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Contesting ‘Gifts from Jesus’

Conversion, Charity, and the Distribution of Used Clothing in Guyana

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Abstract

Clothes are a means to demonstrate wealth, status, and socio-religious hegemony. Practices of consuming and exchanging clothing enhance or lower one’s status by displaying and creating taste and capital. In Guyana, many Hindus relate charitable clothing distributions exclusively to Christian missions. They commonly state that the distribution of used clothing is a means to convert Hindus to Christianity. While indeed in the past only Christians were able to conduct such distributions due to their links to colonial powers, today and as a result of transnational migration to North America Guyanese Hindus also organize distributions of clothing. For this purpose, migrants collect used clothes and ship them to Guyana. This article proposes that as Hindus remain a minority in Guyana, the practice of and discourse about charitable distributions are a means to counter and resist the perceived ‘threat’ of conversion. It demonstrates how charitable distributions thereby influence the local socio-religious hierarchy and challenge established power structures.

Résumé

Les vêtements sont des signes de richesse, d’appartenance sociale et d’hégémonie socioreligieuse. Les pratiques de consommation et d’échange de vêtements accroissent ou déprécient le statut d’une personne, signalant ses goûts et son capital. En Guyane, de nombreux hindous attribuent les opérations de distribution de vêtements aux seules missions chrétiennes. Ils voient généralement dans la distribution de vêtements usagés

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un instrument de conversion des Hindous au christianisme. Alors que dans le passé seuls les chrétiens étaient capables d'effectuer ces distributions en raison de leurs liens avec les puissances coloniales, aujourd'hui et en raison du mouvement de migration transnationale vers l'Amérique du Nord, les Hindous guyanais organisent eux aussi des distributions de vêtements. À cet effet, les migrants collectent des vêtements usagés qu'ils expédient en Guyane. Les Hindous demeurant une minorité en Guyane, cet article démontre comment les discours et pratiques de distribution de bienfaisance constituent un moyen de résistance face à la menace de conversion. Il montre comment les distributions de bienfaisance influencent la hiérarchie socioreligieuse locale et questionnent les structures existantes de pouvoir.

Keywords

Hinduism – Guyana – transnational migration – clothing – Christian mission

Mots-clés

Hindouisme – Guyane – migrations transnationales – vêtements – missions chrétiennes

Introduction

Clothes have always been a means to demonstrate wealth and to contest socio-religious hierarchy in Guyana. As elsewhere, practices of consuming and exchanging clothing enhance or lower one's status by displaying one's taste and cultural as well as economic capital.¹ In contemporary Guyanese society, many Hindus regard clothing donations and charitable distributions as related to Christian missions. They often interrelate Christian mission work, (used) clothing distributions, and notions of 'poverty', and frequently describe that initially only Christians were able to conduct distributions due to their economic advantages, links to colonial powers, and role in the international secondhand clothing trade. They commonly state that the distribution of used clothing was and remains a means to convert Hindus to Christianity and to

1 P. Bourdieu. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London: Routledge (Routledge Classics), 2010 (1984).

consolidate Christian dominance, and criticize the fact that Christians refer to such charitable donations as ‘gifts from Jesus.’

Recently and in the course of transnational migration to North America, Guyanese Hindus have initiated the charitable distribution of clothing ‘back home.’ For this purpose, used clothes are collected by migrants and are then shipped to Guyana. This article proposes that the discourse about and the implementation of such clothing distributions may be regarded as a means to counter the perceived ‘threat’ of conversion. It demonstrates how charitable distributions influence the local socio-religious hierarchy and challenge established power structures, and how these are linked to (diasporic) Hindu nationalism. The findings are based on a multi-sited ethnography, consisting of participant observation and ethnographic interviews conducted between 2011 and 2013 in Berbice, Guyana, and New York City, USA. The purpose of this anthropological fieldwork was to analyze the material culture of clothing in Hindu ritual and the performative (re)construction of Indian ethnic identity through dress in transnational Guyanese networks.²

The ‘Threat’ of Conversion and the Discipleship of Christianity

Many of my Guyanese Hindu informants frequently stated that Hinduism is the ‘best way’ of worshipping. For example, Seeram,³ who is a 58-year-old cane worker from Berbice, argued that Hinduism is the oldest and therefore the ‘truest’ of all religions, pointing to Hinduism as the most ‘authentic’ religion in the world. Seeram, who lives with his wife and family in a self-built, well-kept, working-class house in the Guyanese countryside, frequently described himself to be a convinced and ‘stand’ (staunch) Hindu, never to be converted to any other religion. Having lived with him and his family for a period of over seven months, he had become one of my key informants and a gatekeeper to the local community, as he held a respected position in a local religious organization. He usually explained that Christians had stolen their texts from ancient Hindu scripture, indicated that the Bible’s *New Testament* is evidence of this, and asked what Jesus did during the ‘eighteen missing years.’⁴ According to him, Jesus had spent these years in India, in the Himalayas, where he had received his spiritual education and had learned the principles of his future

2 S.T. Kloß, *Fabrics of Indianness. The Exchange and Consumption of Clothing in Transnational Guyanese Hindu Communities*, London, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

3 All names have been changed to ensure my informants’ anonymity.

4 Field notes, Guyana, 2011–2012.

preaching from Hindu gurus and ascetics. Thus, according to Seeram, Christian principles are not necessarily wrong, but Hindu scriptures inevitably remain older, hence are more 'pristine' and 'authentic.' Seeram's argument is part of a general discourse among Berbician Hindus on the basis of which they claim both equality and superiority for their religion relative to Christianity. This theory, expressed not only by Seeram but by numerous other informants who renegotiate their and their community's status in the wider context of Guyanese society, has to be contextualized within the discourse of 'same, but different.'⁵ This discourse forms one of the major aspects in the socio-religious stratification of Guyanese society, as discussed in detail later.

The history and development of Hinduism in Guyana has been influenced by syncretism and exchange with Christianity and Islam, as well as inferiorization, proselytization, and stigmatization processes. Both Guyanese Hinduism and Islam have to be considered as ethnic religions,⁶ meaning that the vast number of Guyanese Hindus and Muslims consider themselves to be part of an ethnic group defined as 'Indian,' whose members construct their identity on the basis of an (alleged) descent from Indian indentured laborers.⁷ These were people shipped to the Caribbean from British India between 1838 and 1917 to work on sugar plantations after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire.⁸ Of the indentured laborers who arrived between 1874 and 1917 in British Guiana, 84.4 per cent were Hindu, 15.1 per cent were Muslim, and a mere 0.1 per cent were Christian.⁹ As discussed elsewhere, Guyanese Hindu and Muslim socio-religious practices represent and performatively (re)create this 'Indian' identity today.¹⁰

Despite the high numbers of Hindus within Guyana's Indian community, Hinduism in Guyana has always been a minority religion, with Christianity forming the dominant religion. From the perspective of the colonial British

5 For an elaboration of the 'Jesus in India' theory see also Joseph, S.J., "Jesus in India? Transgressing Social and Religious Boundaries", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 80 (1), 2012, pp. 161–199.

6 P. van der Veer, and S. Vertovec, "Brahmanism Abroad. On Caribbean Hinduism as an Ethnic Religion", *Ethnology*, Vol. 30 (2), 1991, pp. 149–166.

7 Indian denotes an ethnic group in Guyana, which is socially constructed through othering processes particularly in relation to the Guyanese 'Africans.'

8 H. Tinker, *A New System of Slavery. The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830–1920*, London: Hansib, 1993.

9 P. van der Veer, S. Vertovec, "Brahmanism Abroad ...", p. 151.

10 Clothes and sartorial practices, particularly those concerning the emic category 'Indian Wear,' are of major relevance in this context (S.T. Kloß, *Fabrics of Indianness ...*, Chapter 2).

rulers and the predominantly Christian 'African' population, Christianity was linked to the notion of 'civilization.' In the past, only Christians were considered 'civilized' people, although to varying degrees. Indigenous peoples, for example, who had converted to Christianity, were usually still considered less civilized than European Christians. Hindus, on the other hand, were generally declared 'heathen,' their practices denoted as 'uncivilized' and 'backward' and hence subordinate.¹¹ From this position, Guyanese Hindus have been concerned continuously with Christian efforts at proselytization and have felt a constant need to justify their practices and beliefs. In my presence they often lamented that the numbers of converts to Christianity or Islam are rising. The latest national census indeed shows a proportional decrease in the number of Hindus from 35.0 per cent of the total population in 1991 to 28.4 in 2002, in contrast to increasing percentages of Christian Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Muslims.¹² While these numbers may indicate conversion processes, the outward migration of Hindus has to be considered as an important factor, which has been significant among Guyanese Indians since the 1980s.¹³ Also, the groups of Anglicans, Methodists, and Roman Catholics have experienced substantial decline and former members have transferred to other Christian denominations. My informants' statements thus may be interpreted either as fact, or as expressing the fear of losing the community's traditions as a result of mass conversion. From the Guyanese Hindu perspective, conversion eventually leads to their total domination by 'other' ethnic groups, attended by a loss of self-determination in an environment characterized by ethnically-based tensions. Whenever I approached new Hindu acquaintances, topics like 'idol worship' were almost immediately addressed and discussed, topics that are popularly chosen by (Guyanese) Christians to ridicule Hindus as worshippers of 'stones' and 'puppets.'

The extent to which Guyanese Hindus explain and justify their practices and beliefs is remarkable, not only in the presence of Christians, but also in the course of ceremonies and celebrations, when the audience is predominantly Hindu. This has also been documented for the Trinidadian context in

11 B. Williams, *Stains on My Name, War in My Veins. Guyana and the Politics of Cultural Struggle*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991; B. Brereton, *Race Relations in Colonial Trinidad, 1870–1900*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, New York, 1979.

12 L. Benjamin, ed., *Guyana Population and Housing Census*, Georgetown; Bureau of Statistics, 2002, p. 30.

13 D.E. Plaza, "Disaggregating the Indo- and African-Caribbean Migration and Settlement Experience in Canada", *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 29 (57/58), 2004, pp. 241–266.

the early 1990s, where 'constantly sounded apologia springs from the severe criticism launched against Hindus' purported "idol worship" by fundamentalist Christian groups since the 1960s.¹⁴ Religious leaders lecture on the topic of conversion and draw analogies between Hindu and Christian practices, dismantling conversion as hypocrisy. This was revealed, for example, by Pandit Lakshman, one of the senior *pandits* (priests) in Canje, Berbice, the area in which I conducted most of my fieldwork. While discussing gift-giving practices in Hindu rituals, he handed me his personal folder of *puja* (veneration, ritual) instructions, in which he had documented the proceedings for venerating Lord Shiva and had included the topics of idol worship and conversion. An important aspect when worshipping Shiva is to venerate the *lingam* by pouring a sanctified mixture of *ghee* (clarified butter) and milk over it. Non-Hindus often ridicule the *lingam* as a 'stone' that is worshipped. Therefore, Pandit Lakshman has added instructions on how to address such accusations during this ceremony. Highlighting various lines from *Genesis*, he quoted in his notes, assuming that criticism and ridicule are largely pronounced by Christians: 'And Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone he had put for his pillow, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil on top of it.'¹⁵ This quote, which he usually read out during sermon, supported his argument that the *lingam* is not simply a stone but a house or abode of god. It further demonstrated that even Christians have biblical stories in which similar objects are venerated. Pandit Lakshman hence drew an analogy between Christian and Hindu modes of worship and – in light of the 'Jesus in India' theory and the discourse on 'same, but different' – possibly indicated a Christian appropriation of Hindu worship.

Numerous Hindus addressed cases of conversion. In these accounts, particularly Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists are said to be actively proselytizing in Berbice today. Historically, especially Protestant denominations were engaged in the evangelization of Guyanese Hindus and Muslims. From before British rule Protestant groups were dominant in Guyana, with the Netherlands Reformed Church established in 1720 and the Lutherans arriving during Dutch colonial rule.¹⁶ The British seized the colony in 1814, following the arrival of the London Missionary Society in 1807, and the Church of England subsequently became the government church. Mission work among Indian indentured laborers, former enslaved Africans, and indigenous populations intensified with the arrival of Canadian Presbyterians and the Seventh-Day

14 S. Vertovec, *Hindu Trinidad. Religion, Ethnicity and Socio-Economic Change*, London, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992, p. 195.

15 Pandit Lakshman, personal *puja* instructions, Berbice, Guyana, 2012.

16 J.G. Melton, *Encyclopedia of Protestantism*, New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 255.

Adventists during the 1880s.¹⁷ The Anglican Church and the Canadian Presbyterian Mission directed their work toward Indian indentured laborers after these started to settle permanently in British Guiana.¹⁸ Other Protestant denominations as well as the Catholic church focused on 'African' and 'Amerindian' (indigenous) populations. Christian churches considered it necessary to keep the 'races' apart, even in churches, and divided the mission work along these socially constructed racial lines. This strategy was part of the divide-and-rule policy of the British colonizers, planters, and missionaries, which was aimed at the separation of the colonized groups to maintain control over a population that otherwise might have united and subverted the colonizers.¹⁹ Up until today, various evangelical groups as well as Hindu and Muslim missions have continued their missionary work, heavily impacting ethnic identity formation and group cohesion. Although they do not necessarily declare their work as proselytizing or countering conversion, the majority of my Hindu informants interpret mission work – and to a certain extent also development work – in terms of proselytization efforts, and suggest that there are underlying, tacit motives among organizations and/or their volunteers and employees.

Despite their efforts, only a minority of Hindus and Muslims were proselytized in British Guiana.²⁰ A large number of those Hindus who did convert became nominal Christians and continued to practice Hindu rituals alongside Christian practices.²¹ Most Hindus did not readily adopt a different socio-religious value system, as their religious traditions provided them with a means to maintain and create stability in a mostly foreign environment and, of course, were something they believed in. Still, to acquire and maintain a higher social status in colonial society, a person and his or her family were required to be Christian. Stigmatized as 'uncivilized,' most Guyanese Hindus considered conversion as the only possibility for upward social mobility and to acquire social, economic, and cultural capital. The Hindu community instigated sanctions against such converts, however, as conversion was regarded as threat-

17 J.G. Melton, and M. Baumann, *Religions of the World. A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Beliefs and Practices*, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2010.

18 C.A. Dunn, *The Canadian Mission in British Guiana. The Pioneer Years, 1885–1927*, Master's thesis, Queen's University, 1971.

19 S. Garner, *Guyana 1838–1985. Ethnicity, Class and Gender*, Kingston: Ian Randle, 2008.

20 C.A. Dunn, *Canadian Mission ...*

21 C. Jayawardena, "Religious Belief and Social Change: Aspects of the Development of Hinduism in British Guiana", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 8 (2), 1966, pp. 211–240.

ening group solidarity and the continuity of traditions.²² In this context, the terms 'rice-Christians' and 'belly-Christians' were applied, describing people who 'embraced that [Christian] faith for material gain.'²³ I have encountered such labels in contemporary Guyana, where my informants often assumed that a convert must have hoped for some sort of financial or material gain through conversion. For example, Seeram explained that some of the Christian churches would 'walk around' and 'offer' money if a person converted to their faith. Sewing classes, he and others further explained, offered for women and supposedly directed at all 'races and religions,' were viewed suspiciously and Hindu informants indicated hidden proselytization motives. 'They only teach and lend sewing machines to those who are or become Christian,' my informants would usually tell me in informal conversations, although, upon inquiry, these fears and accusations were refuted by humanitarian or faith-based organizations conducting those classes. The majority of Guyanese Hindus continue to perceive conversion as hypocrisy, treason, and betrayal of ancestral traditions. It is seldom considered to be based on a change of belief. Over the past twenty years the need to convert in order to achieve upward social mobility has decreased, however – a development linked, for example, to Indian cultural revitalization and to the governmental rule of the allegedly Guyanese 'Indian' political party PPP/C between 1992 and 2015.

Contesting Socio-Religious Hierarchy

Certainly, Hindus have not passively accepted the stigmatization of their traditions but have actively been challenging it, and consequently contest the established socio-religious hierarchy. They emphasize the sophistication, morality, and authenticity of their traditions in relation to Christianity. Specific discourses which contest and subvert this hierarchy have been expressed and refined. For example, Hindus draw analogies between Christian and Hindu concepts, define inter-religious equivalents, and implement the discourse of 'same, but different.' On several occasions my Hindu informants proposed the equality of all religions, only to then claim Hindu superiority a few moments later. Such seemingly contradictory statements are part of a larger discourse on religions being defined as 'the same, but different.' For instance, in one of our conversations Seeram explained why different religions exist today even

²² C.A. Dunn, *Canadian Mission ...*, p. 79.

²³ C. Jayawardena, "Religious Belief ...", p. 227.

though they are ‘essentially’ the same. He elaborated that the same god has created and ‘designed’ different names, rituals, and scriptures according to the environment people live in, similarly to the creation of plants and animals. He stated: ‘Now, god had prepared the world in such a way that some places in the world ... some things grow and some other part things nuh grow!’²⁴ From this deterministic perspective, rituals and religions are adapted according to environmental conditions and locally available resources. If a Hindu offers flowers during a *puja* to the deity, this is possible because he or she has access to large quantities of flowers; hence ‘Hindu religion’ was ‘designed’ for an Indian locality. In a Euro-American environment, where there are winter seasons and flowers do not grow in abundance, god designed rituals differently according to these ‘conditions.’²⁵ Similar interpretations have been documented by the anthropologist Brackette Williams, whose Guyanese informants described how each ‘race’ has been given a set of ritual practices ‘through which that race can best communicate with the Supreme.’²⁶

Accordingly, to Seeram and others, religious practices are based on the race or ethnic group of a devotee.²⁷ Thus, even in the course of migration, my informants may not find it necessary to adapt to the local rituals that fit best to this environment. As the race of a person influences the best mode of communication with a god, he or she cannot simply discard his or her traditional rituals in a new environment. From this perspective, a white British planter could best communicate with god in a Christian way even though he or she was no longer residing in Great Britain, one of the regions for which Christianity had been designed. An Indian, similarly, could best communicate with a Hindu god or Allah. The conversion of Hindus to Christianity is thus considered to be more than a ‘selling out’ or betrayal of traditions, as it implies a loss of spiritual agency, since conversion may imply a regression in the ability to communicate with the Supreme.

From this perspective, all deities are ‘essentially’ the same, yet different ways of praying have to be acknowledged. This discourse of ‘same, but different’ on the one hand promotes equality, draws attention to transcultural exchange processes or common origin, and often serves as a status leveler in inter-religious dialogue. However, depending on context and according to varying intentions,

24 Seeram, interviewed by the author, Berbice, Guyana, March 2, 2013.

25 The fact of not having enough flowers to offer during *puja* is one of the most frequently expressed complaints and causes of distresses for Guyanese Hindus in the North American diaspora, and is therefore a topic frequently addressed even in Guyana.

26 B. Williams, *Stains on my Name ...*, p. 208.

27 In Guyana, the terms *ethnic group* and *race* are often used interchangeably.

on the other hand this statement also leaves space for hierarchization. 'Same, but different' may be applied to claim the superiority of Hinduism over Christianity, to hierarchize the described ways of praying. This is achieved, for example, by describing the Christian 'theft' of Hindu scripture, as expressed through the 'Jesus in India' theory, discussed in the beginning of this article. This theory is a common narrative that implies not only a moral inferiority on the part of Christians but also designates Jesus' (and hence also Christian) gnosis as dependent on Hindu philosophy. When Guyanese Hindus emphasize that Christianity has developed largely from Hindu teachings, this does not devalue Christianity as wrong, but rather puts it in a juvenile state or on a lower level of 'truth.'

Still, Hindus find it necessary to frequently explain and defend their concepts. They have appropriated and adapted specific terms such as 'church' and 'altar' to address and indicate the meaning and relevance of specific objects and practices towards Christians. Such 'translations' of concepts and the definition of similarity or sameness are not novel or exceptional practices, but have existed throughout the course of cultural and inter-religious contact. Historically, missionaries have searched and invented 'suitable' language to approach the local populations that they tried to proselytize. They have been actively involved in the translation and hence also transformation of religious concepts. For the Guyanese context, historian Charles Alexander Dunn refers to a program that was conducted by a Presbyterian Canadian missionary as training for catechists in 1918. Part of this program was a four-hour session titled 'Christian Terms and Hindi Equivalents.'²⁸ Although the content of this session remains unspecified, it reveals the missionaries' need to translate Christian terms and to find 'equivalents' to make Christianity more accessible to Hindus and Muslims in British Guiana, who initially spoke a variety of languages, including dialects of Hindi. Translation strategies and the definition of equivalents have to be considered as intricate elements of contact zones. A 'contact zone,' according to linguistic and literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt, is a 'space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.'²⁹ It is a zone of social spaces 'where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordi-

28 C.A. Dunn, *Christian Mission ...*, p. 136.

29 M.L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London, New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 6.

nation ...'³⁰ Guyana, in the past and at present, has to be understood as such a contact zone, where processes of (unequal) cultural exchange, of transculturation, affect religious practices and concepts.

Translation practices take place in socio-cultural hierarchies in which dominance, power, and subordination largely influence which cultural elements are transmitted, adapted, and challenged. The Hindu application of foreign words or loan-words such as 'church' may indicate and performatively recreate the dominance of Anglo-Christian culture and asymmetries of power in Guyana. When one refers to a Hindu *mandir* as a 'church' this may increase its status and value in contexts in which Christians form the dominant majority. It must be considered, however, that Hindus who apply the term 'church' may be aware of these processes and may not passively adapt but consciously apply this term to create equality or to declare the superiority of their religion to Christianity. According to Guyanese Hindus, *mandir* and church are essentially 'the same': places of worship. Yet, a *mandir* may be considered as a more 'authentic' institution, as they consider Hinduism to be older than Christianity. Informants frequently translated religious concepts, for instance the concept of *daan*, and emphasized their similarity. *Daan* is denoted as 'charity,' and is used as an equivalent to the Christian concept of charity, not only among lay people, but also among Hindu priests. This necessarily raises the question of whether the concepts of charity and *daan* refer to the same practices and ideas. At this point more research has to be conducted to understand potential conceptual differences between Christian and Hindu notions of charity. More relevant for this analysis is to focus on my informants' application of both terms as equivalents, however, as this reveals ongoing contestations of socio-religious hierarchy and power structures. I propose that defining concepts as equivalents and strategically imitating practices are means to contest and possibly subvert established structures of religious hierarchy. Hindus may perceive conceptual differences between charity and *daan*, yet may still declare them to be 'the same' in order to contest an established religious hierarchy. In this context, it becomes less relevant whether the practices conducted are the same or vary to certain degrees, but the capacity to conduct or strategically imitate charity forms the more important aspect in this process of contestation.

Through the practice of conducting charitable distributions, the organizing group may claim the societal position of giver, and hence create superior status. As part of gift economies, negotiations of hierarchy are intrinsic to such prac-

³⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

tices and distributions. When giving a gift, the giver's status rises in relation to the receiver of the gift. Only when the receiver reciprocates the gift is his or her status reconstituted. According to Marcel Mauss and classical gift exchange theory, the '[f]ailure to give or receive, like failure to make return gifts, means a loss of dignity.'³¹ Similarly, when alms are given in acts of charity, the giver of these alms not only benefits in terms of acquiring merit, but he or she creates or reinforces a higher status compared to the receiver. Receivers of charity are seldom in the position to reciprocate the gift, hence the practice of giving alms usually defines the receiver as poor and inferior. Of course, not all acts of charitable gift-giving are one-way transactions, and a gift of charitable goods may be reciprocated in different ways other than a direct return of material gifts. However, those of my informants who criticized and rejected the practice of Christian charitable distributions perceived these distributions as a powerful means of continued Hindu subordination, as reinstatement of Christian superiority, and thus considered them in terms of unreciprocated gift exchange.

Most of my informants explained that they had never gone to charitable distributions, to the extent that they claimed no knowledge about them, stating that only 'the poor does go.' Nevertheless, they sometimes remarked that churches hand out charitable goods such as clothing from trucks and that people have to go and line up to receive them. They were eager to distance themselves from charitable distributions, to avoid being considered poor and to express an outright rejection of (Christian) charitable goods, and hence inferior status. Interestingly, to my knowledge no Christian clothing distribution took place during the period and in the region in which I conducted fieldwork. Hindu groups seemed to be the only ones conducting charitable clothing drives in Berbice, distributing used clothes that had been collected predominantly in the diaspora, as discussed later. For example, when I attended a medical outreach program of a humanitarian organization run by diasporic Guyanese Hindus, shoes were distributed among those who attended the event. Although clothing distributions, labelled as Christian, seem to have largely diminished, they continue to exist in the imaginary and memories of my informants, remaining as a tacit threat and mode of inferiorization that has to be addressed and challenged in action.³²

31 M. Mauss, *The Gift. Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, London: Cohen & West, 1966, p. 41.

32 Besides the general change of development practice – from material support to advice and partnership – in the 1980s and 1990s, this decline of clothing distributions is certainly also linked to the greater availability of clothing since the 1990s. During this period the Guyanese economy recovered, poverty decreased, and migrant Guyanese sent not only

Conversion and the Distribution of Clothes

Part of the colonial project was the proselytization of 'heathen' populations, which included the distribution of clothing as a means to 'adequately' clothe the colonized converts and maintain power structures. Narratives of clothing distributions are almost exclusively linked to Christian missions in Guyana today, and informants frequently pronounced that, 'Christians send this clothing, and if you want it you have to become a Christian.'³³ Material benefits of conversion have been documented, for example, by the Canadian Presbyterian Missionary Society, which was particularly active in proselytizing the Guyanese Indian population. According to Dunn, it provided converts for instance with '160 garments, made by the ladies' that were distributed to 'the most needy' during Christmas 1888.³⁴ These items were handed out by a reverend in a mission school, paid for by plantation managers.

Although these practices can no longer be noticed in present-day Guyana, past conversion practices linked to clothing distributions have become part of the collective memory of and general discussions among Guyanese Hindus. Opinions as to whether the distributions are/were conversion strategies, and therefore offensive, vary among individuals today. While some informants claimed these distributions to be an offense, others regarded them as a result of the efficiency and good network of Christian churches, something that should not be condemned. Indumati, a 65-year-old Hindu from Berbice, was rather unconcerned about Christian charitable distributions and stated that when Christian churches share clothing, they share it with everybody and 'nuh only Christian people.'³⁵ She stated: 'To me since me get sense, me know Christian people ah share clothes. Because dem missionary from ... Merica, dem missionary ah send it to Guyana. And Guyana ah share it.'³⁶ Indumati, who is

financial remittances but also clothes to their families and friends at 'home.' Elsewhere I describe how this clothing boom led to the development of 'grading' clothes; the practice of selecting and disposing unwanted clothes which are handed on to a friend or family member as means of disposal. As clothes may not be discarded as long as they are defined as 'wearable,' they are used to create, visualize, and materialize relationships, recreating equality as well as hierarchy in this process (S.T. Kloß, *Fabrics of Indianness ...*, chapters 3 and 7).

33 Pandit Suraj, interviewed by the author, Berbice, Guyana, October 28, 2011.

34 C.A. Dunn, *Christian Mission ...*, pp. 33f.

35 Indumati, interviewed by the author, Berbice, Guyana, February 22, 2012.

36 My transcription of Guyanese Creole is based on spellings as proposed for example by: R. and J. Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*, Kingston: University of the West

a pensioner and widow, living with her eldest, unmarried son in a working-class home in rural Berbice, and whom I frequently met and interviewed as she occasionally earned money by sewing clothes, denied that Christians only share clothing among Christians to 'bribe' poor Hindus to conversion, as highlighted by others. Furthermore, she did not evaluate the distribution of used clothing negatively. Generally, like many elderly women with whom I talked, she was rather uncritical of Guyana's colonial and Christian-dominated history. Her interpretation must be contextualized in her personal life history, a life which she narrated as 'poor' and during which she may have accepted garments from clothing distributions. For instance, Indumati was able to explain that when you go to one of the clothing drives, the people who hand out the clothes – usually from a truck – would give you only one single piece, regardless how much you ask for, but nevertheless the organizers would not ask which religion you belonged to.

This perspective was certainly not shared by the younger generations, who were far more critical of colonialism and Christian charity. Patsy, a 42-year-old Hindu woman and member of a temple committee, who recently married a diasporic Guyanese Catholic and who was waiting for her visa to join her husband in the USA with her two teenage children, observed that recently a lot of 'poor' people have been converting to Christianity, and interpreted this as a consequence of the 'charity' that they received from Christian institutions.³⁷ She debated this in the company of her friends, whose vivid contributions to the conversation evoked popular Hindu discourse on Christian missionary work. Her friends immediately affirmed Patsy's statements and contemptuously named organizations they identified as Christian, such as the Guyana Red Cross. Although the Red Cross certainly does not label itself as Christian, my Hindu informants generally identify it as Christian, pointing out, for instance, that they use a cross as their symbol. They seldom differentiate between missionary, development, and humanitarian work. To them, people do not give without a purpose, or conduct charitable distributions or contribute to society without a motive. The contestation and consolidation of racial and religious hierarchy is often perceived as the objective – a suspicion that is based on the highly specific context of and the ethnically-based tensions in Guyana.

Most clothes distributed have been 'used' or 'secondhand' clothes in the past. As early as the nineteenth century the link between the secondhand cloth-

Indies Press, 2003; J.R. Rickford, *A Festival of Guyanese Words*, Georgetown: University of Guyana, 1978.

37 She did not specify when charitable events take or took place.

ing trade and missionary work was consolidated, particularly after European industrialization and due to the growing availability of clothing. Referring to a British missionary magazine from 1853, historian Beverly Lemire has emphasized the role that missionaries played, 'join[ing] the ranks of those rechanneling surplus apparel' and encouraging people to donate old garments so that they could be utilized by the missions.³⁸ She discusses how '[o]ld clothes gained international prominence as a charitable currency, part of the material arsenal of colonial projects.'³⁹ The distribution of used clothing is a particularly effective means to reinstate the superiority and inferiority of specific groups, as 'clothing cannot simply travel up the social hierarchy'⁴⁰ and especially used clothes are usually only handed downwards in social hierarchies.⁴¹ For the Indian context Lucy Norris analyzes that handing on used clothing 'allows the giver to reinforce the social distance and hierarchy of the relationship' to the receiver, particularly when these clothes are considered 'unwanted' or 'rubbish'.⁴² Furthermore, for a Hindu context, the 'used' status of these clothes is highly significant, as various concerns with regard to pollution and purity are involved that may even lead to perceptions of used clothing 'endangering' the receivers of charity. Most Hindus conceive of worn clothes as a potential source of pollution, for the cloth may be imbued with 'impure' substances such as bodily fluids.⁴³ Bodies and clothing, from a Hindu perspective, are in constant exchange; they mutually influence each other.⁴⁴ Certainly, used clothes may also be considered auspicious and may have the capacity to recreate intimacy or closeness. They are not necessarily interpreted as polluting, as the definition of a piece of clothing as either dirty or clean is constructed through the

38 B. Lemire, "The Secondhand Clothing Trade in Europe and Beyond: Stages of Development and Enterprise in a Changing Material World, c. 1600–1850", *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture*, Vol. 10 (2), 2012, pp. 144–163, at 136.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 158.

40 L. Norris, *Recycling Indian Clothing. Global Contexts of Reuse and Value*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010, p. 113.

41 *Ibid.*, pp. 85 ff.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 111.

43 S.T. Kloß, *Fabrics of Indianness ...*, Chapters 6 and 7; C.A. Bayly, "The Origins of Swadeshi (Home Industry): Cloth and Indian Society, 1700–1930", in A. Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 285–321.

44 P. Stallybrass, "Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning and the Life of Things", in J. Hemmings (ed.), *The Textile Reader*, New York: Berg Publishers, 2012, pp. 68–77; P. Barnett, "Folds, Fragments, Surfaces: Towards a Poetics of Cloth"; in J. Hemmings (ed.), *The Textile Reader*, New York: Berg Publishers, 2012, pp. 182–190.

(unequal) relationality of giver and receiver.⁴⁵ As charitable exchange does not take place within families or intimate relations, and neither are such donations handed down from a deity, they are not auspicious, but ambivalent at best.⁴⁶

Being Able to Give

In Guyana, used clothes remain a 'charitable currency' linked to missionary work, a link which may be considered as a legacy of Christian missions. However, alms-giving is not particular to Christianity, but indeed is prominent in most major religious traditions.⁴⁷ Concepts of charity and alms have always existed in Hinduism, as expressed by the notion of *daan*. The often encountered reference to charity as a Christian concept or legacy in Guyana hence indicates a Christian claim to (moral) superiority and sophistication in comparison to Hindu morality and civility. In this context and more generally, Hinduism is often accused of lacking social concern.⁴⁸ Since the 1920s, however, various Guyanese Hindu organizations have promoted charity. For instance the Hindoo Society, founded in 1922, opened a *Dharam Sala* (Home for the Poor) for 'destitute people in Georgetown, whatever their race or religion.'⁴⁹ Both Christian and Hindu institutions are said to conduct charitable distributions of clothing and food in rural areas of Berbice today, highlighting the fact that Hindus now are also able to give. For example, Indumati explained that over the past years Hindu charitable distributions have been organized for 'poor people.' She stated: 'Yeah, now, now me see Hindu people ah do it too! Now me see Hindu people ah bring overseas thing and dem ah share it.'⁵⁰ She thereby contested the often proclaimed superiority of Christianity in relation to Hinduism, highlighting how Hindus are as moral or even more moral than Christians, because

45 M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London, New York: Routledge, [1966] 2005.

46 For a discussion of clothing as textile *prasadam* (auspicious leftover), consult S.T. Kloß, *Fabrics of Indianness ...*, pp. 268 ff.

47 J. Parry, "The Gift, the Indian Gift and the 'Indian Gift'", *Man*, Vol. 21 (3), 1986, pp. 453–473, at 467.

48 M.V. Nadkarni, "Does Hinduism Lack Social Concern?", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 42 (20), 2007, pp. 1844–1849.

49 C. Seecharan, *India and the Shaping of the Indo-Guyanese Imagination, 1890s–1920s*, Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1993, p. 47.

50 Indumati, February 22, 2012.

Hindus started to 'give charity' as soon as they acquired the financial means, and conduct it in 'more rightful' ways.

Particularly active in the promotion of Hindu charity and directly labeling Christian charitable distributions as mission work are members of the Arya Samaj. At present, there exist various Hindu traditions in Guyana, and the Hindu community must not be understood as homogeneous. Different Hindu traditions exist, such as the mainstream Sanatan tradition, the Madras tradition (or Kali-Mai Puja), the Arya Samaj, and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). The Arya Samaj developed as a Hindu reform movement in colonial British India at the end of the nineteenth century and was transferred to Guyana through Arya Samaj 'missionaries' in the 1920s. The movement promotes reforms of Hindu ritual and the return to Vedic scripture, which is perceived to be the most genuine and authentic source of Hindu wisdom and knowledge.⁵¹ It proclaims, amongst other things, monotheism, in an attempt to highlight the 'civility' of Hinduism. The significance of charity among Arya Samajis was revealed to me, for example, in my seventy-minute interview with an Arya Samaji priest, Pandit Ramnarine, that revolved almost exclusively around local charitable projects. Ramnarine laid out projects such as the construction of orphanages and soup kitchens, and emphasized continuously that it is the duty of the Arya Samaj to promote such Hindu ideals.⁵²

Scanning through Facebook posts by Hindu-Guyanese institutions and individuals in 2012, I noticed an advertisement for a 'clothing drive.'⁵³ The post announced that clothes were to be collected in the USA, then shipped to Guyana, and distributed on the temple premises of an Arya Samaj *mandir* in Berbice. It specified that the distribution was directed at 'the less fortunate.' The organizer of the clothing drive was Prakash, a young Arya Samaj male in his thirties living in New York, who however frequently travels to his birthplace, Berbice. In an email conversation he explained that he engages in various charitable projects to 'enhance' the lives of Guyanese youths. Without any prompting, he described his clothing distributions as a means to counter Christian missionary work. Describing his personal grief when confronted with poverty in Guyana during his visits from New York, he wrote:

51 P. Younger, *New Homelands. Hindu Communities in Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, South Africa Fiji and East Africa*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

52 Pandit Ramnarine, interviewed by the author, Berbice, Guyana, December 31, 2011.

53 Facebook has become the most important medium to promote Hindu and Indian events in transnational Guyanese networks. The advertisement of the clothing drive was accessed on May 4, 2012, at 1:05 pm, the screenshot of which is in the author's possession.

Aside from the poverty to those who i feel dont deserve it what really got to me is see that where there once [were] mandirs and temples, they were abandon and christian places of worship sprung up. It hurt me to see my people were loosing faith in our "eternal laws". It has been around since the beginning of time and never re-written ... So i decide i would do what ever i could to help protect and promote my culture ...⁵⁴

In the same message he elaborated on the influence of Christian missionaries and their practices of (mis)using charitable distributions to convert Hindus, especially in the rural and 'poor' areas. He specifically highlighted that once these Hindus become Christian, 'they will get food and clothing from them.'⁵⁵ In my reply I encouraged Prakash to tell me more about the influence of Christian charity and specifically what kinds of clothing he has collected. Thus, in his next message he specified that Christians pronounce the charitable goods 'gifts from Jesus':

Christian missionaries go to Guyana and offer many things to the people such as food, clothing, medicine, etc. They tell the people that these items are gifts from Jesus and if the[y] become his followers [so] that their life will be better ... Most foundations like the Salvation Army collect such items and target the people who need it the most and fill their minds with things to make them believe the items are gifts from Jesus.⁵⁶

In these statements Prakash claimed moral superiority over Christians by highlighting that his charitable distributions are 'better' and more moral than Christian ones. He stressed that he hands the collected clothes to anybody who is in need of them, not only Hindus, and that his distributions do not necessitate conversion. According to him, his charity is 'better practiced.' Labeling such distributions as charitable and as Hindu, he directly compared it to Christian charity and contested the alleged Hindu moral inferiority. By not merely rejecting Christian charitable gifts, and hence denying a lower status of Hindus, Prakash discussed his distributions as a practice of resistance that enabled him and Hindus in general to take on the societal position of 'giver' and the ability to (re)define who is 'poor' and 'needy.' Hindu charitable distributions thus performatively (re)construct Hindu sophistication and superior morality.

54 Prakash, email interview, New York, USA, September 1, 2012.

55 Ibid.

56 Prakash, email interview, New York, USA, September 3, 2012.

While Prakash describes his distributions in terms of implementing a Hindu mode of charity or *daan*, he does not claim to be copying Christian modes, but instead emphasizes his better and more sophisticated form of practice. When I met him during the medical outreach and clothing distribution program in August 2015, mentioned earlier, he not only described his objective as being to benefit and contribute to the Guyanese Indian and/or Hindu community, but directly addressed the notion that he was doing it in a similar, yet different – namely more moral – way. It may thus be argued that his practice, and the discourse ‘same, but different’ in this context, form modes of strategic imitation, in which practices are imitated in order to create similarity, to (consciously) maintain difference, and to claim moral superiority and power. They reflect and indicate processes of mimicry, as discussed by Homi Bhabha. According to Bhabha, mimicry includes modes of strategic imitation and is a kind of ‘camouflage’.⁵⁷ As a result of mimicry resemblance is created that is ‘almost the same, but not quite’.⁵⁸ In this process the imitator becomes a menace to the imitated Other by claiming his or her power and status while at the same time maintaining difference.

Arya Samaj charitable distributions furthermore indicate the underlying negotiations of power within the Hindu community of Guyana. Although Arya Samajis do not denote their distributions as a means to convert ‘mainstream’ Hindus to the (Hindu) Arya Samaj movement, intra-group hierarchies are reinstated and contested in this context. This is significant when one takes into account that the Arya Samaj is often identified as a kind of ‘missionary Hinduism’.⁵⁹ The link between charitable distributions, missionary work, and conversion hence persists at various societal levels and among the various Hindu groups.

The case of Prakash further indicates the influence of transnational migration on the perception of who is considered ‘poor’ in Guyanese society. Charitable distributions, conducted by diasporic Guyanese, (re)create the relatively higher social status of Guyanese who live in North America. Guyanese Hindus, among them numerous Arya Samajis, have migrated to Canada and the USA since the 1990s. This has influenced the perception and definition of who is considered ‘poor’ in Guyanese society. Other influences on practices of charitable distributions and discourse on Hindu equality/superiority among Guyanese are, for instance, diaspora-active Hindu nationalist groups from India, such

57 H.K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 128.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 122.

59 A. Michaels, *Hinduism. Past and Present*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, p. 46.

as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), and Hindutva ideology in general. These developments have to be taken into account, for they reveal how the distributions are not merely a result or legacy of past Christian mission work, but also of present-day conservative Hindu nationalist discourse.

Conclusion

As I have demonstrated in this article, denominational competition and sectarianism in a religiously diverse community fosters support for social services and charitable distributions. This is particularly the case when one religious group claims civility and sophistication on the basis of an alleged moral superiority, represented and performatively constituted by charitable distributions. As such distributions are inherently linked to hierarchization processes, defining receivers as 'poor' and 'needy,' the denials and rejections of 'gifts from Jesus' must be read as subversive acts. By accepting Hindu charitable distributions, people may contest the established socio-religious hierarchy. Similar motivations are evident in the practice of drawing analogies between the concepts of charity and *daan*. *Daan*, or 'Hindu charity,' is considered more authentic and 'older' in relation to the Christian concept. In line with the rhetoric of 'same, but different' and from the perspective of Hindus, Hindu and Christian charity are considered as essentially the same, yet perceived to be different. Drawing on interpretations that link Jesus' gnosis to India and Hinduism, Hindu charity is thus claimed to be (morally) superior to Christian charity. In this context, Hindu charity may not necessarily be considered a legacy of Christian missionary work, but rather the opposite may be the case. Having been marginalized and denied sufficient economic capital to conduct charitable distributions in the past, some Hindus now emphasize their ability to provide (better) charity to various social groups and on the basis of this claim higher social status.

When considering the legacies of mission work with regard to notions of charity, one needs to critically assess the agency of the various religious groups involved. For example, while emerging Hindu practices may look like adaptations of Christian missionary practices, Guyanese Hindus cannot be considered to have passively adopted these practices. These practices may be a kind of strategic imitation or conceived as revitalizations of 'more authentic' concepts. As these concepts in practice were and are influenced by colonial Christian mission work however, charitable clothing distributions in contemporary Guyana have to be considered, at least in part, a legacy of missionary work.