

Ritual Form and Ritual Choice among Mauritian Hindus

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People's motivations to partake in religious rituals often relate to external socio-cultural forces such as tradition, ancestry, and peer-pressure, or deep personal convictions centered around devotion, gratitude, or spiritual experience, among others. Simultaneously, however, devotees may also have pragmatic motivations for practicing rituals, such as the need for protection, wellbeing, or socializing, or may see those rituals as a means of fulfilling their wishes. Importantly, the deity addressed in the ritual largely defines the scope and area of divine intervention and help. But all else being equal, why do people choose to engage in the specific rituals that they do, especially given that some are much costlier than others? Our fieldwork suggests that perceived ritual efficacy could be a key cognitive factor at play: people seek rituals that they consider appropriate (in terms of their structure and focus) and proportionate (in terms of their costs) to their needs and expectations. This almost contractual logic of ritual performance is best demonstrated by the concept of promise that is quintessential to the biggest religious festivals of three Hindu communities in Mauritius discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Mauritius, religion, ritual, motivations, efficacy, costs, promise, sacrifice

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1. Introduction

Asking informants directly about the meaning and purpose of their traditions can often be a bewildering endeavor for ethnographers. Some people are unable (or simply do not find any need) to provide a justification for practicing their rituals. They may shrug their shoulders and say that they do not know why – that this is simply what they do, or that they never gave it much thought. Others defer the answer to collective wisdom and the weight of tradition, by saying that they practice those rituals because they have always been done like that. Other forms of deference include agents, such as the elders, ancestors (whether real or mythical), or deities (Bloch, 2005). In many cases, these acts of deference can be multilayered. For example, members of the younger generations may defer the ethnographer to the elders, who may point to the local religious experts, who, in turn, may assert that only their ancestors or gods know the true meaning and purpose of their rituals (Xygalatas, 2012).

While tradition and socialization are undoubtedly important reasons for participation, they are not the only reasons. Upon further reflection, informants tend to offer alternative or additional explanations for their ritual commitments. They may be motivated by deep personal convictions centered on devotion, thanksgiving, or spiritual experience. At the same time, devotees can have pragmatic motivations for engaging in rituals, such as the need for protection, wellbeing, or togetherness. Many see their ritual practices as a means of fulfilling their wishes. The latter, more intrinsic motivations rely on religious ritual as a special communication device with the supernatural and as a tool for coping with circumstances that are beyond humans' limited control (for a more detailed discussion of ritual motivations, see Xygalatas, Maño, 2022).

By their very nature, rituals are causally opaque, and how they deliver the desired outcome is therefore unclear or mysterious (Boyer, Lienard, 2006; McCauley, Lawson, 2002; Rappaport, 1979, 1999). Moreover, ritual actions are symbolic and thus bereft of inherent meaning (Humphrey, Laidlaw, 1994; Staal, 1979); such meaning is either to be discovered by the participant (e.g., via introspection or observation) or revealed by the deity (e.g., through spiritual enlightenment), or the community (e.g., by instruction or shared exegesis). Devotees often have no insight into the inner workings and true meanings of their rituals. As a result, when a multitude of rituals is available within a particular tradition, the choice of a specific ritual can be all the more perplexing. Given this plethora of reasons for ritual participation, how do people pick the proper ritual to begin with? We argue that these choices are not arbitrary or indiscriminate. Rather, to a significant extent, they rely on intuitive notions about ritual efficacy that are based on cues derived from the ritual's structural properties, such as ritual costs (e.g., time, money, physical hardships), form (e.g., private vs. public), or the type of agency involved (e.g., ancestors, spirits, gods).

Research shows that people make intuitive judgments about ritual efficacy. Ritual actions are perceived as special compared to ordinary actions (Kapitány, Nielsen, 2015; Nielbo, Sørensen, 2011; Herrmann, Legare, Harris, Whitehouse, 2013), and

they appear to have causal effects on the world (Woolley, Rhoads, 2017; Xygalatas, Maño, Baranowski-Pinto, 2021). These human intuitions are sensitive to certain structural properties of ritual (Legare, Souza, 2012), key among which are the cost and effort associated with their performance. Specifically, devotees tend to follow a principle of proportionality in their ritual offerings and ordeals, such that these should match their expected outcomes (Aronson, Mills, 1959). Hence there is no practical need to be familiar with the causal processes or expert knowledge pertaining to the performed ritual – if it is culturally sanctioned, practitioners can readily judge the adequacy of each ceremony for addressing a particular need. Following this proportionality logic, higher stakes or more pressing or important issues should require costlier ritual investments. A good starting point for exploring ritual choice is thus to look at the costs involved.

In the current study, we explored the connection between ritual costs and perceptions of ritual efficacy, assuming that costlier rituals would be considered more adequate for addressing important problems. In the context of ethnographic research conducted on the island of Mauritius over several years (2009–2018) of participant observation, we used a mixed-methods approach that included structured and unstructured interviews and free-lists, which allowed us to form a systematic assessment of emic perspectives on the matter. Our informants indeed seem to consider that some ritual practices are better suited than others for addressing major problems. What these practices share is that they require heavier financial, physical, emotional, and opportunity costs, and participating in them is often more binding – if it is based on a promise given to the deity.

2. Ethnographic setting

The Republic of Mauritius is a small island nation that lies in the Indian Ocean's Mascarene archipelago, roughly 900 kilometers east of Madagascar. Situated near the Tropic of Capricorn, it relishes a tropical climate with hot, wet summers and moderately warm, dry winters. The abundant summer showers maintain the thick forest vegetation on the hills and the fertile plains that cover the lowlands from coast to coast. The surrounding lagoon and ocean waters provide additional sources of subsistence and leisure.

The island's interior is crammed with serene villages, clamorous towns, and newly developed commercial complexes, such as Cyber City and Jin Fei. Over 1.3 million people inhabit this tiny island of only 2,000 square kilometers, making it one of the most densely populated countries in the world. The majority dwell in gray or color-painted cinder-block houses that are often clustered in groups of extended families and expand as these families grow. Some of the better off (mostly Franco-Mauritians) own coastal winter residences in addition to their highland homes, while many of the underprivileged (mainly Creoles) reside in tin shanties without indoor plumbing.

Despite a solid road network crisscrossing the island, the urban areas suffer from traffic jams packed with smoggy buses, noisy motorbikes, honking cabs, and impatient cars fighting for space. Besides traffic and pollution, the streets also offer plentiful meal options in the form of street stands, snack shops, and restaurants. Numerous boutiques, stores, and repair shops complete the landscape. In sharp contrast to this bustling urban scenery, an ever-increasing number of suburban malls provide shopping and entertainment options. Over a million tourists visit the island every year, savoring luxurious resorts and water sports and admiring the paradisiacal shorelines. The tourism industry is essential for the Mauritian economy and, through it, Mauritians have become increasingly involved in globalization, adopting modern lifestyles and cultural preferences.

However, the current Mauritian “success story”¹ was preceded by a dark colonial past. In its short history of existence, Mauritius hosted a harsh colonial slave system and underwent the “great experiment” after its abolition in 1835 – the massive import of indentured laborers by the British government, mostly from India (Allen, 1999). The ethnic make-up of the nation reflects these past developments. White Mauritians (or Franco-Mauritians) descended from French colonizers and British administrators, Indo-Mauritians (Hindus and Muslims) arrived mostly as indentured laborers, Sino-Mauritians migrated to the island as skilled laborers and vendors, and Creoles (Afro-Mauritians) derive their ancestry (predominantly) from African slaves.

Mauritius’ ethnic diversity is also reflected in the various religions and their numerous public manifestations. Imams’ calls break the morning serenity in cities and towns while the many Tamil and Hindu temples welcome devotees for evening prayers and chants. Church bells announce Sunday service, and Buddhist pagodas light up for Chinese New Year festivities in the capital of Port Louis. Overall, Mauritius is a highly religious yet religiously tolerant country. According to the nationwide census (Statistics Mauritius, 2012), only 0.7% of the population stated ‘no religious affiliation’. Religiosity is widely regarded as a socially desirable trait (Purzycki et al., 2018), and atheism is often considered a moral deficit (Gervais et al., 2017). In our ethnographic experience, it is much more acceptable to belong to a different religion than to not belong to any.

Mauritians readily and frequently proclaim their religious tolerance, especially when presenting their nation’s religious pluralism model to outsiders (Sisisky, 2005). Various factors contribute to the comparatively successful Mauritian model of cultural and religious pluralism, including the lack of a native population (Eisenlohr, 2006a; Sisisky, 2005); the geographical and social proximity of its communities (Benedict, 1965; Kostick, 2008; Eriksen, 1998; Patel, 2012; Sisisky, 2005); and people’s notable cultural and religious knowledge, supported by the state education system. Still, like any other social marker, religious affiliation also highlights people’s

1 A term used to refer to the at the time seemingly unlikely transition from a collapsing post-colonial sugar cane-based economy to one of Africa’s most developed nations – also known as the “economic miracle”.

differences. Alongside ethnicity and ancestry (language and culture), religion is the key attribute that defines Mauritian communities, often used interchangeably with those other markers.

The most populous religious community on the island are Hindus, who are mostly Shaivites. They comprise just under half of the population and consist of four main ethnic subgroups. North-Indian Hindus largely draw their ancestry from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and speak mainly Bhojpuri and Hindi (with varying levels of fusion with Kreol).² They are commonly referred to as Hindus. Tamils comprise almost 8% of the population and are descended from people who came from Tamil Nadu in southern India and use Tamil as their ancestral language. They are perhaps the most distinct Hindu community due to their language, religion, and long presence in Mauritius, and their main deity is Murugan (Kartikeya). Telugus (around 3% of the population) are of south Indian origin (mostly from Andhra Pradesh), and their ancestral language is Telugu. They are predominantly Vaishnavites. Finally, Marathis (< 3%), are descendants of Marathi-speaking people who came from Maharashtra in western India, and predominantly worship Lord Ganesh, the elephant god, son of Shiva (Allen, 1999; Hollup, 1994; Kostick, 2008; Sisisky, 2005; Statistics Mauritius, 2012).

Christians, in the majority, Roman-Catholic (Palmyre, 2007), include Afro-Mauritians (often referred to as Creoles), representing over a quarter of the population and drawing their ancestry from African slaves, as well as white Mauritians (typically called Franco-Mauritians),³ descendants of colonial land owners who comprise about 2% of locals. Islam is the third most prominent religion in Mauritius (17.3%), with most devotees following the Sunni tradition (Statistics Mauritius, 2012). Most Mauritian Muslims draw their ancestry from Northern India and current Pakistan and are speakers of Bhojpuri and Urdu, although many prefer to identify with the pan-Islamic movement instead, complementing and replacing Urdu with Arabic as their ritual language (Eisenlohr, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c; Emrith, 1967, 1994; Hempel, 2009; Hollup, 1996). An additional 1–2% are Buddhists, virtually all of them Sino-Mauritians (Statistics Mauritius, 2012).

Frequent exchange between those religious groups often results in syncretism and conversion as well as dual affiliation. For example, many Sino-Mauritians identify as Christians but practice Buddhism alongside Christianity, and some Hindus may pray to Jesus and Mary alongside the Hindu pantheon (Xygalatas et al., 2016; Xygalatas et al., 2017). This religious pluralism is often endorsed and encouraged by state policies

2 Kreol is the lingua franca of most Mauritians – this is the language they speak daily and use in most interactions (with friends, family, colleagues, etc.). It originated in the 18th century as a language of the (mostly African) slaves, which they used amongst themselves and vis-a-vis their French masters. The language itself is very adaptable, and today's Kreol has many local variants and vocabularies, depending on its users (e.g., Bhojpuri, French, or English speakers).

3 Franco-Mauritians are descendants of French settlers (mostly arriving in the 1700s), who also successfully assimilated British families arriving later (mainly in the 1800s). The tight-knit community is rather small (around 3% of the total population) and fairly endogamous, although a growing number of incoming South Africans are marrying into it.

as it is viewed as the cornerstone of Mauritian peacefulness. Consequently, the post-WWII process of religious equalization bestowed every recognized Mauritian community with at least one public holiday, allowing each community to celebrate its main religious festival on a national scale.

Among those festivals, the biggest celebration for Hindus, and the biggest ritual gathering in Mauritius, is Maha Shivaratri, the “Great Night of Shiva”. People from all around the island go on pilgrimage to *Grand Bassin* (or *Ganga Talao*), a sacred lake at the heart of the island’s main rainforest. Pilgrims carry decorated *kanwars* (mobile altars) on their way to the lake’s shore, where they join in prayers and ritual offerings to Shiva. After completing their pilgrimage, they carry some water back to pour it on their temple’s Shiva lingam. Another popular annual Hindu celebration is Durga Puja, a harvest festival that also commemorates the goddess’s defeat of the demon Mahishasura.

The Thaipusam Kavadi is the most important religious gathering of Mauritian Tamils, yet its popularity has been increasing even beyond the community. This festival commemorates Murugan’s triumph over demonic forces and is observed in all major Tamil neighborhoods and settlements. The celebrations climax with a long procession by devotees who have their bodies pierced with needles and skewers (symbols of Murugan’s emblematic spear), and carry decorated shrines (*kavadis*) on their shoulders or drag chariots hooked to their skin (Xygalatas et al., 2013a). The Thaipusam Kavadi is one of the most painful and exhausting rituals in Mauritius (Xygalatas et al., 2019), attracting both admiration and condemnation (Xygalatas et al., 2021). Additional favorite Tamil traditions involve the *Marche sur les sabres* (sword-walking) and Thimidi (firewalking).

The anniversary of Lord Ganesh, Shiva’s elephant son, is celebrated at the Ganesh Chaturthi, the most important festival of the Marathi community (Maño, 2019). Every year, some families host god Ganesh by placing his statue on an altar at the center of their household or the local temple. It is a time of late-night visits to family, friends, and neighbors, where guests feast and pray together with their hosts in front of the effigy. Throughout the festivities, which must last at least three days, local groups of dancers and musicians tour the island and perform every night till early morning. The celebrations peak with a procession to a seaside or riverbank, joined by the sounds of loud music, chants, prayers, and dance. At the site, family delegates submerge themselves collectively into the water while holding Ganesh’s effigies, hoping to have their wishes fulfilled in exchange for their offerings. Other prominent Marathi festivals include Gudi Padwa, which welcomes the new year and the arrival of spring, and Shivaji day, devoted to a legendary Marathi hero who defeated Moghul intruders in Maharashtra. Mauritian Marathis regard Shivaji as their nation’s unifier and hence deem the festival their National Day.

In addition to these costly rituals, there are several, less costly joyous or solemn celebrations. For instance, Holi, the festival of colors, is an ancient spring festival commemorating the victory of good over evil and marking the commencement of harvest in its place of origin (since Mauritius lies in the southern hemisphere, the

timing of the festival does not agree with its agrarian cycles). Festivities begin with lighting a bonfire and burning effigies of the demoness Holika on the eve of Holi. The following day, people take to the streets to smear each other with colorful powders.

The Ganga Snan (Asnan) is a purification ritual for Hindus, who go to the seashores to pray and make offerings to Ganga, the water goddess of purity. According to one mythological interpretation, Ganga rested on Shiva's head to cool him down after he drank all the poison released into the world by daemons. The ceremony is thus strongly linked to India's river Ganges. Since the sacred Ganges River runs into the Indian Ocean, bathing in the ocean on that occasion is said to wash away sins. Nevertheless, some Mauritians meet at the Ganga Talao Lake in the island's center, which, legend claims, springs from the Ganges itself. In 1972, local religious authorities held a ceremony that strengthened the bond with the Ganges by pouring its sacred water into the lake.

Other popular Hindu rituals include Divali (also known as the festival of lights), where people commemorate the triumph of light over darkness by lighting candles, lamps, and lanterns; Rakhi – the recognition of sibling ties signified by a Rakhi bracelet and gift-giving; and the fore-walking ritual of Thimithi, as well as various forms of personal and collective prayers (*Pujas*). Interestingly, when we surveyed 25 Mauritians about the most important religious practices in their community, they provided a list of 36 distinct rituals (Xygalatas, Maño, 2022).

Notably, these ritual traditions were imported from India, which is still considered a somewhat sacred and idealized motherland by many Hindu Mauritians.⁴ The connection to India is maintained in various ways, such as visiting the country, watching Indian television programs, or maintaining strong political ties at the state level. Moreover, a common practice among Mauritian devotees is to invite highly esteemed ritual specialists from the Indian subcontinent to serve in local temples, which adds to their prestige.⁵ However, the Indian priests are often surprised to discover that most Mauritians nowadays prefer speaking Kreol instead of their ancestral languages and practice rituals that have significantly diverged from their place of origin. For instance, whereas Kavadi is a rather marginal rural festival in India, in Mauritius it has evolved into one of the largest urban religious gatherings.

3. The question of ritual choice

Given this abundance of ritual practices, how is one to prioritize? No doubt, some of the major factors that influence ritual choice are external to the individual. Religious background and socialization, socioeconomic status, and even geography, shape people's rituals habits and preferences. If you grew up in a Marathi coastal village, you would probably celebrate Ganesh Chaturthi and Gudi Padwa in your family,

⁴ Many lose the idealism after visiting India.

⁵ Alternatively, local priests travel to India to get trained and educated in religious matters.

attend monthly prayers (*Pujas*) at the temple and have a traditional Marathi wedding in adulthood. Such factors notwithstanding, a cognitive approach may be useful when trying to understand people's motivations, all else being equal, for favoring specific rituals over others.

In our ethnographic fieldwork with Mauritian Hindus, we have encountered a wide variety of reasons for participating in religious rituals (Xygalatas, Maño, 2022). Out of these, we identified four main categories that reflect different determinants of ritual choice and behavior. First, many people relate to their cultural preferences and ancestry, as in statements like “As a Marathi, I pray Lord Ganesh”, or “The Hindus, they pray Shiva”. Alternatively, devotees rely on mythical explanations as in “celebrating Murugan's victory over demons”. Such reflections correspond to the processes of enculturation described above, although they are not at odds with worshipping different deities, even those of other religious groups. Other than deeply personal motivations, these kinds of responses rather capture cultural identity, customs, and norms, such as which deities to worship or what events to attend.

Referring to culture and ancestry is somewhat close to a different type of reasoning, centered on various forms of deference. When asked why they perform a particular ritual, or why they perform it in a particular way, our informants often appeal to the authority of their elders, ancestors, priests, gods, or scriptures. Often, they also recall tradition in general: “We have always been doing it this way” (and so it is the right way to do it). Anthropologists the world over are certainly very familiar with this kind of statement (Bloch, 2005; Xygalatas, 2012). Culture and tradition therefore tend to be prevalent external causes of ritual participation among people, our informants including. However, it is not just deference or conformity bias (‘do what most people around you are doing’) that leads to ritual participation, but also the fear of social punishment if one refuses to do so. One of our informants, a financially independent Marathi woman in her early thirties, said that she does not want to have the traditional marriage as she is “not really into it”. She then added that she will need to “bow her head and follow”, or else it would also impact her younger brother and he himself would eventually not be allowed to follow through with the traditional wedding.⁶ Nevertheless, participation in the religious festivals discussed in the ethnographic section is voluntary and is hence not reinforced by fear of social punishment.

A different sort of reasoning behind ritual participation, and one that is almost equally as prevalent, rests on tautology. Our informants often turn the question into an answer, simply by restating it with different words. Thus, when asked about their motivation to perform a ritual, they reply with “in order to pray”, “to worship the gods”, or “to do what needs to be done”. Even though such answers cannot really be interpreted as external causes in the sense described above, they are mere action descriptions, rather than direct internal motivations. Consequently, tautological

⁶ Our informant has since left the country, not least due to issues related to traditions and conservatism – there is indeed a fairly large exodus of young Mauritians who go abroad for studies or work, and many do not return.

reasoning might reflect a lack of deep personal conviction and could be employed as a “substitute” at hand. Alternatively, people sometimes plainly admit that they do not know why they (have to) conduct particular rituals. Nevertheless, with enough perseverance of the interviewer, they eventually tend to proffer some reason – usually of the sort described above or in the previous paragraphs.

On the other hand, tautological explanations can conceal a different type of reasoning, not fitting the categories discussed so far. People often have diverse personal convictions regarding ritual performance, which they sometimes openly articulate when asked. The variety of personal motivations can be considerable, ranging from the general level of very common reasons to the specific level of highly idiosyncratic answers. For example, our informants are prone to perform rituals out of gratitude, for the experience of it, for the wellbeing and protection of the family, or simply to socialize. Alternatively, they can be concrete, such as when mentioning praying or making a ritual sacrifice so that their child will pass an important exam at school, or that they will marry a beloved one, or to thank the god for curing a relative from severe illness. The type of ritual and the deity it addresses can help in defining the practitioners’ particular goals and the efficacy of the ritual procedure in reaching them. For example, since Ganesh is known as the god of wisdom and the remover of obstacles, people tend to ask him for help with education or “troubleshooting” during the Chaturthi festival. Similarly, praying to the Sun can secure daily protection and blessings, so people start every day with a morning *Puja* (prayer).

4. Ethnographic evidence

Below, we outline evidence gathered during our ethnographic fieldwork in Mauritius, conducted by Xygalatas since 2009 and Maño since 2014. Although we both focused our research on ritual, Xygalatas spent more time on the north-west coast, where he conducted participant observation among Hindi-speaking Hindus in the district of Pamplemousses, as well as in the district of Plaines Wilhems among Tamils, while Maño resided in the south, conducting participant observation among Marathis in the district of Rivière Noire. In addition, however, we both overlapped for lengthy periods at all three of those sites, where we conducted research together. During that research, we held structured and unstructured face-to-face interviews with several dozens of individuals. Rather than tabulating and quantifying those data, which vary greatly in their form, length, and context, we present here representative cases that we take to be exemplary of our overall ethnographic interpretation. Those cases include five of the most-commonly mentioned collective rituals by our informants.

Cases 1–4 are examples of participation in costly religious rituals⁷: the Maha Shivaratri, the Thaipusam Kavadi, and the Ganesh Chaturthi, which involve

7 These rituals are regarded as very costly by the informants themselves.

significant effort, pain, and/or resources. Cases 5 and 6 involve participation in two low-cost religious rituals, specifically Holi (the festival of colors) and Ganga Snan (a purification ritual), which are relatively less demanding in terms of the involved expenditures of time, energy, or money. Our selected informants represent three of the four main Mauritian Hindu communities and include two young Marathi men and an adolescent girl, two young Hindu women, and an older Tamil male. Four of those informants were university-educated at the time (one with a degree from abroad, India), and two of them had some expertise in cultural studies. Our Marathi and Tamil informants resided in a big urban agglomeration in central Mauritius, whereas our Hindu informants lived in the north, in a more rural environment. Most of the cases described below include informants talking about the rituals of their communities, except cases 1 and 3, which cover participation in out-group rituals (Marathis participating in a Hindu and Tamil festival, respectively).

Case 1 (Maha Shivaratri):

TR is a young Marathi man in his mid-twenties, who lives in the central high-plateau city of Curepipe. He has a university degree and works for an international company in Ebene. He is married to a Telugu, who converted to his religion, learning the Marathi language and rituals along with it.⁸ One weekend afternoon, we were discussing spiritual and religious matters at his cousin's place. In the excerpt below, we talked about god and his presence, particularly during the festival of Maha Shivaratri.

TR: *You need support in life, which is god... For example, during the Maha Shivaratri pilgrimage, the temperature always drops to 12 degrees, and it rains, and there is mist. How is it possible at that time of the year? Scientists could not explain it. It is Shiva's blessing – he likes that weather since he was resting in the Himalayas. I go to Ganga Talao but not to pray – it is a special place where you get this special feeling of god's presence and you must have felt it too there, no way you could not.*

TR's description of the pilgrimage does not involve any form of deference to ancestors or tradition. His contemplation of the event is rather spiritual, introspective, and analytical, including a pseudo-scientific argument regarding the weather. He is a young and educated man, a member of a new generation of Mauritians who are becoming more secularized and westernized. Most still follow their family traditions and cultural customs but prefer that religion does not interfere much with their political or societal views and life choices. TR admitted that he previously voted for members of parliament who were not Marathi (something that would have been rare in the past).

Still, TR is a religious man, and he believes that everyone needs divine support in their life. Later in the interview, he provided several different examples from his life where he felt such miraculous support. He also hinted that the temperature drop during the pilgrimage is a divine intervention, a *blessing* from Shiva – possibly so that

8 In fact, the wife became more familiar with aspects of Marathi culture than many Marathis themselves (including her in-laws), which made her an acceptable bride for the family and community.

people would not suffer hot conditions during their walk with heavy *kanwars*.⁹ His main motivation to go was to experience the *special place* and get a *special feeling of god's presence*. The unique *feeling* of divinity, often tied to a special event or sacred place, is a recurrent motive in pilgrimage narratives (Badone, 2007).

We have repeatedly witnessed similar personal accounts in connection to all the three major Hindu religious festivals in Mauritius. What connects all these accounts could thus be epitomized as 'experience' – of the divine, the atmosphere, or the occasion and the place. In contrast to the external causes of ritual participation, the search for experience is an internal motivational force that drives devotees to partake in the ritual event. Interestingly, for TR, prayer is not necessary to experience the special divine feeling. In his case, it is more about reaching the desired state of mind, about inner spirituality, rather than a specific request.

Case 2 (Thaipusam Kavadi):

GM is a 58-year-old Tamil male from the city of Quatre Bornes who works in the sugar cane fields. He has no advanced education and has made his living as an unskilled laborer. After years of backbreaking work in the sugar fields, which took a toll on his health, he managed to become a supervisor on the farm and is hoping to retire soon. In the interview, he talked about how he started attending the Thaipusam Kavadi as a child and how this eventually turned into a tradition for his family. He personally carried the kavadi three times in his lifetime with a pierced tongue. He emphasized the importance of conscientious preparation for the ceremony, or else an injury or failure could be risked. Finally, he elaborated on his motivations for carrying the kavadi, which were mostly health-related at first.

The first time I performed the Kavadi I was very happy, I had lots of courage. I was not scared at all, even of the needles. When I think of the Kavadi, I remember having health problems with my foot; then I came to the temple and asked the Lord to make me well, and then I would do the Kavadi. Eventually, I had the courage to do the Kavadi and saw that I was well. Now I pray for my family, and I thank Murugan because I am well now.

When I was carrying the kavadi, I felt I was not from this world; I felt Murugan was in front of me as if I were alone with him. And then, after removing the needle and the pouring of the milk, I felt I was here. I had one needle in my tongue. I participated in the Kavadi because I was not feeling well, so if I got well, I would thank Murugan. During my sickness I did the Kavadi – I started recovering while I was doing it; even during the procession. Then I did it again, and I was already feeling well, with no pain, and I felt great, like in the sky. I did it again because I had felt something during my prayers, so I want to encourage my children to continue this prayer. It has become like a tradition; in a way, it is like thanksgiving to Murugan. I believe that while doing this prayer, I will certainly gain something. So, it is important to do it again. When they put a needle in me, it was like an ant's bite. It was very simple, and I did not bleed, even

9 Large, decorated structures carried on shoulders or dragged on wheels to the place of worship.

when they removed it. ... Walking for a distance did not feel difficult, because I was in another world. I think it is painful for many people but because they are not fasting well. You have to be disciplined while fasting, and then everything works well.

My memory of my first Kavadi is very clear in my mind. I remember when I put in the needle, when I took the kavadi, how I was feeling... as clear as if it was happening now. When I remember it, it is like reliving it. Now when I remember it, I feel it as if I were there. Even being in the temple is like being there. It is a fairly strong positive feeling, and it is very intense.

GM's recollection of these past events introduces an experienced perspective that one only gets with age. Over the years, his remembering became "polished" and stabilized into a well-developed, story-like narrative. The possible (and probable) departure from the original experience in no way diminishes the personal and social significance of the narrative – if anything, it betrays the opposite. For GM, attending the Kavadi became a life-changing and transformative act that helped define his religious identity and faith for the rest of his life. Such a "game-changing" experience is not uncommon in the context of this intense ritual, which can be tremendously painful and exhaustive, yet, at the same time, rewarding. Together with the ritual's exceptional extravagance (comprising multiple sensory channels), its intensity and physicality surely contribute to making it an unforgettable ordeal for the participants (Whitehouse, 2004). Indeed, those who go through such an ordeal tend to report "flashbulb" memories of the event (Whitehouse, 2004; Xygalatas et al., 2013b), as also demonstrated in the example above – GM's memory of his first Kavadi is very lucid and remembering it feels like *reliving it again*.

Nevertheless, an intense feeling of 'happiness' and 'positivity' penetrates the overall ritual experience, or the remembering thereof (Fischer et al., 2014). Apart from the physical and mental hardships, our informants often stress how they benefit psychologically and emotionally. Still, according to GM, such a rewarding experience can only be reached through 'fasting' and 'discipline' preceding the ritual procession. In our fieldwork, this is another recurrent theme regarding ritual experience and efficacy – for it to be a positive experience and a successful 'sacrifice', one needs to prepare accordingly and restrict oneself by fasting and abstaining from alcohol, sex, or comfort, etc.

GM believes that his preparation, discipline, and devotion led to a successful Kavadi on his part, and to the fulfillment of his wish by Murugan, that is, to cure his sick leg. The healing process started immediately during the procession and GM went through a very spiritual and mystic experience while walking, not unlike TR at Ganga Talao (Case 1). Despite the crowds, the noise, and the bustle at these events, such an out-of-the-world experience is not uncommon among the devotees. Out of gratitude for the cure, GM felt he needed to do the Kavadi again. Later, he did it for the benefit of his family too, so that they would also remain well.

Finally, GM decided to pass the baton to his children once he got too old to carry on. By doing this, he created a tradition in his family, which continues to live on – his children and relatives actively and proudly partake in the Kavadi procession every

year. Likewise, when we ask younger informants why they practice the ritual, many refer to tradition, ancestors, and their elders.

Case 3 (Thaipusam Kavadi):

MR is a young Marathi woman in her late teens from the city of Curepipe. She is a secondary school student and sister of TR from Case 1. She chose to walk the Kavadi procession at the event happening in Henrietta and Vacoas, where a substantial Marathi population resides. During the festival, she stayed with her relatives who live in the area. In the transcript below, we present a short account of her involvement in the ritual.

MR was carrying the milk¹⁰ for her private reasons, which she did not share with the rest of us – she only said she made a promise and to get what she wished for she needed to walk with the burden and make offerings. She also believed that this particular way of sacrifice is more powerful than the practices in her community. The weather conditions that day were extreme, as is typical for that time of the year – the sun was burning, and the humidity was skyrocketing, making the whole walk even more demanding and exhausting.

Later at the family's house, after the walk, MR's future sister-in-law was questioning MR's participation. MR replied that each community has its own way of sacrifice, and the Tamils have the Kavadi. She said she did it because it is more powerful than just fasting, for example, as Marathis do. She said she made a promise and to get what she asked for she needed to do that sacrifice. She said next year maybe she will do it again if it will be possible; like there will be no death in the family or something else. TR (her brother) said that maybe she did it for a boy or something. His fiancée said she would not be able to do it like that and said she prefers to take action herself if she wants directly to achieve something.

MR made a promise to Murugan to walk the procession in his honor to get what she asked for in return. But she did not share the promise she made with her kin or with the ethnographer. Half-jokingly, her brother speculated that she might have done it 'for a boy', which would not, in fact, be all too surprising. Doing the ritual to find a spouse or to have a good marriage is a common practice, although many keep such motive a secret. Importantly, MR believed that to walk with the burden and to make her offerings is a sacrifice big enough to successfully reach her goal. In other words, she wanted to make sure that her wish will be paid for enough through her fulfilled promise. In addition to the ritual suffering of her choosing, the weather was particularly harsh that day too; it was very hot and humid, with a cloudless day, thus scaling up the already painful and exhaustive experience of the ritual ordeal.

Nevertheless, MR still chose to undergo this experience instead of hosting the Ganesh Chaturthi event, which is the main religious festival of her community. Like

10 Unlike men, women in the procession carry a jar of milk on their heads and usually have just one piercing in the tongue.

the Kavadi, the Chaturthi is often utilized by devotees who gave the god a promise in exchange for a wish fulfilled. Moreover, the Marathi festival is undoubtedly more euphoric and less painful. Why, then, choose another ritual for making her promise? Besides possible reasons not captured in the excerpt (e.g., it could be more expensive to host), expectations of ritual efficacy seemed to be the decisive factor in MR's choice. She notes that each community has its own way of sacrifice but admits that the Tamil Kavadi is more powerful than the "Marathi way". The crucial difference seems to lay in the ritual costs since the Kavadi requires a greater personal sacrifice than *just fasting* (which is but a part of it). The logic of the act says that the more you give (sacrifice, offer), the more you can get in return from the ritual's agent, Lord Murugan. To put it differently, if you want an important wish fulfilled, you'd better choose a powerful ritual to that end, which requires you to invest a lot in exchange. In doing so, you are increasing your chances to succeed in your endeavor – that is why MR chose the out-group ritual instead of the one practiced in her community.

Case 4 (Ganesh Chaturthi):

HG is a secondary school teacher in his early 30s, coming from the Marathi community in the city of Vacoas. He studied folklore in India and is well-versed in the Marathi culture and traditions. We talked about Marathi religious life and customs in Mauritius. In what follows, HG described how the Ganesh Chaturthi festival is celebrated in Mauritius (in contrast to India), as well as the reasons people might have to host the event in their homes.

For the Lord Ganesh there is the prayer in the morning at the temple for one and a half days. Some of them (devotees) they do it in the temples; now again, the festival is not celebrated in everyone's house, ok? In India it's different, if you go to India, if there are fifteen houses here everyone will pray, everyone organizes it, but in Mauritius it's different. Again, why? Because they want to bring people together, because the community is small, they want to bring the maximum people together. So, what they do is instead of doing it individually, everyone at their place, it would be a problem. So maybe you will have only four people doing it at their place. So, what they do, for example, in one particular place, we have, let's say, fifteen Marathi people here, only maybe one or two of them will organize the event, then, all these fifteen people they come at one place.

Now there are people who organize the Ganesh festival. The thing is, some people do it just for, it comes to them, a thought, like, ok, this year I will organize. Some people they might have, it's on the devotion, maybe they have a family problem, a disease or anytime they have a problem; they made a promise to the god, they asked the god, during the prayer they asked the god please help me this year, to get me out of this problem, next year I will do it at my place. Those people in the temples now, they already have their statue there, it has been put there, every day they have to pray – for them it is compulsory to do it. Got it?

HG's account is not a personal story, but rather a commentary and description of the event from a cultural scholar's perspective – one who also happens to be a native to the culture. He highlights two main aspects of the festival: its social dimension and people's motivations for hosting the festival. First, he considers the small size of the Marathi community as a determinant of how the festival gets celebrated and organized. Because of their small numbers on the island, Marathis want to group and celebrate together whenever there is an opportunity, as opposed to individually (like in India). Therefore, hosting the festival alternates between different households each year, even though some might do so repeatedly. The festivities are thus concentrated in those particular households and temples, accompanied by night-long singing and dancing of traveling bands of (mostly young) performers. In our fieldwork on Mauritian religious rituals, we have repeatedly encountered various such mentions of community, togetherness, and celebration, as in the above example. The fact that these themes are so prevalent is hardly surprising because they are integral to collective rituals the world over (Xygalatas, Maño, 2022).

Apart from socializing and feasting, people may have both religious and pragmatic reasons (which are not at odds) to host the festival. For example, people can decide to host the event out of their devotion to the god, to show him respect by inviting him to their house and taking care of him. Devotion is a common theme in ritual participation (Xygalatas, Maño, 2022), and our informants often refer to it when they talk about their personal involvement in the rites. Importantly, devotion plays a crucial role in reputational management as devout individuals tend to be more trustworthy and cooperative in the eyes of others (Power, 2017a, 2017b; Sosis, Alcorta, 2003; Sosis, Ruffle, 2003). Hence, public acts of devotion serve to communicate with oneself, the deity, and the community.

Nevertheless, people often perform the ritual to improve their situation or benefit in some way. In practice, it could consequently be seen as an 'exchange' between a devotee and the deity, even though the devotees themselves might not always perceive it that way. A crucial term here is the concept of promise to the deity. If a wish is fulfilled or help is awarded, the receiving individual will promise the god to host the ritual event in the future as a thanksgiving act. Alternatively, people may organize the event to secure prospective divine aid with an issue or problem they currently have and that needs solving. In this latter scenario, making a promise to the god precedes the god's intervention. As we have repeatedly heard from our informants, making a promise is the hallmark reason for participation bounded to the major festivals discussed here. It is something of a binding contract between devotees and their divine helper that ought to be honored. Thus, people who take care of the effigy, either at home or in the temple, must pray and attend to it throughout the festival, else they risk a promise not fulfilled or, worse, a god displeased.

Last, but not least, since Ganesh is known as the remover of obstacles, people often turn to him to overcome problems of various sorts. As HG points out, these can be related to family matters or health, for example, which are both very common causes addressed in this ritual. Other than that, Ganesh is frequently asked to secure success

in life or business, as he can interfere with possible problems along the way. Moreover, as a god of wisdom, he is often sought out to oversee educational success and safe passage through exams for children. Asking him for help by making a promise and hosting the festival is, however, believed to be more powerful compared to an ordinary prayer or temple visit. Therefore, when the stakes are high, or if people feel obliged by deeply felt gratitude to Ganesh, they tend to choose this ritual to fulfill their promise or to thank the god for provided help. Similar “contractual” logic often applies to the other costly rituals discussed in this section.

Case 5 (Holi):

YR is a 25-year-old Hindu-Mauritian woman with a psychology degree from the University of Mauritius. She is planning to pursue an MA in counseling psychology overseas, for which she received a scholarship. YR lives in a village in the northern central region and is currently working as a researcher for an NGO. We talked about the Holi festival from her perspective as a young adult who is not particularly religious; we discussed the meaning of it, the accompanying traditions, and her own participation experience.

I participated mostly as I was younger; even at this age, I participate... What we do is we meet up somewhere, then we start where the village begins, we knock on doors, some people join in as we move along the village the group gets bigger, in other villages sometimes there are instruments and singing. Sometimes we do the whole procession, sometimes we just meet in the yard of the temple, or someone's yard who is willing to accommodate us, and we play Holi there. We also play a lot with water – we also use water guns, we fill it with colored water or use buckets. We usually celebrate after school, without a priest who has already done all the religious rituals with the elders. As kids we only play; we only have fun. Then there are other places where they wait till the evening or afternoon, so they combine everything, the religious part plus the fun part. Most of the time, we are supposed to be keeping a vegetarian diet, but that also depends on the individual.

I am not sure about the esoteric teachings about Holi, but what I slightly remember is celebrating the victory of the good over the bad. Based on what I learned and grasped from my parents and the priest, Holi is a festival to celebrate the fact that there was someone called Prahlad whose father was a king, and the son worshipped a different god than his father and his people – I can't remember which one. Therefore, the king made him sit on a pile of wood that was set on fire to see if his god would protect him. The son's aunt Holika protected him by making him sit on her. On the eve of Holi they make a wooden doll called Holika and light it up to celebrate that.

Some people don't play Holi, only the children. To play Holi means rubbing color on your family or friends' faces, it's like a game, you run away; it's fun, it's about the friends, happiness, sharing, adding colors in each other's lives. But I think some people play Holi without knowing why, some people don't even celebrate, it's like the essence, the meaning behind hasn't been passed down.

Holi is, first and foremost, a joyful occasion and a social event. People associate this festival with friends, happiness, sharing, fun, and play. Mauritians, especially youngsters, gather to have a laugh together by smashing colored powder and water on each other. It is a time to meet friends and family and share good feelings and food (in an entertaining way as in 'playing Holi'). But, there is also a strong protective element in the festivities, as they celebrate the defeat of evil and secure protection against it. The victory of the forces of good is hence the main impetus for the overall joyfulness of the event. Nevertheless, some participants, especially elders, engage in a more rigorous and modest way of celebrating on the eve of Holi when they perform religious rituals with symbolic elements from the festival's mythology (e.g., burning the *Holika*).

Holi is thus perceived as an overwhelmingly joyful and positive event with a relaxed atmosphere. It could be due to these characteristics that people do not regard their participation as a real sacrifice since it does not include any hardship, suffering, or severe self-restraint (except fasting for some people), nor a substantial financial or time commitment. Therefore, people do not usually address urgent or serious personal matters through this festival, apart from generally securing protection against evil forces. Furthermore, Holi is not a public holiday, which can be a serious external limitation on participation – due to the substantial increase in employment rates (especially among women) in recent decades, the amount of people who can fully commit to the festivities has been limited. Consequently, it is primarily youngsters and elders who observe the celebrations, albeit in different ways.

Case 6 (Asnan):

BR is a Hindu woman in her mid-thirties (33) from central Mauritius, now living with her husband on the outskirts of the capital city of Port Louis. She studied communication in India and works as an art teacher in a public primary school. Even though she is not strictly religious, she comes from a religious family – her parents and grandparents observed the rituals practiced in their community. In the paragraphs below, she describes participation in the Ganga-Snan festival and its religious significance.

Ganga is water, and Snan means taking a bath. On that day, we have a full moon, we go to the beach and pray to the deity of water. We thank for the abundance of water. Earlier, people used to fast, go pray, and return home, but now it's totally different – people will go to the seaside and fast only for 1–2 hours, pray in the water and then just enjoy themselves, even eat non-veg food afterward or drink alcohol. It's mostly about family time and enjoyment, much less about spirituality. Before, people used to follow rituals more strictly; now, we got westernized. The festival has lost its importance; participation has been decreasing, especially among the young – maybe they don't have the proper knowledge about it, they just know they have to do it, but they don't know "why". Maybe also because of lack of time – people are caught up with work. Or maybe because of the interest toward the deity, it's popularity – Ganga is a deity, one of many, whereas Shiva, for example, is a god.

I participated in the festival in my adolescence the last time, with my parents. I have been told that we have to thank the goddess for the abundance of water, and we go there (to the beach) to pray for the prosperity of our family and for help, most importantly, wash away our sins, to purify our body and soul. I remember my parents used to take coins, whirl them around their heads, and throw them into the water. Mostly we go to the seaside, but also the river connects to the ocean, you can do it on a riverbank. I think they go there for the salted water; it removes the negativity in our bodies. There is a scientific notion behind it, it's my opinion.

The Asnan is honoring Ganga, which largely defines the scope of its impact. Since bathing in the sacred river is believed to purify the body and soul, people practice it to wash away their sins and improve their physical and mental health by bathing in the sea. The goddess's power also includes securing fertility and, more broadly, prosperity or abundance through her mastery of the water element. Originally, the Asnan was followed to secure a good harvest and sufficient rain ("abundance of water"). However, the mechanization and modernization of the agricultural sector with a rapid decrease in human involvement and the different harvesting cycle in Mauritius could have contributed to the decreasing popularity of this festival on the island. Therefore, people perform the ritual mostly for reasons mentioned before or due to their culture and tradition – they know they need to do it, "but don't know why". Last but not least, people celebrate Asnan for enjoyment. They spend some quality family time at the seaside, only a small part of which is devoted to the ritual procedures, the rest being leisure.

BR also mentioned praying to Ganga for help, which could indicate that she sees the ritual procedures and offerings as a personal sacrifice that should secure the desired outcome, whatever it may be. Material offerings are indeed part of the ritual, and the ritual bath could symbolize a personal act of commitment to the deity and the cause. Nevertheless, the concepts of promise, sacrifice, or any kind of ritual barter are very scarce in the case of Asnan participation, which seems to be tied to the sacred water element and its influence on fertility, prosperity, health, and purity. Additionally, Ganga is not generally seen as being as powerful as the main gods of the Hindu pantheon, but only as a deity, one of many. Naturally, Ganga is thus not among the top choices when devotees ask for divine help in serious or urgent matters via their ritual sacrifice. Finally, like Holi, the Asnan is not a public holiday; hence, people in employment have only limited opportunities to participate.

5. Discussion – ritual choice, efficacy, and costs

People perform rituals for many different reasons. Apart from the more common and shared justifications connected to various forms of deference, cultural practices, community, and tradition, people often have concrete expectations or needs that they address through such ceremonies. As the above interviews show, these can range from getting experience and spiritual growth to socializing and communicating with the divine or other humans, and from devotion and gratitude to healing and wellbeing.

However, one must wonder why a simple prayer isn't always satisfactory in reaching these goals.

To understand why this is so, one needs to consider what the three big religious festivals (Maha Shivaratri, Ganesh Chaturthi, Thaipusam Kavadi) have in common, and how they differ from the rest. First, participation in these events requires significant personal investment of time, energy, and resources in a relatively short time span. In the case of more ordinary and regular rituals, the investments (or costs) are rationed over a longer period and in smaller doses. In contrast, the big festivals involve considerable physical exhaustion (pilgrimage, carrying of burdens, sleep deprivation), abstinence (from food, sex, or alcohol), significant financial costs (hosting the events, and building and decorating the kanwars, kavadis, or effigies), and even discomfort and suffering (tropical heat, body piercings). These costly and often unpleasant aspects of highly demanding participation are captured by the informants referring to their participation as a sacrifice.

The Holi and Asnan, on the other hand, are not viewed primarily (or at all, in the case of Holi) as substantial sacrifices. They are not dysphoric, there is no suffering involved, and both are, overall, less demanding in terms of effort and costs. In fact, Holi, with its joyous and relaxed form and vibe, could be regarded as just the opposite.

Next, one must consider the devotees' justifications for partaking in the big festivals. Very often, these are based on deeply personal, meaningful, and vital matters. For some, attending the ritual leads to a transformative and even life-changing experience. For others, it is a unique opportunity to meet god under unique circumstances; yet, others seek healing for themselves or their kin or look for divine protection and blessings. Many make the sacrifice out of deeply felt gratitude and as a way of thanksgiving and showing respect and devotion.

On the contrary, Holi is viewed as a social event defined by fun and joy, with a prospect of protection against evil. Praying to Ganga and taking an outdoor bath during the Asnan is believed to warrant prosperity, fertility, health, and physical and moral purity. The scope of the ritual impact is thus narrower and more restricted compared to the big festivals, and devotees seem to respect these limitations. These rituals are not regarded as life-changing events and there is no expectation to engage in exceptional displays of devotion. The stakes involved in the big ritual events are hence much higher for those individuals that fully commit with their minds, bodies, and resources (e.g., those carrying a kanwar or kavadi, or hosting Ganesh in their home or temple).

Therefore, to comprehend the ritual choices people make, it may be useful to examine ritual costs. What seems to be the decisive factor in people's choices is the perceived ritual efficacy. Costly rituals are regarded as more powerful (and thus more efficacious) precisely because of the costs involved. Consequently, when stakes are high or of particular importance, people tend to engage in more costly ceremonies. GM from Case 3 summed it up by saying that he will certainly gain something by doing it, even if this 'something' is vague or unknown. Scientific evidence supports the notion that humans intuitively assess ritual efficacy (Legare, Souza 2012;

Xygalatas, Maño, Baranowski-Pinto, 2021) and that these assessments are, to an extent, founded upon the costliness of rituals. In other words, the more effort that goes into participation (“the more you give”), the bigger the expected benefits (“the more you get”) (Festinger, Riecken, Schachter, 1956). In addition, devotees expect gods to reward their devotion or punish their absence (White, Norenzayan, 2022), and by conducting appropriate deferential and devotional rituals, they can secure a protective and personal relationship with the deity (Exline et al., 2021; Johnson, Okun, Cohen, 2015; Johnson, Cohen, Okun, 2016; Purzycki, Holland, 2018; White, Norenzayan, 2022).

Such a contractual logic is best reflected in the concept of promise, which is the hallmark reason to engage in the three big religious rituals. To make a promise is seen as a mutual contract with the deity, which binds the devotee to make the ritual sacrifice in exchange for the desired outcome. Alternatively, it follows previously received divine help, pledging the receiver to pay back in the form of sacrifice. People usually make a promise to the deity when there is some urgent or serious matter that needs solving or divine support. They do not make such promises lightly as doing so involves a future ritual ordeal, and failure to follow up on the promise can upset the gods and bring misfortune. The given promise and the required sacrifice follow a proportionality principle: the more you ask for, the more you need to give in return. Since the concept of promise relates mostly to the costliest rituals in Mauritius, it further supports the notion that ritual costs determine their efficacy.

Importantly, the deity addressed in the ritual largely defines the scope and area of divine intervention and help. This is another crucial aspect of efficacy judgments – turning to the most relevant god for each type of problem. However, Mauritian pluralism also allows for choosing out-group ritual alternatives when one’s own community’s options are not satisfactory. As demonstrated by MR in Case 4, an out-group ritual seemed more powerful in granting her wish, so she decided to make a promise and followed it through. Thus, the Mauritian context broadens the available ritual choices, allowing for greater flexibility in choosing the most suited alternative.

The findings presented here come from a limited sample but are representative of our overall ethnographic understanding. However, future studies may use larger samples and quantitative methods, allowing for more systematic comparisons between types of ritual participation. To further explore and decipher whether (and to what extent) costs predict perceived efficacy and, in effect, ritual choice, prospective research should concentrate on the kind, magnitude, and urgency of the stakes involved in ritual participation. The kinds of justifications provided by our informants and their relation to the various rituals could be a starting point for such an endeavor.

Other potential avenues for future investigations could involve different demographic, socioeconomic, and religiosity indicators of the informants, with analyses of their impact. For instance, how do male and female motivations for participation compare? Are women’s reflections more family-oriented? Do people who claim to be more religious sacrifice more? Do low-status people address more

existential needs through these rituals? These are just a few outstanding questions pertaining to ritual choice and practice and their relation to demographic variables that could illuminate and enrich the current findings.

To sum up, the rich religious landscape of Mauritius offers plenty of opportunities for ritual action. Despite the non-negligible role of personal life history, enculturation, and societal pressure in ritual choice, individual decision-making and rationalization are equally crucial for a complex understanding of the phenomenon. Our main takeaway is that other things being equal, devotees' specific needs combine with intuitive expectations concerning ritual efficacy and purpose to impact their choices of proper ritual action.

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