Malaysia's Piercing Praxis
Category : May 1998
Published by Anonymous on May. 01, 1998

CELEBRATION

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Everyone in the country joins in Tai Pusam

Alvin Ung, Associated Press

With fish hooks embedded in their backs and spears piercing their cheeks, hundreds of thousands of Malaysian Hindus marched toward a prehistoric cave today in an annual ritual of penance. The festival known as Tai Pusam was brought to Malaysia in the 19th century by Indian immigrants who came to work on rubber estates and in government offices. In Malaysia, the pilgrimage drew one million people today--devotees and camera-snapping onlookers alike--to a temple at the Batu Caves just north of the capital, Kuala Lumpur.

Near the foothills of the temple, a penitent carried a 100-pound kavadi up the 272 steps to the top. The kavadi, a metal frame cocooning the penitent's body, is attached with hundreds of thin hooks and steel shafts. An estimated 9,000 people carried it at the festival.

A stream of trance-induced devotees followed the path up the

temple steps today to pay homage to their deity, Lord Muruga. Their foreheads, tongues and cheeks were pierced with spears, some as wide as broomstick handles. Everywhere, bald men smeared in holy ash and saffron powder and women draped in orange saris chanted "Muruga, Muruga" amid the sweltering heat and thundering beat of drums.

After about two hours, priests, who helped induce the trance, removed the skewers. Devotees claim to feel no pain and little blood comes out of the wounds. When the hooks and spears are removed, the only sign of the flagellation is redness and slight bruising. "It is all faith and belief in God," said temple priest Krishna Vadyar.

Before Tai Pusam, devotees fast for three to 48 days. During that time, they meditate daily and avoid food and drink throughout the day. They avoid alcohol and foods, such as onions, believed to arouse sexual desire. Only then, they say, are they prepared on the day itself to slip into a pain-defying trance.

All around the temple, vendors sold tinsel, fresh flowers, fruit and religious items. The ground was littered with offerings to the Gods, such as bananas and smashed coconuts. The air was scented by jasmine and rose, and contemporary Tamil movie soundtracks blared on speakers.

Some of this year's pilgrims said they were praying for fertility, a good harvest, a passing grade on school examinations. Others travel from near and far just to watch. Andrew Kaminski

of Britain described the festival as "quite gruesome but compelling." "At first I thought I saw a man walking on stilts," Kaminski said. "But when he got closer I saw he was walking on ax blades."