, by Śiva for his devotee. In both cases the interceptor emerges victorious. The remainder of this paper will focus on the meanings of *Śatābhiṣekam* to devotees at the Tirukkadaiyur temple, and is based on ethnographic interviews I conducted at Tirukkadaiyur during the summer of 2008.

Śatābhiṣekam

Although reasons for the performance of *Śatābhiṣekam* at Tirukkadaiyur are still obscure, the fact remains that thousands of people visit this site for this exact purpose. The association between the Mārkaṇḍeya myth and the ritual performance is not clear. One informant suggested that because Mārkaṇḍeya was 16 years old when he was granted eternal youth, hence *Śatābhiṣekam* is performed in the 61st year, thus reversing the number.

Despite the convenience of such an explanation, this understanding did not seem to be widespread. Today, Tirukkadaiyur is a popular pilgrimage spot for worshippers of both Siva and his consort, the goddess Apirāmi, to whom a large shrine is dedicated in the temple complex. Although *Śatābiṣekam* is an extremely popular and fast growing ritual, its neglect in scholarly writings on Hindu rites of passage is rather surprising. "*Śatābiṣekam*" serves as an umbrella term, referring both to itself as well as to *ṣaṣṭhīyāptapūrti*, the "fulfillment of 60 years". Strictly speaking, a *ṣaṣṭhīyāptapūrti* is a ritual remarriage of a couple that takes place of the

husband's 61st birthday and *Śatābhiṣekam* takes place on the husband's 81st birthday. The service is conducted by Brahmin priests and constitutes a full marriage ceremony including the sacred fire and the retying of the *tāli* by the husband on his wife. One woman explained the reason for *Śatābhiṣekam* was to prolong married life, "In general they are praying to prolong the lives of both the wife and the husband, but also the wife can be praying for her husband—mostly it is to stay together as a couple." The Tirukkadaiyur temple currently performs more than 50 marriage ceremonies a day.

Why has this ritual become so important among contemporary South Indian Hindus? The answer is twofold: firstly, this rite reflects the high value placed on domesticity, as well as the prominent position occupied by the householder in urban middle class Brahmin society. This ritual reiterates issues surrounding womanhood and echoes both a celebration of the ideal of the married woman and animates the potential fear or anxieties around widowhood. The second reason for its growing popularity is found in its origins as a Smārta Brahmin ritual, and the position occupied by the Smārta Brahmin community as representatives of elite culture.

At Tirukkadaiyur, *Śatābhiṣekam* dramatizes a number of social, religious, and deeply existential concerns. For example, one informant who had performed a 61st remarriage ceremony explained that when she was married to her husband he was 44 and she was seventeen. After raising two daughters, she was very worried that something would happen to her husband. She also mentioned that she no longer had a father, a fact that seemed to add to her anxiety. This anxiety over the longevity of the husband brought the couple to Tirukkadaiyur to worship the Goddess Apirāmi and renew their wedding vows. It is worth pointing out that the maintenance of their householder status hinges on both their continued existence, however, from her explanation we can understand that it was her anxiety over his death in particular, made worse by the fact that she had neither father nor male heirs to look after her, that provided the impetus to perform *Śatābhiṣekam*. This anxiety therefore emerges as a gendered experience. One male informant expressed that he felt one of the main reasons why a woman would want to perform *Śatābhiṣekam* is to protect her marriage: "She does not want to loose her power, she does not want her husband to loose his life before her." Another male informant, Radja V, expressed that he felt one of the main reasons why a woman would want to perform *Śatābhiṣekam* is to guard her marriage: "... *Śatābhiṣekam* is to protect her

marriage. By elongating her life and her and her husband's life as a marriage couple she protects herself from becoming a widow, she wants to make sure she remains a *cumaṅgalī*, so that her husband does not lose his life before her." These expressions reemphasize the societal importance placed on remaining a *cumaṅgalī*, and speak directly to a woman's fears of the loss of her husband, and with him, her class identity.

Today, the practice of *Śatābhiṣekam* has transcended its origins as a Smārta Brahmin ritual. Although still performed in *Smārta* circles; it is now performed by a variety of caste groups. The popularization of this ritual can be, at least in part, attributed to the fact that multiple caste groups seek to emulate Smārta Brahmin practices, which to some degree establish class norms. Mary Hancock in her book *Womanhood in the Making* provides an indepth historio-political account of how Smārta Brahmins ascended to their current position as 'cultural brokers,' wielding immense religious and social power and influence. The term "cultural broker" was first coined in the work of anthropologist Milton Singer, who argued that Smārtas were among the culture brokers who disseminated Sanskritic Hinduism regionally and transregionally, incorporating localized, orally transmitted, "little traditions" into a composite "great Tradition".[25] More recently, Smārtas have developed a discourse on national culture that has been influential in Indian cultural politics and in the production of scholarly knowledge about South Asia.[26] Hancock goes so far as to identify the normative images of womanhood, domesticity, and tradition at the heart of self-representation and at the heart of nationalism in South India, as largely constructed by the discourses produced by the Tamil *Smārta* Brahmin community.[27]

In fact, the *Smārta* community is so influential that their authority extends past their immediate community and penetrates other caste groups—especially middle caste business communities such as Cheggiyārs and Mudaliyārs, and Vēḷaḷars—that seek to emulate Brahmin elite cultural practices in order to gain social mobility through these caches. This religious and cultural emulation can be seen today at Tirukkadaiyur, where it is not just *Smārtas* who are practicing the ritual of *Śatābhiṣekam*.

---

25. Hancock, *Womanhood in the Making; Domestic Ritual and Public Culture in Urban South India*, 6.
26. Ibid., 67.
27. Ibid., 10.

Women performing such rites as *Śatābhiṣekam*, which reemphasizes the place of the married woman in middle class society, or *nōṉpu*, which exemplifies the idea that a woman's ritual actions exert control over her husband's well-being, fortify social structures related to ideas of elite womanhood. Craddock writes that, "Ritualization creates a spatial/temporal environment in which an individual embodies and enacts structures of personal and social meaning within a perceived field of possibility."[28] These rituals consolidate ideas surrounding womanhood and domesticity and articulate a class and caste based hierarchy of status. In her work on Hindu women's rituals in contemporary North India, Tracy Pintchman notes that people who participate in ritual practices become embedded in larger communities that maintain particular social norms and values.[29] Such is also the case here, where participants actively perpetuate ideas surrounding womanhood and marriage, reifying social norms by bolstering favourable inclinations towards domesticity.

---

28. Elaine Craddock, "The Anatomy of Devotion: The life and Poetry of Karaikkal Ammaiyar" In *Woman's Lives, Woman's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition*. ed. Tracy Pintchman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 131–148.

29. Tracy Pintchman, *Woman's Lives, Woman's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.