Special Issue: Sacred Objects in Religions

Dyn. Civ., 2026
Vol. 5, pp. 82-100
Doi 10.18926/70056

Generating Sacredness in the Domestic Sphere: Wedding Rituals and the Navarātri Kolu Festival in South India

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Abstract This article examines how domestic sacredness is dynamically generated, negotiated, and undone within South Indian Brahmin households. Based on ethnographic analysis of the wedding first-night ritual and the *Navarātri kolu* festival, the study shows how ritual doubling—exemplified by the marappācci dolls as symbolic doubles of the bridal couple—and the circulation of miniature utensils link life-cycle rites with annual festivals. The kolu's stepped display condenses cosmological hierarchies while activating gendered forms of ritual practice, auspiciousness (*maṅgalam*) and purity (*śuddham*). Everyday acts such as sweeping threshold, sparkling water, drawing kolam, and lighting lamps function as "religious profane" practices that continually remake the boundaries between the mundane and the sacred. Digital sharing and online kolu competitions further extend domestic sacredness into dispersed social networks. By foregrounding materiality, gender, purity, and the ephemerality of ritual arrangements, the article demonstrates that domestic sacredness is a plural, fragile and continually renewed process of making and unmaking.

Keywords Domestic sacredness, ritual doubling, miniaturization, boundary-making

1.Introduction

This article examines how sacredness is generated in South Indian households through two ritual contexts: wedding ceremonies and the (Skt.) *Navarātri* festival. *Navarātri* is a nine-night festival dedicated to the Goddess. In Tamil Brahmin homes, it takes the form of a (T.) *kolu*, stepped altar decorated with dolls and miniature objects that temporarily transform the domestic interior into a sacred space. Rather than assuming sacredness as a pre-existing essence, this article approaches domestic sacredness as a dynamic and processual condition produced through embodied ritual acts, gendered forms of domestic practice, and the continual circulation, arrangement, and dissolution of material objects. These dynamics now unfold not only within the physical household but also, increasingly, through digital circuits of sharing that extend sacred presence across dispersed social networks.

In anthropological studies of Hindu ritual, public institutions such as temples and large-scale festivals have historically received disproportionate attention, while household practices were often relegated to the domain of "private" or the "minor". Earlier studies tended to frame domestic rituals as derivative or secondary in comparison with grandeur of temple-centered worship.

In recent decades, however, this imbalance has been substantially redressed. A growing body of research—most notably the edited volumes *Nine Nights of Goddess* (Simmons, Sen, and Rodrigues 2018) and *Nine Nights of Power* (Hüsken, Narayanan, and Zotter 2021)—has placed the *Navarātri* festival and other household-centred practices at the center of analysis. These works collectively signal a decisive shift

toward recognizing the household as a crucial site of ritual production.

Over the last decade, scholarship has decisively repositioned domestic ritual including *Navarātri* from the margins of Hindu practice to the center of analytical concern. Within this shift, four strands are especially germane to the present study. First, work on materiality and dolls has clarified how *kolu* objects do not simply represent deities but do ritual work. Analyses of (T.) *bommai*/*kolu* have traced how textures, scale, and arrangement solicit tactile engagement and authorize women's curatorial labor across the nine nights, highlighting a domain in which aesthetic practice and domestic piety are coextensive (Ilkama 2018; 2021). Second, a complementary line of inquiry foregrounds the tension between creativity and normativity in Brahmin household *kolu*. Detailed case studies from Kanchipuram show that innovation—new materials, ecological messaging, elaborate dioramas—is welcomed only within boundaries of purity and propriety; when those boundaries are perceived as crossed, displays are publicly questioned, revealing how domestic sacredness is continuously policed, negotiated, and taught (Hüsken 2021). These boundaries are often articulated through culturally specific categories of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness (Skt. *maṅgalam*/*amaṅgaḷam*) and purity and impurity (Skt. *śuddham*/*aśuddham*), which play a central role in structuring domestic ritual life.

A third strand conceptualizes kolu as an aesthetics of memory. Here, the stepped display functions as a mnemonic archive: heirloom sets carry genealogies, annual re-arrangement reactivates kin histories, and narrative commentary during visits turns looking kin to remembering. This approach shows how temporary is laminated into the altar and how women's seasonal curation binds ritual time to life cycle time (Shivakumar 2018). Finally, urban ethnographies examine kolu as a site of caste and class making in contemporary South Indian cities. Attention to apartment complexes, neighborhood circuits, and middle-class publics demonstrates how hospitality, circulation, and display convert domestic interiors into semi-public arenas where social distinction is crafted alongside devotion (Wilson 2018).

Considered collectively, these contributions illuminate material practice, creative limits, mnemonic labor, and urban sociality. Yet they also open questions this article pursues: How do miniaturization and gendered practice jointly generate sacred presence beyond representation? In what ways do wedding night objects—such as the (T.) *marappācci*[1] couple, miniature utensils, grains—reappear in *Navarātri* to stitch together life-cycle rites and annual festivals? How do culturally specific notions of auspiciousness, purity, and ritual practice shape the emergence, negotiation, and fragility of domestic sacredness? And finally, how do contemporary digital circuits extend the circulation of dolls, images, and ritual aesthetics into new arenas of shared visibility and recognition?

By tracking these circulations across intimate and festive settings, this study brings

1.1. Methodological and Theoretical Framewok

To analyze how domestic sacredness is generated, negotiated, and sometimes undone through bodily practice, material circulation and sensory engagement, this study draws on a set of theoretical perspectives that conceptualize ritual as a dynamic and processual field, rather than a fixed symbolic structure.

Catharine Bell's (1992) notion of ritualization emphasizes how ritual acts strategically mark boundaries, transforming ordinary practices into authoritative ones. Through repetition, contrast, and formalization, ritualization produces distinctions of sacred and profane, authoritative and mundane. Subsequent work has shown that this perspective can be enriched by attention to the sensory and embedded dimensions through which such boundaries are lived and felt.

In contrast, Victor Turner's (ターナー 1996（1969）) theory of liminality and communitas highlights the transitional phases of ritual, in which participants are temporarily removed from established structures and exposed to ambiguity. This "betwixt and between" condition suspends ordinary hierarchies and opens the possibility of communitas—fleeting sense of unstructured equality. While sometimes critiqued for universalizing, Turner's insight gains nuance when examined through corporeal positioning, affective resisters, and cultural idioms, which show how liminal states are experienced differently across context.

Clifford Geertz's (1973) dramatization ritualframes ritual as a cultural performance that both reflects and shapes social life. Ritual function not only as models of the world as it is but also as modes for the world as it might be, staging values in visible and emotionally persuasive form. His semiotic emphasis can be

further developed by recognizing how performance also engages participants through gesture, mood, and sensory experience, not only through symbolic interpretation.

Moving beyond symbolic representation, Tim Ingold's (2000, 2011) dwelling perspective redirects attention from symbolic representation to lived engagement. It highlights that people and materials are interwoven processes, with ritual objects participating through their textures, rhythms, and affordances. Although Ingold's phenomenological approach may be challenging to apply comparatively, it resonates strongly with contemporary anthropology's turn to material vitality, affective intensity, and embodied practice.

Considered collectively, those perspectives suggest that sacredness is not static essence but and emergent process: marked through differentiation, lived in transition, dramatized in performance, and sustained through material entanglement. Anthropological debates on miniatures and sacredness add another dimension: Claude Lévi-Strauss (1976) described miniatures as models that condense complex worlds into graspable form. While illuminating, this structuralist view can be complemented by recognizing how miniatures also work on sensory and affective levels, not only cognitive ones. Sunan Stewart (1992) emphasized temporality, showing how miniatures condense memory and nostalgia, transforming the past into portable affective presence. Her literary orientation can be enriched ethnographically by examining how such dynamics are enacted in practice. Michael Taussig (1993) argued that reduction intensifies aura, generating a sense of magical presence. His evocative account foregrounds the sensory force of scale, while also inviting inquiry into how such intensities are cultivated through ritual engagements.

Maurice Godelier's (ゴドリエ 2000) notion of sacredness of inalienable possessions further underscores how heirloom *kolu* dolls transcend their status as gifts to embody memory, lineage, and enduring sacred value.

From this perspective, the domestic sphere emerges as a dynamic site where ritual simultaneously reinforces order, creates moments of suspension, dramatizes shared cultural values, and materializes entanglements between human and objects. In doing so, this article responds to the broader theme of "things and the sacred" by showing how domestic objects—dolls, ritual utensils, and gift trays—do not merely symbolize pre-existing sacred realities but actively participate in generating them.

1.2 Household Ritual Life: Gender, Purity, and Everyday Boundary-Making

Domestic ritual life in South India brings into sharp relief the ways gender, purity, and everyday practices of boundary-making intersect to shape the production of sacred space within the household. Previous studies have long emphasized that Hindu religious life is anchored not only temples but also in the rhythms of domestic practice. Logan (1980), in her ethnography in Madurai, documented the annual cycle of domestic rituals, showing how household spaces server an essential site of religious order. Fuller and Logan (1985) further argued that *Navarātri* rituals express a complementary relationship between temple and household practice: temple rituals dramatize cosmic battles, while domestic rituals cultivate order, auspiciousness, and relational cohesion.

Within this domestic sphere, gendered division of ritual labor are both pervasive and productive. As Tanaka (1999) observed, in Chidambaram, only male priests perform (Skt.) *pūjā*[2] and recite mantra for the deity, reinforcing a hierarchical relationship between institutional and the ritual authority exercised within household. Yet at home, women undertake a wide array of ritual tasks—singing devotional songs, preparing offering, arranging altars, and visiting other homes—thereby sustaining the sensory, relational, and aesthetic dimensions of ritual life. The home thus become a space where gender norms are enacted, negotiated, and occasionally contested.

A foundational set of distinctions shaping domestic ritual life are culturally specific categories of "auspicious/inauspicious (*maṅgalam*/*amaṅgaḷam*)" and "pure/impure (*śuddham*/*aśuddham*)" widely shared across South Asia as moral and cosmological categories. As studies of the complementary relationship between purity and auspiciousness in Hindu society have shown (Marglin 1985; Madan 1991), these categories strongly shape everyday conduct by providing a framework through which people evaluate the appropriateness of actions, bodily states, times f day, spatial arrangements, and social relationships. Maṅgalam is associated with the forces of prosperity, fertility, and success; it inheres in wedding, particular days, and the presence of married women (Skt.*sumaṅgalī*)[3].

Amaṅgaḷam, by contrast, is linked to death, postpartum states, misfortune, and conflict, and serves as grounds for restricting certain actions. Meanwhile, the distinction between *śuddham* and *aśuddham* produces fine-grained differentiations among bodies, foods, and spaces, structuring who may touch whtat, enter which area, or use particular utensils within the daily practices of the home.

At the same time, anthropological analyses have further shown that these categories cannot be understood through purity alone. Madan (1991) reframes auspiciousness as a generative and relational principle that complements the boundary-maintaining logic of purity, while Marglin (1985) highlights the centrality of women's ritual labor in producing auspiciousness within domestic and communal life. Extending this line of inquiry, Yagi (八木 1999) demonstrates that in North Indian life-cycle rituals the key concern is not merely impurity but the management of ritual danger—especially the vulnerability of brides, newborns, and mourners to malevolent forces. From this perspective, auspiciousness and inauspiciousness emerge as practical assessments tied to the protection of family prosperity and the mitigation of ritual risk, enacted through the embodied actions of women and service castes. These insights collectively nuance the purity/impurity framework by showing that domestic ritual life involves the continual interplay of boundary-making, generative ritual action, and the negotiation of vulnerability.

As Iizuka (2015) demonstrates, these categories are deeply embedded in the spatial organization of priestly households, where rooms, corridors, and cooking spaces are allocated according to degrees of purity, thereby shaping the conditions under which ritual may be properly performed. These distinctions are not abstract ideals but experienced and enacted through the bodily, sensory, and practical routines that continually renew the household's moral and ritual order.

Such quotidian practices of purification and boundary maintenance are closely aligned with broader theoretical debates on the nature of "dirt", "impurity", and "defilement". Mary Douglas (2009) defined dirt as "matter of place" arguing that impurity represents a disturbance to an established order and a transgression of classificatory boundaries. Dirt appears where classification falters, prompting a reaffirmation and rearticulation of social boundaries and the reconstruction of order.

Building on this boundary-oriented perspective, Sekine (関根 1995) developed a critical reinterpretation based on his ethnographic research among Dalit communities in South India. Sekine shows that impurity (ケガレ) is not merely a feared or negative force. Rather, it functions as a positive power that enables the reconfiguration of relationships and the reconstruction of social order. While Douglas highlights impurity as a disturbance of order, Sekine reinterprets impurity through South Indian practice as a generative force that drives the creative reorganization of order.

This perspective converges with Parry's (1994) analysis of North Indian mortuary rituals, in which he conceptualizes impurity as a generative energy that propels cycles of purification, reintegration, and renewal. For Parry, impurity is not a destructive or destabilizing condition but rather an essential catalyst for the continual regeneration of social order. It is a force that sets the ritual and moral universe in motion.

The theoretical trajectory from Douglas to Sekine to Parry suggests that dirt/impurity/*kegare* should not be understood simply as negative or polluting forces, but as generative phenomena that unsettle, renew, and reconfigure the boundaries of social and ritual life. From this perspective, everyday acts within the home—sweeping, sprinkling water, drawing kolam, lighting lamps—are not merely physical acts of cleaning but dynamic practices that refresh and reorganize the domestic environment, continually rendering it receptive to the presence of the sacred.

In many South Indian households, women sweep the threshold at dawn and dusk, sprinkle water to cool and purify the ground, draw kolam designs, and light lamps in the evening. These actions do more than remove dirt or signal propriety; they generate and continually renew boundaries between inside and outside, pure and impure, everyday and ritual.

Domestic rituals such as the *Navarātri kolu* explicitly build upon these practices of boundary-making.（T.）Kōlam[4] designs placed before or beneath the kolu altar extend quotidian purification practices into the ritual domain, visually marking the transition from the ordinary to the auspicious. At the same time, the ephemeral nature of these arrangements—the *kolam* that is erased by footsteps or rain, the lamp that extinguishes, the altar dismantled at the festival's close—reveals the fragility of domestic sacredness. Sacred space must be continually

remade, its boundaries redrawn, its objects reanimated.

Research in diaspora contexts further demonstrates how domestic sacredness is reshaped across diverse geographic settings. Sahney (2019) shows how South Asian immigrant women in the United States transform kitchens and living rooms into Hindu ritual spaces, adapting to architectural and material constraints while preserving the relational and sensory logics of domestic worship. Such comparative insights underscore that domestic ritual life is neither peripheral nor static but an active arena in which gender, materiality, purity, and everyday labor converge to produce—and continually reproduce—sacred space.

1.3 Comparative Perspectives

The recognition of household rituals in South India resonates with broader anthropological insights from. other regions. Latin American Catholic households, for example, the ofrenda (home altar) set up during the Day of the Dead is described as a space where saint's images, flowers, and food offerings are arranged to welcome the dead. It functions both as a symbol of family memory and solidarity and as a core of "Mexican tradition closely tied to national identity (Brandes 2006).

Similarly, in Southeast Asia, Buddhist domestic shrines anchor the household in a cycle of merit-making, linking daily offerings with karmic economies (Tambiah 1970). These shrines embed daily life in borader religious and moral frameworks, where acts of giving—flowers, food, incense—generate both spiritual merit and social cohesion. In this way, the household become a microcosm of larger ritual systems, mediating between intimate domestic practices and wider religious structure.

Hinamatsuri dolls in Japan provide a valuable comparative example. As Koresawa (是澤 2013) demonstrates, the cultural meanings of these dolls varied by social class: while aristocratic and samurai households displayed lavish sets symbolizing prestige and authority, in merchant and commoner families they became popular as a more approachable girl's festival. It is also significant that *Hinamatsuri*（ひな祭り）dolls originated in children's doll play (ひいな遊び) and eventually developed into the annual ritual celebration of *Hinamatsuri*. This transformation from play to ritual contrasts with the Navarātri kolu altars of South India, where dolls are not everyday playthings but are ritually arranged to sacralize the domestic space. Yet both cases reveal a similar dynamic of ritualization through the medium of dolls.

These examples demonstrate that domestic rituals as not marginal but constitutive, shaping religious life as much as public ceremonies. They also illustrate how miniatures—whether saint's figurines, Buddhist icons, or ritual dolls—function as condensed embodiments of cosmological order. The South Indian case, particularly the wedding first-night ritual and the *Navarātri kolu*, provides a distinctive vantage point for examining how miniaturization, gender, and sacredness intersect.

1.4 Fieldwork and Research Context

The analysis draws on ethnographic fieldwork among the Dikshitar[5)] community of Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu. The Dikshitars are hereditary Brahmin priests of the Nataraja. temple, entrusted with both ritual and administrative authority. Their households are deeply intertwined with temple life, yet also cultivate distinctive domestic ritual traditions.

The research is based on extended fieldwork conducted during October-November 2009 and from May 2012 to September 2013. Methods included participant observation of both domestic and temple-based rituals, semi-structured interviews with priests and women householders, and the collection of vernacular songs, oral narratives, and relevant textual sources.

Two ritual contexts are central here. The first is the wedding first-night ceremony, in which bridal chamber is transformed into sacred space through decoration, offerings, and ritual gestures. *Marappācci* dolls—wooden figures symbolizing the bridal couple—are placed on a miniature bed, accompanied by cooking utensils and auspicious commodities. The second is the *Navarātri koku*, a nine-night festival during which stepped doll displays are assembled, integrating deities, saints, humans, and animals into hierarchical arrangements that serve as focal point of hospitality, songs, and gift-giving.

By examining these contexts together, the analysis highlights how sacredness is produced in domestic space through ritualization, material arrangements, and gendered practices that link life-cycle rituals with annual festivals.

2.Wedding Rituals and the production of the domestic sacredness

In the Dikshitar community, the first-night ritual (T. *cānti mukūrttam*) exemplifies how ordinary domestic space is trans-

formed into a sacred sphere through wedding ceremonies. The decoration and ritual gestures convert everyday domestic setting into space of heightened ritual intensity. This transformation exemplifies as "ritualization", a process that generates sacredness and authority by strategically distinguishing space and action (Bell 1992). The ethnographic description presented here drives from the author's participant observation of the first-night ritual of Meenakshi and Kumar in October 2009.

2.1 Transforming the Bridal Chamber into Sacred Space

Preparations for the first night ritual begin the day before. The marital bedroom is furnished with a large bed, teak furniture, wedding gifts, and daily necessities. These furnishings are provided by the bride's natal family, which already signifies their active involvement. In addition, *marappācci* dolls, miniature cooking utensils, vegetables and fruits, sweets, coffee powder, and other food items, such as green beans, raw bananas, cashew nuts, coffee powder and biscuits, are displayed, along with everyday commodities such as face powder and soap. These items symbolize the necessities of household life while also transforming the room into festive and auspicious environment.

On the floor, *kōlam* (design made with in rice powder) are drawn and decorated with lamps and flowers. Jasmine garlands and their fragrance play a crucial role in sacralizing the atmosphere. Younger girls such as the bride's siblings and cousins of the family arrange the flowers, while elder women instruct them how to prepare the offerings and decoration, exemplifying the intergenerational transmission of ritual knowledge even at the stage of preparation.

On the day of the ritual, the bride is escorted from her natal home to the marital home. The procession includes a lot of the bride relatives, giving the event festive character. At the threshold, coconuts are ritually cracked, musicians play flute and drum, unhusked rice[6] is scattered at the doorway by the sister in-law[7]. As the bride steps on the rice and enters on the rice and enters the household, the act is understood both as a symbolic separation from impurity and a gesture that brings prosperity and fertility to the new home.

Inside the house, the couple undergoes purification with holy, and the household priest[8] conducts the (Skt.) *hōma* (fire ritual). This is following by the symbolic cooking of milk rice in

Figure 1. Bride walking on unhusked rice (photograhed by the author in chidambaram, 2009)

Figure 2. Ettu Irakku ritual for the bride (photograhed by the author in chidambaram, 2009)

Figure 3. Ettu Irakku ritual for the marappācci dolls (photograhed by the author in chidambaram, 2009)

the kitchen, around which women gather and sing ritual songs. Outside the bridal chamber, women sing hymns praising the bride and the gods, reinforcing the ritual atmosphere.

After purification and the *hōma*, women relatives perform (T.) *Ettu Irakku* (lit. "to raise and lower"). Using lamps, coins, cowrie shells[9], and pestles, the bride's mother and female kin enact a sequence of ritual gestures above the bride's head to invoke prosperity and fertility. The vertical motion of "raising and lowing" in understood to drive away harmful while drawing in auspicious blessing[10]. At the same time, children participate by using miniature cooking utensils to perform the same gestures with the marappācci dolls. Although playful in appearance, this children's participation is ritually sanctioned and represents a mechanism for transmitting ritual knowledge across generations.

Notably, the same ritual gestures also appear in the *Ettu Irakku* hymn, which narrates how Goddess Pārvatī (Śiva's consort) herself undergoes the rite. In this way the human bride and the goddess are imagined as experiencing the same ritual process, and the bride's transition into married life is ritually overlaid with the divine model of Pārvatī's own embodied passage. One version of the hymn runs as follows:

> Hymn of *Ettu Irakku* for Goddess Pārvatī[11]
> Pārvatī sits on a golden throne like the rising moon.
> Goddess Arundhati comes and braids her hair with gems and flowers
> Gold Ganga water is poured like pearls, and a golden pot of holy water handed to her
> Elder women approach with lamps and offering of food,
> while five women adorned with pearls sing songs accompanied by colorful parrots.
> Pārvatī's heart overflows with demotion to Śiva,
> and all living being pray for the birth of Murgan, casting (Skt.) *akṣata*[12] onto her womb
> Śiva and Pārvatī sit enthroned, a thousand children with her hands,
> distributing sandalwood, flowers, betel leaves, and areca nuts to everyone.

The affective dimension of the bridal chamber songs further illuminates the ritualization of emotion. In the Bridal Chamber Song, the bride is portrayed as overcome by hesitation and vulnerability:

> "Like a fish caught in a net,
> She trembled once inside the chamber"

The vivid metaphor conveys not only anxiety and shyness but also the embodied sensation of being entrapped, dramatizing the bride's emotional passage into marriage. Such imagery transforms intimate feelings into a collective performance. Erotic intimacy is subsequently ritualized through a sequence of gestures:

> "He anointed her with sandal paste,
> adorned her with jasmine,
> offered betel nut, and kissed her."

These poetic lines inscribe bodily sensation into the ritual frame, exemplifying what Bell (1992) has described as ritualization: marking actions and affects as ritually significant through stylization and contrast. In this way, hesitation, longing, and tenderness are not simply psychological states but ritualized affects, shared and authorized within the collective setting.

The Bridal Chamber Song elaborates this transition with vivid imagery: on an auspicious day under a favorable nakṣatra, Pārvatī is led to the bed chamber while Śiva, adorned in golden garments and ornaments, waits eagerly, peering through the door-crack for his bride. Accompanies by women relatives,

Pārvatī trembles with shyness and anxiety, standing "like a fish cought in a net" once inside. Struck by Kāma's arrow of love, Śiva pursues her playfully: after gestures of retreat and embrace, he anoints her with sandal paste, adorns her with jasmine, offer betel nut, and kisses her. Outside, her female companions listen at the cracks and sing in chorus, making the union. Immediately afterward, in Open the Door Song, the focus turns to their intimate dialogue at the threshold: Śiva calls for Pārvatī to unfasten the chain and open the door; she anoints his chest with perfume, fans him with a golden-ruby fan, and takes up the (Skt.) *vīṇā* in song. As Śiva's heart "melt with longing," their union is consummated, expressing the sacredness of marriage through gesture of conjugal intimacy[13].

In Open the Door Song, the threshold scene further dramatizes anticipation and conjugal intimacy. The closed door, momentarily barring access heightens expectation, while ritualized gestures gradually dissolve the distance between bride and groom:

> "Unfasten the chain and open the door, fan me with the golden-ruby fan."

The doorway functions here as a liminal boundary, symbolically mediating between separation and union. By embedding embodied emotion—hesitation, desire, and longing—within this spatial threshold, the songs sacralize the affective process of marital transition. The human couple's union is thus ritually overlaid with divine prototypes, as their gestures echo those attributed to Śiva and Pārvatī.

Ethnographic details from the groom Kumar's household illustrate with unusual clarity how the bridal chamber itself becomes a condensed theater of fertility, prosperity, and transition. The teak bed, measuring almost the entire breadth of a 2.65×3.15 meters room, is flanked by massive cabinet, living little open space. Under the bed are stored beans, raw bananas, cashew nuts, coffee powder, biscuits, and chocolates, while shelves above hold wedding gifts and miniature playhouse utensils. In the corner stands a pair of marappācci dolls on a miniature teak bed identical in color and design to the bridal couple's own. The accumulating of food, cosmetics, toys, and ritual items collapses daily necessities, auspicious commodities, and symbolic doubles into a single material assemblage, transforming the chamber into a microcosm of future household life.

The *Ettu Irakku* sequence exemplifies how women's ritual gestures inscribe the bride's body with fertility and prosperity. Lamps, coins, unhusked rice, and a small stone pestle are raised and lowered before her, while children mimic the same actions with toy utensils before the *marappācci* dolls. Here the pestle functions as a phallic emblem, rice as reproductive potency, and cowrie shells as womb-like tokens of wealth and protection. The relay of cowries through the hems of female relatives' saris not only integrates the bride into her husband's lineage but also dramatizes a circulation of feminine generative power across households. These acts exemplify Bell's (1992) "ritualization," where gestures and substances produce authority by differentiating sacred from ordinary movements.

The songs that accompany chamber entry further sacralize the moment. Unlike North Indian wedding song that mock the groom with explicit sexual innuendo (八木 1992), Dikshitar women sing narrative hymns recounting the divine first night of Śiva and Pārvatī. Erotic intimacy is alluded to through metaphor—"a fish caught in a net", jasmine garlands, betel nut—yet remains embedded within a divine frame that overlays the human couple with cosmic prototypes.

Finally, the eight transitional days following the first night underscore the liminal quality of the rite. The bride spends nights in the marital home but returns each morning to her natal house, alternating care between the two households. This oscillation delays abrupt rapture, enabling gradual incorporation. Marriage, then, is not a single event but an extended passage mediated through spatial mobility, ritualized gestures, and the circulation of objects that together generate sacred domesticity.

2.2 Marappācci dolls as Doubles of the Couple

The *marappācci* dolls are placed on a miniature bed designed to replicate the couple's own, situated in corner of the bridal chamber. The dolls are treated as symbolic doubles of the bride and groom, accompanied by ritual objects such as pestles (masculinity), unhusked rice (fertility), and coins and cowrie shells (wealth). Together, these elements construct another "married couple" within the ritual space.

Figure 4. A pair of marappācci dolls on a miniature marital bed (photograhed by the author in chidambaram, 2009)

Figure 5. Cowries and stones in the bride's sari hemed (photograhed by the author in chidambaram, 2009)

Figure 6. Bride and groom head for the temple carrying kavaṭi (photograhed by the author in chidambaram, 2009)

Women sing songs, burn incense, and offer gifts before the dolls. These acts, directed toward the dolls, stand in contrast to the mantras chanted by the male priest for the human bride. The dolls thus serve as proxies for the bride's body, enabling the emergence of a female-centered domain of sacred practice.

Toward the end of the ritual, cowrie shells and small stones[14] are passed through the hem of the bride's sari and circulated among female relatives, symbolizing the integration of the two households and the transmission of power among women. The hymns narrating the divine marriage of Śiva and Pārvatī. In this way, the human union is ritually overlaid with the divine model, and *marappācci* dolls mediate this correspondence by embodying both human and divine conjugality within the ritual space. Through them, women enact and sustain the sacred parallel between domestic marriage and the cosmic union of the deities.

On the following morning, the couple performs the (T.) *Kavaṭi*[15] ritual, carrying milk pots in procession to offer to the god Murugan[16]. This act reinforces the sanctification of the marriage within temple and cosmic orders.

2.3 Between Two Households: Gendered Participation and Natal Ties

During the "eight transitional days" following the first night, the bride spends nights in the marital home but returns to her natal home each morning. For the first four days, she is cared for by women of her natal family; for the next four, by the groom's relatives. Her mother and female kin also bring offering and daily necessities into the marital home, actively shaping ritual environment.

Thus, the ritual is sustained by the cooperation of both households, and the bride's transition unfolds as a process of continuity rather than abrupt rupture. Furthermore, such connections with the natal family extend beyond the first-night ritual. After marriage, it remains customary for the bride to return frequently to her natal home during menstruation, childbirth, and periods of child-rearing. The natal family continues to play an indispensable role in her life, serving as an enduring source of support even after she is settled in her husband's household.

The first-night ritual demonstrate how domestic space is transformed into a liminal site through the careful arrangement of objects, songs, and bodily movements. The bridal chamber is furnished with a large bed, symbolic gifts, and ritual items such as *marappācci* dolls, miniature cooking

utensils, and auspicious commodities. These object not only sanctify the space but also anticipate their later reappearance in annual festivals such as Navarātri, thereby linking marriage rites with cyclical domestic rituals.

The ritual also foregrounds generated dynamics. While the bride undergoes purification, the groom enters the chamber without such procedures, exposing an asymmetry in ritual purity requirement. Women, however, play a central role in decorating the space, preparing songs, and sustaining the affective atmosphere of the ritual. The event illustrates the interplay of aesthetic, material, and social dimensions that sacralize the domestic sphere.

In sum, the first-night ritual highlights how sacredness is generated within intimate domestic contexts and how women's practices are crucial in shaping these transformations. Such findings set the stage for examining other domestic rituals, in particular the Navarātri festival.

3.The Navarātri Festival: Miniaturization and Sacred Display

Navarātri, literally "nine nights," refers to the annual cycle of worship dedicated to the goddesses and occupies a special position among the regionally diverse Hindu ritual calendar. The festival begins on the new moon (T. *amāvācai*) of the Tamil month of (T.) *Puraṭṭāci* (September-October), aligning the renewal of lunar time with the restoration of cosmic order. The nine nights are typically divided into three triads: days 1-3 for Durgā, the fierce goddess of destruction and protection; days 4-6 Lakṣmī, goddess of prosperity, fertility, and wealth; and days 7-9 for Sarasvatī, goddess of learning, music, and the arts. On the 10th day, (Skt.) *Vijayadaśamī*, devotee celebrate the triumph for dharma and the inauguration of new pursuits, often through children's initiation into learning or the consecration of tools and books.

Cosmological interpretation also varies across regions. In North India, *Navarātri* coincides with Viṣṇu's cosmic sleep, a time of instability that requires ritual vigilance. In South India, it is understood as midnight in the divine day (equivalent to one human year), a liminal time when demonic forces gain temporary strength and must be ritually countered. Mythologically *Navarātri* commemorates Durgā victory over the buffalo demon Mahīṣāsura and the restoration of Indra, the Vedic king of gods, to his throne, reaffirming cosmic stability (Fuller 2004: 108-109).

Figure 7. Kolu displayed on shelves in the living room (photograhed by the author in chidambaram, 2009)

Figure 8. A nine-tiered kolu arrangement, marappācci dolls on the bottom tier (photograhed by the author in chidambaram, 2009)

In practice, Navarātri is celebrated not only in temples but also domestic interiors, where kolu displays play a central role. It is to these domestic altars, and their role in materializing sacredness, that I turn in the next section.

3.1 Kolu as a Domestic Altar

In Tamil Brahmin households, *Navarātri* is marked by the construction of a stepped altar known as kolu. The tiers are arranged in odd numbers, ideally nine, though five or seven are also acceptable; at least three are considered necessary (Tanaka 1999: 124)[17]. The tiers are then arranged hierarchically: gods and kings on the upper steps, saints in the middle, humans and everyday utensils below, and animals at the base.

Although the *kolu* altar resembles the domestic shrine (*pūjā* room), it differs in significant ways. Whereas the *pūjā* room often accommodates ancestral photographs alongside image of Śiva, Viṣṇu, and local goddesses, the *kolu* altar excludes ancestors altogether. Instead, its tiered structure dramatizes a cosmological hierarchy. As Sahney (2019) observes, the *pūjā* room functions as a permanent shrine integrating gods and forebears into daily domestic worship, while *kolu* altar is a temporary festival construction that reconfigures the household into cosmic stage for the goddess.

In household space is limited, however, families adapt by displaying the dolls on bookshelves or cupboards in the living room rather than constructing a full stepped altar. These improvisations nonetheless transform ordinary interiors into ritual arenas, showing the flexibility of the *kolu* tradition and its capacity to sacralize domestic space even under spatial constraints.

Objects used in the wedding first-night ritual *marappācci* dolls, miniature cooking utensils, stones, and cowries-are reused in the *kolu*, linking marriage rites and the festival through the circulation of ritual objects and the regeneration of sacredness.

During my fieldwork in the Dikshitar's households in Chidambaram, I was invited into several homes to witness the *kolu*. Houses ordinarily restricted by concerns of ritual purity opened their doors, and I, like other guests, was asked to sing before the altar to honor the goddess. Boundaries usually policed were temporarily suspended, and the household was reconfigured as a ritual public space.

Children' disguises accentuated the festive atmosphere. One girl appeared as the god Kṛṣṇa[18]; another child wore the (T:) maṭicar, the formal attire of married brahmin women. These acts of cross-dressing and role reversal exemplify the playful dimension of Navarātri, while also highlighting the fluidity of gender roles in goddess worship.

Figure 9. Children in disguise as Rada, Kṛṣṇa and madisār attire (photograhed by the author in chidambaram, 2009)

Initially, I sang a Japanese *Hinamatsuri* (Doll's Festival) song, given its structural similarity to kolu as a stepped display. It was not well received. When I sang the lullaby "*Yurikago no uta*" ("Cradle Song")[19]—which I had practiced for a friend's newborn. On this occasion, listeners responded with delight, especially to its gentle rhythm and the onomatopoeic refrain, "*Nennneko, nenneko, nenneko yo*". The verses run as follows:

Yurikago no uta wo
Kanariya ga utau yo
Nenneko, nenneko, nennekoyo
(The canary sings the cradle song,
Sleep, my baby)

Yurikago no oue ni
Biwa no mi ga yureru yo
Nenneko, nenneko, nennekoyo
(Above the cradle the loquat fruits sway,
Sleep, my baby)

Yurikago no tsuna wo
Kinezumi ga yusuruyo
Nenneko, nenneko, nennekoyo
(The squirrel rocks the cradle's rope,
Sleep, my baby)
(Translated by author)

Thereafter, I often sang it before the altar. This episode illustrates how the kolu functions as a "ritual performance space" that accommodates foreign songs and generates new meanings: the legitimation of outside participation, the playful reinterpretation of unfamiliar sounds, and their resonance with established symbolic motifs of swaying, thereby producing new communal experiences of laughter and empathy.

Women's ritual repertoire also includes the (T.) *ōtam* (boat-rowing song), performed in temple weddings and goddess rituals involving swings. Its structure frames the melody with the refrain "*Ērērō, ērilarō*" (from the author's field notes), stamping the rhythm of rowing on participant's bodies. Cradle-swaying, swing-swaying, and wave-swaying motif converge here, reinforcing ritual rhythm through embodied resonance.

During my fieldwork in 2012, I incorporated the crochet hooks and an *amigurumi* (Japanese crocheted soft toy) handbook, which I had brought from Japan, into daily interactions with children and women. As the festival approached, I purchased colorful yarn and cotton locally and crocheted small animals such as elephants, squirrels, and rabbits, which I gifted to children in the households I visited. These handmade gifts delighted the children and served as a conversational bridge with women, creating moments of intimacy that exceeded the formal boundaries of research.

In one household, I encountered women engaged in plastic-wire craft, producing decorative bags and animal figurines. Among the kolu displays, I found a striking elephant made of plastic wire; I later commissioned a pair and gifted them to Japanese friend living in Chennai. This episode illustrates how the kolu setting accommodated not only ritual and song but also aesthetic exchanges that linked local and foreign craft practices.

At the same time, *Navarātri* is not confined to the domestic sphere. In the Nataraja temple, where the Dikshitar serve as hereditary priests, monumental twenty-one-tiered kolu altar is constructed during the festival. Each evening, a festival image

Figure 10. Twenty-one-tiered kolu with goddess's swing (photograhed by the author in chidambaram, 2009)

Figure 11. Kolu display with a zoo park scene at the base (photograhed by the author in chidambaram, 2009)

of the goddess Śivakāmasundarī is ceremonially brought from her shrine within the temple and placed upon a swing set before the altar. There, she is ritually rocked as she gazes upon the *kolu* display. For this reason, the *Navarātri* festival in the Nataraja temple is popularly known as the "Swing Festival."

In addition to the display itself, hospitality was central to the *kolu*. At the end of each visit, women distributed (T.) *tāmpulam*—betel leaves, areca nuts, turmeric, and flowers wrapped together—as tokens of blessing and respect. The female guests were given special sets that include bangles, blouse piece, turmeric, vermilion powder, and sometimes other items of feminine adornment, known collectively *cumaṅgalī* sets, which reinforced their auspicious status. Guests also received (T.) *cuṇṭal*, a boiled chickpea dish served as a sacred food offering. Chickpeas are categorized within the South Asian hot/cold classification system as inherently "hot" substances and are thus believed to augment the goddess's potency. Women who subsequently consume the remnants of this offering are believed understood to experience an intensification of their own procreative capacities. These acts of distribution extended the sacred presence of the kolu beyond the altar, weaving ritual blessing into networks of social exchange and feminine auspiciousness.

3.2 The Grammar of Display and Materiality

The *kolu* altar materializes symbolic order. The tiers are arranged hierarchically: gods and kings on the upper steps, saints in the middle, humans and everyday utensils below, and animals at the base. Stones and cowries, once currency and used as counters in the board game (T.) *paṟaṅkuli*, signify both wealth and play.

Playfulness permeates the display, especially in the "park" dioramas (zoos, gardens, temple replicas) assembled around the altar. Here, children arrange figurines, rivers, and forests with stones, sand, and sprouted pulses, extending the altar into a site of entertainment and public imagination. Their activities serve not merely as play but as embodied training in ritual materiality — simultaneously playground and pedagogical arena. Excessive creativity, however, is suspect. In Kancipuram, a Brahmin man constructed replicas of temple chariots and images from scrap materials to promote ecological awareness. His display was condemned, as scrap was deemed impure from the stand point of ritual purity (Hüsken 2018). This case underscores the tension between playful freedom and ritual propriety.

Treatment of *marappācci* varies. In Karnataka, they are displayed as king and queen, richy adorned (Narayan 2018). In Dikshitar households of Chidambaram, they may be placed on the lower tiers or alongside divine images in the middle, their positioning far from uniform. Sivakumar (2018) notes that on *Vijayadaśamī*[20], the 10th day of *Navarātri*, "red sandalwood couple dolls are made to lie down, making the end of the year's *kolu*." This act signals both the symbolic closure of marriage and the temporal closure of the festival.

Thus, play in *kolu* is not a decorative surplus but a domain that educate children into ritual life, enables social imagination, and remains bounded by normative constraints. It embodies overlapping dimensions of education, creativity, and propriety.

The ethnographic case of *Navarātri* further reveal how the *kolu* altar operates as both a religious and a playful display. The stepped arrangement of dolls reflects cosmic and social hierarchies, while the lower tiers and surrounding "parks" invite creative participation by children. Guests are welcomed into homes, boundaries of ritual purity are temporarily relaxed, and songs—whether traditional or improvised—animate the altar as a performative space. My own participation as an outsider illustrates how ritual performance can generate new communal meanings.

In addition, the grand Swing Festival at the Nataraja temple shows how the domestic practice of *kolu* resonates with, yet differs from, temple-scale ritual. The juxtaposition of household altars and the monumental twenty-one-tiered koku in the temple highlights the festival's dual location in both private and public religious life.

Taken together, these observations point to the *kolu* as a dynamic site where materiality, memory, and social relations converge, thereby laying the conceptual foundation for examining, in the following discussion, how domestic ritual practices engage with gender, ritual authority, and memory.

3.3 Contemporary Transformations

At the same time, the contemporary practice of *kolu* is not the domestic interior alone. In recent years, the practice of

displaying *kolu* has extended beyond the physical boundaries of the household through digital platforms. Many Tamil Brahmin families, particularly in urban centers such as Chennai and Bengaluru, now participate in online *kolu* competitions organized by cultural associations, corporate sponsors, and regional media outlets[21]. Families upload photographs or short videos of their decorated altars, often accompanied by explanatory captions detailing the theme of the display, the number of tiers, or the symbolic significance of the dolls. Judges or audiences then evaluate the entries, and prizes are awarded for categories such as creativity, thematic innovation, or adherence to tradition.

These online competitions, which proliferated the COVID-19 pandemic, enabled households to continue ritual participation despite restrictions on physical gathering. Even after resumption of in-person visits, many families have retained digital sharing as an additional layer of ritual practice, highlighting how domestic sacralization adapts to shifting social contexts. Participation in these competitions does not merely reflect an interest in prestige or recognition; it also reveals how sacred presence is rearticulated through acts of visual documentation and circulation.

Social media platform such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp further amplify this process. Women, who are the primary organizers of *kolu*, frequently share images of their displays with kin networks and community groups, accompanied by messages of blessing and invitations to virtual viewings. Through these digital circuits, *kolu* extends beyond the home to create dispersed networks of auspicious exchange. The domestic interior, once accessible only to immediate kin and neighbors, is reimagined as a publicly shareable sacred space, mediated by photography, hashtags, and comment threads. In this sense, online *kolu* and social media sharing exemplify how domestic ritual practice increasingly operates within multi-scalar arenas that intertwine the intimate and the global.

4.Discussion

4.1 Ritual Doubling: Brides, Dolls, and Parallel Sacred Domains

The first-night ritual illustrates a striking form of ritual doubling, in which human actors and symbolic proxies coexist and operate in parallel. By "ritual doubling," I refer to the process whereby ritual actions are simultaneously enacted on both human and symbolic. planes, so that lived reality and its representation reinforce each other within the same performative frame. The *marappācci* dolls are not simply representation of the couple but function as their ritual doubles, installed on a miniature bed within the bridal chamber. While the groom and bride participate in the formal rites conducted by the male priest, the dolls are simultaneously animated by women's songs, offerings, and ritual gestures. In this dual register, domestic sacredness emerges through the interplay of embodied action and material proxies, generating two sacred domains: one dominated by priestly authority and Sanskrit mantras, and another cultivated through women's embodied practices. This layered enactment demonstrates how objects enable the coexistence of overlapping ritual orders, making the household a site of parallel sacralities.

Here, the polytheistic imagination of Hinduism intensifies this doubling. The bride's experience is ritually overlaid not only with Pārvatī's model but also with the presence of Murgan and other deities connected to fertility and protection. Sacredness thus does not crystallize around a single divine figure but unfolds as constellation of multiple divine agents, reinforcing the distributed and plural nature of domestic sacred space. This constellation reflects how domestic sacredness is produced through the multiplicity of divine presences, objects, and acts within the household, forming a networked divine presence.

4.2 Miniatures and the Making of Memory

Miniatures such as the *marappācci* dolls and tiny cooking utensils condense cosmological and social orders into tangible forms, while also serving as vehicles of memory. Given to the bride as part of her (T.) *cīṟāṇam* (wedding trousseau), the dolls enter the bridal chamber on the wedding night and reappear annually during the Navarātri *kolu*. Through this cyclical reappearance, they tie an individual life passage to the broader rhythm of ritual time. In this sense, the dolls operate as what Maurice Godelier has termed "inalienable possessions"—objects that cannot be alienated without undermining personal and collective identity. They embody women's life histories, familial continuity, and the cyclical renewal of domestic sa-

credness rhrough the circulation of material objects. Today, photography and digital circulation of *kolu* displays further extend this archival function, enabling miniature objects to weave sacred memory across both generations and media. In recent years, this digital dimension has expanded further with online *kolu* competition, where households submit photographs or videos of their displays, transforming domestic altars into shared, networked arenas of ritual creativity and recognition.

The hierarchical arrangement of kolu dolls also condenses the polytheistic cosmos into miniature form. Gods, saints, humans and animals coexist on the same altar, allowing different divine powers to be simultaneously present within the household. This condensation exemplifies how miniaturization and polytheism together generate sacredness: by shrinking the expansive multiplicity of the divine into a tangible, layered display that remains open to reinterpretation across time and context.

Episodes such as the exchange of crocheted *amigurumi* animals and plastic-wire elephants during my fieldwork further highlight the role of craft creativity in the Navarātri context. These objects were not part of the canonical *kolu* set, yet they were readily incorporated into the festive atmosphere. Such improvisations reveal how domestic sacredness is generated not only through inherited ritual forms but also through playful, aesthetic experiments that extend networks of sociability. Craft practices, whether crocheting or plastic-wire weaving, thus exemplify the ways in which women and children introduce creative variations that enliven the kolu while remaining within its broader ritual frame.

In recent years, the digital circulation of *kolu* displays has created new trajectories through which domestic sacredness is produced and recognized. During and after COVID-19, photographs and videos of *kolu* altars—often carefully curated and accompanied by captions explain themes or symbolic choices—were shared across WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and online competitions. These digital disseminations did not merely document the altar; they reactivated it in wider social fields, allowing dolls, arrangements, and ritual aesthetics to move beyond the confines of the home. In this sense, the digital *kolu* exemplifies a contemporary extension of the same processual dynamics that characterize domestic sacredness: the continual reconfiguration of sacred presence through circulation, replication, and shared visibility. Digital media thus become new sites where auspiciousness, aesthetic practice, and ritual creativity are recognized, debated, and reimagined.

4.3 Domestic Practice, Pollution, and the Religious Profane

Across both the wedding ritual and the kolu festival, women stand at the center of domestic ritual practice. They prepare offerings, decorate spaces, sing devotional songs, and exchange gifts such as *tāmpulam*, *sumaṅgalī* sets, and *cuṇṭal*, thereby sustaining the aesthetics and social relations that animate sacredness. Yet these practices exist within a hierarchical structure in which ultimate ritual authority often remains vested in male priests. For instance, the groom enters the bridal chamber without purification, while the bride undergoes elaborate rites of cleansing, underscoring ritual asymmetry. In the *kolu*, women manage the altar daily, but male priests are invited to open and close the festival with Sanskrit mantras. Nonetheless, women exercise authority in subtler registers—for example, by laying down the *marappācci* dolls on *Vijayadaśamī* to mark ritual closure. Such acts underscore how women's agency coexists with, and sometimes quietly counters, male-dominated ritual hierarchies. Domestic sacredness thus emerges as a negotiated product of gendered practices, embodied ritual acts, and material arrangements.

As Arnal and MacCutcheon (2013) argue, the distinction between the sacred and the profane is not affixed binary but a fluid set of categories continually produced through social practices. Parry's (1994) analysis of death rituals in Banaras likewise demonstrates that pollution is not simply a negative state to be eliminated but a structurally embedded element in the very constitution of the sacred. As he shows, the intense impurity generated by death initiates a series of purificatory and reintegrative rites that activate religious order and render the boundary between purity and impurity visible. Pollution thus serves as the catalyst that makes the sacred recognizable and necessitates the ritual labor of cleansing, reordering, and return to social and cosmological coherence.

A similar dynamic is present in South Indian domestic ritual life. The everyday practices performed by women—sweeping the threshold, sparkling water, drawing *kōlam* designs, and lighting lamps at dusk—do not merely remove dirt of disor-

der; they actively produce the boundary between inside and outside, pure and impure, everyday and ritual. These quotidian modes of cleansing and boundary-making replicate, on a smaller domestic scale, the cyclical process of "pollution and renewal" that Parry describes for Banaras, and they prepare the home as a space worthy of divine visitation. The *kōlam* placed before or beneath the *Navarātri kolu* altar further extends these daily practices into the ritual domain, visually articulating small but significant sacred zones within the home. Such embodied practices and the circulation, placement, and removal of objects together sustain the processual nature of domestic sacredness.

At the same time, these practices also reveals how sacredness is continually unmade: dirt inevitably returs, kolam designs fade under footsteps or rain, lamps extinguish, and disorder reappears. The material arrangements at the heart of domestic ritual life—such as the kolu displays during Navarātri or the decorations and miniature beds prepared for the bridal chamber—are likewise profoundly ephemeral. They must be dismantled, stored away, or allowed to decay once the ritual moment has passed. In this sense, domestic sacredness is not a stable condition but a fragile accomplishment that is ceaselessly assembled and disassembled through everyday acts of contact, wear, and renewal.

5.Conclusion

This study has examined how domestic sacredness emerges within the everyday life of South Indian Brahmin households, focusing on the Dikshitars of Chidambaram and their wedding first-night rituals and *Navarātri kolu* displays. By tracing the interplay of embodied ritual acts, the analysis has shown that domestic sacredness is not affixed state but a processual and dynamically negotiated condition.

The ethnography highlights three closely connected processes. First, ritual doubling—exemplified by the *marappācci* dolls—reveals how human actors and their material proxies operate simultaneously, creating parallel and overlapping sacred domains within the household. Second, Practices of miniaturization condense cosmological and social orders into tangible forms that also function as mnemonic devices, linking life-cycle rituals to annual festivals and allowing sacredness to circulate across generations and media. Third, gendered participation demonstrates how women's embodied and aesthetic practices shape the rhythms of domestic ritual life, while also negotiating the hierarchical authority of male priests.

Considered collectively, these processes illuminate the domestic sphere as a dynamic site where sacredness is generated, sustained, and continually reworked. Rather than treating the sacred as a stable quality or an ontological domain set apart from the everyday—a Durkheimian image that implicitly privileges the "sacred" over the "profane"—this study shows that domestic sacredness emerges through the shifting interplay of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, purity and impurity and the ceaseless movement of objects, substances, and bodies. The household becomes sacred not by exclusion from the mundane but through its constant entanglement with the "religious profane": sweeping, sparkling, drawing, drawing *kōlam*, preparing food, arranging dolls, and dismantling ritual displays once their time has passed.

The circulation of dolls, cooking utensils, *kolu* gifts such as *sumaṅgalī* sets, and cuṇṭal illustrates how everyday things become temporally animated as sacred agents, mediating relations between household and temple while reinforcing intergenerational continuity.

Yet these same materials also reveal the fragility of domestic sacredness: *kolam* designes fade, lamps extinguish, ritual decorations are dismantled, and disorder inevitably returns. Sacredness is this continually produced and unmade through cycles of contact, decay and renewal.

Moreover, the recent digital transformation of kolu practice—accelerated during after COVID-19—extends the dynamics of domestic sacredness beyond the material circulation of objects within the home. When households photograph and share their *kolu* displays through digital sharing and online circulation, dolls and ritual arrangements acquire a second life as mobile sacred images. These digital circuits enable forms of recognition, auspicious exchange, and aesthetic appreciation that no longer depend on physical co-presence, allowing sacredness to travel across dispersed kin and community networks. In this sense, the digital kolu represents a contemporary modality of domestic sacredness: one that remains rooted in household marital practices while simultaneously participating in expansive fields of visibility and ritual interaction.

Finally, the polytheistic imagination of Hinduism amplifies

these dynamics by dispersing sacredness across multiple deities, objects, and ritual actions. Domestic rituals do not cohere around a single divine presence but weave a constellation of overlapping sacred domains, each anchored in specific acts, materials, and relational contexts. This plurality ensures that domestic sacredness remains fluid and responsive—not a bounded realm opposed to the everyday, but a fragile and genereative process emerging from the very textures od domestic life.

Note on Transliteration

Sanskrit terms are transliterated according to the IAST system.Tamil terms follow the romanized transliteration system used in the *Tamil Lexicon* published by the University of Madras. Diacritics are retained throughout the text. At first occurrence, Tamil and Sanskrit terms are identified by the abbreviations (T.) and (Skt.), respectively.

Acknowledgements

This research for this article was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 11K03564 and and 21H00985. Additional supports were provided by the Resona Asia-Oceania Foundation and the Sumitomo Life Insurance Company's "Mirai wo Tsuyokusuru Kosodate Project". I am deeply grateful to the editorial committee of Dynamics of Civilizations for their editorial guidance, and to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful and constructive comments, which significantly enriched the discussion of this article.

Notes

1) *Marappācci* are paired wooden dolls, traditionally caved from red sandalwood, found in Tamil Nadu and parts of South India. Given to brides as part of the wedding trousseau and later displayed in Navarātri kolu.
2) pūjā is a Hindu ritual of worship involving offerings such as flowers, food, incense, and prayers made to a deity, sacred object, or person. While highly variable in form, it generally entails acts of honor, hospitality, and devotion toward the divine.
3) In Tamil Hindu ritual context, the *cumaṅgalī* (*sumangali*) is considered a married woman whose husband is alive, embodying auspiciousness and serving as a mediator of fertility and prosperity.
4) *Kōlam* are ritual floor patterns, typically geometric or auspicious motifs, made with rice flour and drawn mainly by women in South India. Created daily as well as during festivals, they invite prosperity, ward off evil, and sacralize domestic space.
5) Dikshiar refers to the hereditary Brahmin priestly community of the Nataraja temple in Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu. Uniquely, according to the temple tradition, Śiva himself is considered to be counted among their number, which underscores their intimate identification with the deity. The Dikshitars not only perform temple rituals and festival but also serve collectively as trustees, managing the temple's administration and resources. Unlike household priest (purohita), who serve individual families, their ritual and managerial authority is rooted in the temple's sovereignty.
6) Hindu domestic rituals, unhusked rice symbolizes fertility, prosperity, reproductive power, and continuity. The presence of the husk signifies latent, not-yet-released energy. In contrast, husked rice is used in offering, representing purity and sanctified nourishment.
7) This role is typically fulfilled by the mother-in-law, but in the absence of Kumar's mother, who had passed away by then, it was carried out by his elder sister.
8) A (Skt.) prohita is a ritual specialist who performs domestic rites. Unlike temple priest, household priests are engaged by families to conduct life-cycle rituals and domestic sacrifices. According to Raynolds (1980), during the (T.) caṭaṅku, pubery ritual, lams and vessels of unhusked paddy rice are lifted and lowered before the girl to affect her passage from a state of disorder into one of social order.
9) Cowrie shells (*Cypraeidae*), once used as currency in South Asia, are regarded in Hindu domestic rituals as symbols of fertility, wealth, and protection. Their smooth, womb-like shape signifies female generative power. Source: "Pārvatīkku erri irakkutal," Sri Pārvatī Amman Cōvanam, pp. 66–67, l.1097-1113; translation by the author.
10) According to Raynolds (1980), during the (T.) *caṭaṅku*, pubery ritual, lams and vessels of unhusked paddy rice are lifted and lowered before the girl to affect her passage from a state of disorder into one of social order.
11) Source: "Pārvatīkku erri irakkutal," *Sri Pārvatī Amman Cōvanam*, pp. 66–67, l.1097-1113; translation by the author.
12) *Akṣata* refers to uncooked rice grains, often colored yellow with turmeric. In Hindu domestic and temple rituals, it is sprinkled or cast upon deities, ritual objects, or persons as a gesture of blessing.
13) Both ritual songs, "Bridal Chamber song" (pp. 71–73) and "Open the Door Song" (pp.73-75), are excerpted and summarized from the source: *Sri Pārvatī Amman Cōvanam,* l.1210-1247; translation by the author.

14) Small stones used in rituals may also allude to their role in traditional games such as paṟaṅkuḷi (mancala-type board game). In these setting, stones function not only as marks of play and counting but also as symbolic element that connect leisure, socialization, and ritual life.

15) *Kavaṭi* is a ritual act of carrying a decorated wooden or bamboo structure, often with pots of milk flowers, or other offerings, on the shoulders as an act of devotion and penance to the god Murugan. It is most prominently performed during pilgrimages and festivals such as Taipocam.

16) Murugan (Skt: Skanda, Kārttikeya) is a major Tamil deity, revered as the son of Śiva and Pārvatī. and the brother of Gaṇeśa. Widely worshipped in South India and Sri Lanka, he is associated with youth, beauty, warfare, and fertility, and is often depicted with a spear. In Tamil devotion, Murugan embodies both protective power and procreative energy.

17) This principle is strikingly reminiscent of the Japanese doll's Festival (Hinamatsuri), where the stepped display (Hinadan) is most commonly constructed with seven tiers, though five- and three-tiered versions are also accepted. Both systems thus emphasized odd numbers and a minimum number of steps, revealing cross-cultural parallels in the symbolic organization of domestic ritual displays.

18) Kṛṣṇa is one of the most widely venerated and popular deities in Hinduism. He embodies multiple aspects-divine child, cowherd and lover, charioteer and teacher in *Bhagavad Gītā*.

19) "*Yurikago no Uta*" ("Cradle Song") is well-known Japanese lullaby composed in 1921, with lyrics by Hakushu Kitahara. Its gentle, onomatopoetic refrain has made it one of the most enduring cradle songs in modern Japan.

20) *Vijayadaśamī* (lit. the tenth day of victory) is the culminating day of the Navarātri festival. It commemorates the victory of Goddess Durgā over the buffalo demon Mahīṣāsura and symbolize the triumph of (Skt.) *dharma* (cosmic order) over adharma (chaos).

21) For example, Sapthavarna Creations' annual Global Golu Awards and Giri India's Global Navaratri Golu Decoration Contest enables worldwide participation through online submission.

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（Received August 31, 2025; accepted December 30, 2025）