

DIVINE SUSTENANCE: KRISHNA PRASADAM IN HONOLULU, HAWAI‘I

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is an ethnographic study of the role of prasadam—sanctified food that has been ritually offered to the god Krishna—among the Honolulu branch of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), popularly known as the Hare Krishnas. Taking prasadam as the starting point, this thesis broadens from an examination of the meaning-laden exchange and consumption of prasadam to the social, spiritual, and political dimensions of prasadam distribution and production. It traces the connections facilitated by prasadam both within and outside of Honolulu’s ISKCON community, with a particular focus on the utopian image of self-sustaining farm communities in ISKCON ideology. The thesis contextualizes these issues within the framework of the politics of food, farming and land in Hawai‘i, illustrating the way in which Honolulu’s ISKCON community is located in the particular context of Honolulu, and the ways in which this branch of a transnational religious organization is made local.

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**CHAPTER ONE**  
**BECOMING PRASADAM DASI: AN INTRODUCTION TO ISKCON**  
**HONOLULU**

The lush green mountainous neighborhood of Nu‘uanu, in Honolulu, Hawai‘i, on the island of O‘ahu, is home to New Navadvipa Dham temple. The New Navadvipa Dham temple was established in 1974 by followers of A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami, lovingly referred to by his followers as Srila Prabhupada. The temple was converted from an enormous house on expansive grounds, with a towering banyan tree in the backyard, thickly rooted to the ground from its many hanging branches. The ground floor contains an entrance lobby, to the left of which is a large rectangular “temple room” with a carved wooden arch and sliding wooden doors at one end. The doors are periodically opened during the day at times of worship to reveal a marble altar housing statues of sumptuously clothed deities, and at the other end, sitting on a gilded and upholstered throne, is a life-sized statue of Srila Prabhupada. Next to the “temple room” is a small adjoining room in which ritual objects are stored, and the clothes and garlands for the deities (whose images are freshly dressed and garlanded each day) are stored and prepared. Straight ahead and to the right of the lobby is a gift shop, entered through large sliding glass doors, in which religious literature, images of the blue-skinned god Krishna, Indian clothing, incense, t-shirts with images of Krishna, and Indian jewelry are sold. The ground floor also contains a restroom, a large kitchen containing industrial grade cooking equipment, and a dining room with many tables and chairs, which, between Monday and Friday during the lunch hours, operates as a buffet restaurant. The upper

floor is accessed via a stately wooden staircase and contains a large bedroom in which Srila Prabhupada at one time resided. It is still furnished with his belongings, and contains another life-sized statue of Srila Prabhupada, posed behind his desk. There are also other, very modest bedrooms inhabited by temple priests and devotees on this floor. The temple has a large garden both in front and behind the main house, with another small home on the property, which houses more devotees in service of the temple. Given the scope and scale of the grounds, it comes as no surprise that the temple was purchased by a wealthy person—Henry Ford’s great-grandson, Albert Ford (whose spiritual name is Ambarish Das), who, in 1974, gifted the property to the organization that his guru, Srila Prabhupada founded, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness—referred to as ISKCON by its members, and popularly known as the Hare Krishnas (Espanol 2001).<sup>1</sup> New Navadvipa Dham was thus transformed into part of the global network of ISKCON temples. On a quiet residential street, this house regularly pulsates with the sounds of devotional chanting, of *bhajans* (devotional hymns to Krishna), harmonium, and *mirgdandam* drums.<sup>2</sup> New Navadvipa Dham Temple came to be the primary location of my “field site”—but it came later into a process of gradual exposure. Indeed, it was my

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<sup>1</sup> This information has been covered by newspapers in O‘ahu, including *The Honolulu Advertiser*, where I drew my reference (Espanol 2001). It was also mentioned to me by devotees, and those outside the ISKCON community as well. I heard a slight variation of this account from two devotees, who suggested that Albert Ford still owned the temple, and leased it out to ISKCON for one dollar a day.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the quiet, residential setting, while conducive of peaceful spiritual reflection, also places limitations upon the temple. I was told that though the temple’s long-standing presence in the community made it impossible for them to be ousted, that the city was increasingly regulating the temple in bothersome ways, for example by restricting the number of people allowed to live on temple grounds to only ten. I was also told, but with more amusement than rancor, that the police had been called in on a noise complaint during one impassioned, late-night bhajan session during my research.



own unplanned yet nevertheless repeated exposure to ISKCON—globally—that inspired me to begin this project. Specifically, that my contact with ISKCON always involved food and eating led me to focus my research on ritually sanctified food, *prasadam*, and its role in ISKCON.

Through more than a year and a half of ethnographic research I found that *prasadam* is viewed as an important tool for spiritual cultivation of the self, and that *prasadam* distribution networks established by ISKCON’s devotees aim to spread *prasadam*’s potency with the goal of generating widespread spiritual transformation. Though the “*prasadarian*” diet is a religious practice, it is also an alternative diet which relates to concerns about sustainable agriculture and healthful eating—concerns that extend beyond ISKCON throughout Hawai‘i. *Prasadam* serves as the focal point of this thesis not only because of its centrality to both the institutional philosophy of ISKCON and the daily lives of ISKCON devotees, but also because it reveals the way the movement is embedded in a particular location, and embodied by particular individuals. Concerns about food and diet relate to concerns about agriculture, industry, and the ideal society, motivating devotees to not only adapt their diet to become “*prasadarians*,” but also to engage with the community beyond ISKCON.

### **ISKCON’s Origins**

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness was born in 1965, when “a sixty-nine-year-old Indian guru named A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada attempted

to transmit to American youth his very traditional, devotional Krishna faith<sup>3</sup>” (Shinn 2004, xvi). Though Krishna devotional worship was a new presence in the American religious landscape at that time, the beliefs and practice espoused by Prabhupada were not. “The modern-day Hare Krishna movement traces its roots to the personality of Shri Chaitanya (1486-1533), though it participates in the older Vedic tradition” (Rosen 2004a, 63). Chaitanya is understood to be an incarnation of Vishnu (Krishna) himself, and it is he who established the devotional practices—namely sankirtan (devotional chanting)—foundational to the Hare Krishna movement. Nevertheless, certain practices in ISKCON are innovative, even if the scriptural doctrine is ancient, and especially in the early years of its establishment, the movement operated through the conversion of individuals from a vastly different religious (or non-religious) background (Bromley and Shinn 1989). ISKCON was founded in America, but the movement rapidly went global, with international recruits outpacing American recruitment by the mid-1970s (Rochford 1985, 278). An online ISKCON directory shows ISKCON’s presence—in the form of temples, restaurants, farms, and schools and other institutions—in 604 cities in 96 nations (Krishna.com).

ISKCON has often been referred to as a New Religious Movement. As Coney notes:

The term *NRM* [New Religious Movement] is often attached to South Asian religious and spiritual groups that have appeared in the West since 1945, who have succeeded in gearing their message to attract a Western audience, and whose teachings and practices are generally perceived as innovative or unorthodox in

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<sup>3</sup> A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami is also referred to as Srila Prabhupada, or simply as Prabhupada or Prabhupad. This last name is the one I use throughout this text.

some way. This perception is held either by the parent traditions from which they are derived, or by Westerners, to whom they are unfamiliar (Coney 2000, 57).

This thesis is in line with studies of NRMs that consider how these “transnational transcendental” movements both circulate, and take root in a particular context (Csordas 2009). Yet my focus remains on attitudes toward food, farming, and land at the Honolulu ISKCON temple, not on ISKCON as a New Religious Movement. It is important to note, too, that the term “New Religious Movement” may itself be problematic, since it is “rarely used by NRMs to describe themselves, as they are likely to see it as an inappropriate label that downplays either their connections to older traditions or their spiritual identities” (Coney 2000, 56). Indeed, this is true in my experience with ISKCON, since devotees highlight the ancient provenance of their philosophy as a sign of its validity, highlighting the continuity between their movement to the ancient “Vedic tradition” of India, referring to the body of ancient Hindu religious scriptures collectively known as “The Vedas.” The Vedic roots of the movement are a source of great pride, so while there is some resistance to dubbing ISKCON Hindu,<sup>4</sup> it is understood by all its adherents as Vedic. For this reason, I do not impose the terminology NMR in my analysis of ISKCON in Honolulu.

Then too, there is the explicitly critical appellation of *cult*, a charge that has haunted ISKCON throughout its presence in the United States, particularly with the rise of the so-called anti-cult movement in the United States in the 1970s and 80s and several

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<sup>4</sup>Some ISKCON materials, and devotees, choose not to identify ISKCON as Hindu, but rather as a practice that applies to all faiths, while others see it as clearly part of a set of Hindu practices. See Chapter Five for more discussion of the Hindu and Vedic nature of ISKCON.

publicized court cases involving allegations of brainwashing (Shinn 1987; Bromely 1989). I reject the terminology of *cult* as well, since, as James Richardson notes “the term has become a ‘social weapon’ to use against groups which are not viewed with favor” (Richardson 1993, 359). Additionally, I find that studies that operate within a cult framework often take as a starting point an implicitly pathologizing set of questions concerning membership. They thus approach ISKCON with the pre-set problematic, “Why would people join? Or stay?” This is the approach of Poling and Kenney, who attempt to formulate a “Hare Krishna character type” (Poling and Kenney 1986). Rejecting this approach, I seek instead to present a contextualized ethnography that addresses the role of food, farming, and attitudes towards land in the construction of identity among members of ISKCON in Honolulu. Returning to just such a contextualized approach, I present a brief description of my field sites and networks.

### **The Gathering Place: Situating ISKCON in O‘ahu**

The Hawaiian archipelago is made up of several main islands: O‘ahu, Hawai‘i, Maui, Moloka‘i, Lāna‘i, Kaua‘i, Ni‘ihau, and Kaho‘olawe. The island of O‘ahu is by far the most populous of the Hawaiian Islands, with its more than 950,000 residents making up roughly 70% of the state’s total population (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Hawai‘i’s capital city, Honolulu, in which the New Navadvipa Dham Temple is located, is on the island of O‘ahu. As of 2006, more than 377,000 people lived in Honolulu (ibid). Aside from Hawai‘i’s residents, large numbers of tourists visit the islands each year; in 2009

visitors to Hawai‘i numbered more than 6.4 million (Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism 2009).

The Hawaiian islands were unified for the first time under King Kamehameha I in 1801 when he established the Kingdom of Hawai‘i. Although the sovereignty of the Hawaiian Kingdom was recognized by France and Great Britain in 1843, and by the United States in 1849, in 1893 a group of white businessmen assisted by U.S. troops illegally overthrew the Hawaiian government and in 1894 declared themselves the Republic of Hawai‘i (Sai 2008). In 1898, the Republic of Hawai‘i ceded its seized territory to the United States following the illegal annexation of Hawai‘i by the United States, despite organized, extensive, and widespread legal and political protest by Hawaiians (Silva 2004). In 1959, Hawai‘i became a U.S. state following a vote in which “settler and military personnel, who outnumbered Native Hawaiians,” were permitted to vote, and the ballot presented a choice between “remaining a U.S. colonial territory” or full statehood, without a third option of independence (Kauanui 2008, 643). In the 1970s and 80s, Native Hawaiians “renewed their cultural pride and political consciousness during a period of renaissance and protest” (Tengan 2008, 2). As a result, the political and cultural landscape of contemporary Hawai‘i is marked by Hawaiian activist struggles for recognition of historical injustices, and amelioration of present conditions for Hawaiians.

Beginning with the arrival of Captain Cook in 1778, the demographics of Hawai‘i shifted rapidly. Diseases introduced by Captain Cook and his crew created deadly epidemics on a nearly unimaginable scale throughout the 19th century, claiming the lives

of “some 90 percent” of the Hawaiian people (Tengan 2008, 2). Meanwhile, Americans came to Hawai‘i to establish plantation agriculture, transforming the landscape of the islands from communally owned and farmed land to sugar plantations (McGregor 2007). Large numbers of plantation workers were recruited from China, Japan, Korea, and the Philippines, often as indentured servants, for low pay in demanding and inhumane conditions (Takaki 1983). As a result of this history, Hawai‘i’s population is demographically distinct from the mainland United States.

On O‘ahu, ISKCON has been part of the religious landscape for more than forty years. The Honolulu temple has the special distinction of having housed Prabhupada. A large color photograph of Prabhupada and disciples in front of the temple’s massive banyan tree is framed and hung in the temple foyer. The home page of the temple’s website tells the history of Prabhupada’s presence in Honolulu:

Since 1969, His Divine A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder-acarya of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, has been distributing the matchless gifts of Krishna Consciousness throughout the Hawaiian Islands...Between 1974 and 1976, His Divine Grace performed that sacred duty especially swiftly here in Hawaii, in his room upstairs. That is how these grounds became a tirtha, a holy place... If you feel Srila Prabhupada’s spiritual presence at his tirtha, it is not surprising (Das 2009).

Prabhupada’s bedroom is preserved as it was during his time at the temple, and a life-sized, extremely realistic image of Prabhupada sits behind a low desk, his papers laid out before him, forever at work in the mission for Krishna Consciousness. Some of the most respected temple devotees have the special distinction of having met Prabhupada, or even been initiated as his disciples.

New Navadvipa Dham is located in the upper-class residential Nu‘uanu neighborhood of Honolulu, a forested neighborhood, in the sloping foothills of the dramatic green mountains surrounding it. Yet, as I initially noted, the temple was not the only site for me, for indeed, in this thesis I am not primarily attempting a holistic ethnographic account of the New Navadvipa Dham temple, but rather seeking to emphasize the cultural models of food, farming and land that inform how ISKCON devotees practice of their faith, and also, in many cases, their interactions with each other, and those outside of ISKCON.

Jim Wafer argues against “the anthropological notion of the field as a “clearly delimited area of the anthropologist’s experience, with neat geographical and temporal boundaries” (Jackson 1996, 3). In line with this critique, James Clifford insists that “there is nothing given about a ‘field.’ It must be worked, turned into a discrete social space, by embodied practices” (Clifford 1997, 54). Although New Navadvipa Dham initially appears to be “clearly delimited,” bounded as it is by the temple grounds, and literally enclosed by fences, this territorial demarcation does not contain the “field” of my research, but rather serves as a central hub to the many connections I engendered through my research. Instead of a fieldwork site, I developed a fieldwork network. The temple was a gathering place to which I returned again and again, participating in Sunday worship, engaging in conversations about prasadam, and, always, consuming my own portion of it.

But New Navadvipa Dham’s networks led me outside the temple, as well. For ISKCON’s presence in Honolulu extends widely beyond the temple. Perhaps most

visible are the weekly Saturday sankirtan in Waikiki. *Sankirtan* is group devotional singing and chanting of the mahamantra: *Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Kirshna Hare Hare Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare*<sup>5</sup> (from whence comes the appellation “Hare Krishnas”). A circle of drummers and chanters is set up, and ISKCON publications are distributed in English and Japanese, to the mostly tourist crowd in Waikiki. *Sankirtan* is held in other public venues as well, generally at times when many people will hear, like during the monthly outdoor art festivals in Honolulu’s Chinatown. Also in Chinatown is a restaurant, Govindaji’s, owned and operated by an ISKCON Krishna devotee. On the campus of the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa a food stand, called Govinda’s, is run directly by the temple serving “healthy vegetarian food.” Here, the only sign of ISKCON affiliation, aside from the name,<sup>6</sup> is the relatively inconspicuous stack of business cards containing the temple’s information next to the cash register. And yet, all food and drink served at Govinda’s is cooked at the temple, and delivered daily to campus. My field network also brought me to a homeless shelter in Honolulu, where Daiva, a long-time Krishna devotee, has established an urban garden that provides vegetables and herbs to the shelter that hosts it.

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<sup>5</sup> For ease of reading, I use English spellings of Sanskrit terms in cases where such spellings are well-known (for example I have used Krishna instead of Krsna, a more faithful transliteration from Sanskrit). Likewise, I have not systematically made use of diacritical markings in transliterations of Sanskrit terms and verses.

<sup>6</sup> ISKCON restaurants tend to share the same name. Govinda is one of the many names of Krishna, specifically, in his young, cowherd form. It has become, as one business-savvy Honolulu devotee told me, a global “brand name” for ISKCON’s vegetarian restaurants. During the time of my fieldwork (fall 2009 through summer 2011), this devotee was attempting to establish a Govinda’s restaurant in the tourist district of Waikiki, a project which ultimately did not succeed.



There are other, broader networks through time and geographic space as well, as devotees signaled to me, via the internet, print and audio-visual media, both contemporary and from the early days of the movement, produced throughout the world. Indeed, the social networking site Facebook, and the online video site YouTube became nodes within my fieldwork network as well. Finally, the diverse and ever-changing composition of the temple goers each Sunday evening service was another network in and of itself. Often, devotees whom I asked for interviews, or discussed my project with, would suggest other people to contact, or directly introduce me to other devotees.

The ISKCON Honolulu community is difficult to define, and impossible to characterize in one sweeping statement. It comprises local members, born and raised in Hawai‘i, mainland USA transplants, and immigrants from a wide range of nations. Because I did not take a census of the temple community, my comments on the community’s demographics are drawn from my own observations of temple services and interactions with devotees. On average, about 75 people attend the Sunday feasts, usually around a half-dozen or more are first-time visitors to the temple. In terms of ethnic and racial composition, European Americans (and some recent European immigrants) appeared to be the largest segment of the temple community, closely followed by Indian nationals and Indian diasporic populations from the United States, Fiji, and elsewhere. (Non-Indian) Asian Americans also attended, although it seems to me in numbers less than their representation in the overall population of O‘ahu. There are a number of African American devotees, and a very few Hawaiian or part Hawaiian devotees in the temple community as well. Many devotees were born and raised in Hawai‘i, but many

others came to the island from elsewhere, some for work or schooling, and some through direct ties with the temple (this was common in the case of the temple's initiated priests, many of whom were requested to come serve as *pujaris*, or priests at New Navadvipa Dham). Likewise, based on my observations, ISKCON's membership is drawn from a variety of class backgrounds as well. Some members work as professionals, some come from wealthy families, some work in poorly-paid service-sector jobs, some are looking for work, some are full-time students, and those who reside in the temple perform temple service full-time and are dependent on the temple for housing, food, and other needs. Most of those whom I interviewed came from middle-class backgrounds, and were either working for the temple full-time, working in service (retail and tourism) or non-profit sectors, or were full-time students (both graduate and undergraduate levels were represented). Interestingly, many of them were vegetarians before joining the movement, another factor that pointed me towards the study of prasadam.

Women and men attend temple services in generally equal numbers. Women and men separate to the left and right sides, respectively, of the temple room during sankirtan, although there is no barrier between the two groups, and there are exceptions when lack of space necessitates it, or when newcomers do not follow this gendered division of space. Men generally lead the sankirtan, both in chanting and the accompanying instruments. I only rarely saw women with instruments during the sankirtan. In contrast, women often lead the devotional song that is sung at the conclusion of the evening service, as well as additional bhajans that are often sung, more informally, after prasadam has been served on Sunday evenings. Men and women are eligible to serve as priests or

priestesses, and their duties in those roles are identical. There are currently many more men than women serving as pujaris in the New Navadvipa temple and the current temple president is a man, although in the past the temple has been under female leadership. Celibacy is valued in ISKCON as part of the “material renunciation” felt to be conducive of spiritual development, but marriage between devotees, especially with the goal of producing and raising Krishna Conscious children, is not discouraged.<sup>7</sup> The devotees and pujaris of New Navadvipa Dham include both married devotees, and celibate devotees. Chapter Four includes a discussion of gender relations and ideologies in ISKCON.

While much has been written on ISKCON as a convert faith (Singer 1984; Poling and Kenney 1986b; Shinn 1987), the Honolulu community includes adult and adolescent children of devotees, comprising a second generation of devotees, raised in, rather than converted to, the movement. I met a number of second-generation devotees who had been educated through ISKCON schools as well. Interestingly, I met several European American devotees who had spent substantial portions of their childhoods in ISKCON’s religious schools, or *gurukula*, in India. The age range of Honolulu’s ISKCON community spans from senior devotees to the newest member of the community, who was just four days old on her first visit to the temple. It seemed to me that within this age range, there were clusters of “senior devotees” who had joined the movement during its early years of the mid-1960s through 1970s, and newer devotees in their 20s, including many university students.

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<sup>7</sup> See Rochford (2007) for evolving attitudes on celibacy and marriage in ISKCON.

## **Ethnographic Eating: My Introduction to Krishna Prasadam**

Although the nature of my “field site” and my entry into it complicate simplistic notions of “entering the field,” I will nevertheless offer a story of beginning, albeit one which highlights my gradual process of becoming aware of ISKCON Honolulu. Pulling out a notebook some time back, in which I had dutifully taken notes during my orientation into the masters program in anthropology at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa in August of 2009, I noticed that I had written, “FOOD Govinda’s—Sustainability Courtyard” in the margins of my notes on such pragmatic matters as required coursework and funding opportunities. Govinda’s, the vegetarian food stall run by ISKCON and located in the Sustainability Courtyard at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, became a key site in my ethnographic research. Thus my initial exposure to “the field” evidently came about during my formal initiation into graduate studies in anthropology, though I did not at the time realize it. I don’t recall when I found out that Govinda’s was affiliated with ISKCON, but it was early into that first semester. What surprised me was not that there should be an ISKCON food operation on campus, but rather that this was far from my first encounter with “Hare Krishna food” (a cuisine in and of itself, and one which forms the starting point, and central theme of this thesis) despite having never deliberately sought it out.

In one respect this is unsurprising. For a combination of ethical and environmental concerns, I have been a vegetarian for the past 13 years, although one, I feel compelled to disclose, that does not meet the strict dietary requirements laid forth by ISKCON. Vegetarianism is a fundamental doctrinal issue for ISKCON, and “Hare

Krishna food,” which I will henceforth discuss as prasadam, meaning ritually sanctified food, is essential to the daily practice of Krishna Consciousness by devotees. And prasadam is consumed by those outside of ISKCON as well. It was precisely this point of exchange and interaction through food between members of ISKCON and others that piqued my interest in studying prasadam.

Encountering the Govinda’s on campus in August 2009, I recalled visiting a vegetarian restaurant during travels in Northern Chile in December 2007, only to discover it was housed inside of an ISKCON temple. I remembered, too, the free cooking classes (and subsequent dinners) conducted by a young Krishna devotee at the campus of the University of California at Irvine. I attended a couple of these classes back in 2006 during visits to my now-husband at his college campus. I thought back, too, to the fall of 2004 when I studied abroad in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India, and stayed with a host family who took me to a Krishna temple. This temple was different from all the others I had visited with them. Architecturally, it was newer, and both the exterior and interior bore little resemblance to any of the many ornate Southern-style temples in Madurai. Another distinctive feature was the prasadam we received. It was abundant. A full meal was served, rather than a small amount, deposited directly into the palm, as at other temples I visited during my stay in India. I remember my host sister explaining to me in a low tone as we waited in line for prasadam, ‘If they say Hare Krishna to you, you should say Hare Krishna back.’ She explained that here, they believed saying Hare Krishna was a form of prayer, and it was at that moment, already inside the temple, that I realized why it seemed so different—this was a Hare Krishna temple.

When I met and became friends with a fellow University of Hawai‘i student who is a Krishna devotee, and a regular temple attendee, I communicated my interest in the experiences I had had with ISKCON, identifying food, as a central theme to them. It was most likely she who told me for the first time that all food served at Govinda’s, as at all ISKCON restaurants, was prasadam. I was familiar with the concept, having studied Hinduism, and visited Hindu temples in India, where I lived for a combined total of about 12 months. When I shared my interest in prasadam with her, she said that I should go visit the temple with her. I did so, and on my first visit, in November of 2009, I was promptly introduced by my friend to the temple’s president—as a student of prasadam. Immediately, the president and other devotees I spoke with on that first visit, had stories to tell of prasadam, and spoke of it as powerful and transformative. It was this immediate and enthusiastic response to my desire to study prasadam that determined my choice of research topic, encouraged as I was that devotees agreed that prasadam was a worthy topic of study, and what’s more seemed to deem me worthy to study it. I continue to be thankful for the warm reception, and the assistance of devotees who aided me in my research through informal conversation and semi-formal interviews alike.

So what exactly is prasadam? It was typically described to me by those I interviewed as mercy. As this definition suggests, prasadam is not limited to foodstuffs, although it is precisely edible prasadam, and not other types, that plays a centrally important role in ISKCON and which is the subject of this study. Basically, prasadam is anything offered by *pujaris* (priests) to an installed image of the deity, one in which the

deity resides<sup>8</sup> in the temple. These offerings, typically of food, flowers, water, or kumkum powder (vermillion powder applied between the eyes of the devotee) become sanctified through this ritual transaction. To ISKCON devotees, they not only take on the mercy of god, but become “non-different” from god, thus they embody all the power and potency of the divine.

Prasadam is offered, and distributed, at nearly all Hindu temples, but it takes on an amplified importance at ISKCON. Many forms of prasadam are distributed at ISKCON, including flower garlands presented to the deities, cloth used to dress the deities, and tulsi water (water infused with the tulsi plant, considered to be sacred in ISKCON), but the most notable and large-scale prasadam distribution is that of edible prasadam. Furthermore, while temple prasadam plays an important role and is felt to be particularly potent, devotees can *and must* offer their own food to Krishna. This, too, is prasadam.

Let me turn now to a justification of why I have dwelled on the story of my own introduction to prasadam, which is to emphasize the way in which prasadam was my point of entry into ISKCON. This is important beyond my own individual story of embarking on this project, since, as I found from devotees with whom I spoke, this experience is not uncommon (although the outcome of ethnography through prasadam is more so). Many devotees recounted having come to ISKCON through prasadam (see Chapters Three and Four), and devotees committed to the organization’s missionary purpose of spreading Krishna Consciousness are keenly aware of the power of prasadam

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<sup>8</sup>See Eck (1998) for a discussion of how the deity resides in the image.

in “unlocking” Krishna Consciousness in others (see Chapter Four). Prasadam encapsulates some of the deepest philosophical points of the movement. It is also ideally suited for studying both the intimate and communal daily experiences of devotees because of the fundamental and universal necessity of eating. And I quickly came to see that prasadam was about so much more than just eating, or perhaps that eating, for Krishna devotees, is about much more than just the consumption of food. When food is understood to be non-different from God, eating is inevitably a profound experience. I realized, too, that attitudes about food connected with larger aims within the movement, namely the value of “simple living,” and the essentially land-based ideals of the movement (see Chapter Four). Roy reminds us that: “Anthropologists understand eating as a deeply social act intimately associated with identity. Many anthropological studies show the profound relationship between food, and individual and group societies” (Roy 2005, 174).

### **Why Prasadam Matters**

Although broader themes emerging from the relationship of food to food production and land politics are also explored—namely in Chapter Five—I see my thesis project primarily as an ethnography within the anthropology of food. My approach is inspired by R.S. Khare’s use of a semiotic approach to examine the “dominant cultural models and meanings” of Hindu Indian foodways (Khare 1992, 15). Because much of ISKCON’s food practices are drawn from Hindu Indian food traditions, I find both his approach, and his analysis of prasadam as “pure food par excellence” useful in my



analysis (Khare 1976, 8). I draw, too, from the intellectual heritage of symbolic anthropology, including Mary Douglas's focus on food as a symbolic medium and metaphor of the body as society (Douglas 1970).

In analyzing my research on prasadam, and ISKCON, I tried to unite an awareness of the symbolic, with the experiential, and to address how meaning is made and shared through discourse, as well as through action and interaction. I find Victor Turner's discussion of ritual and *communitas* reflects much of the experiences of devotional worship that I witnessed and participated in at the temple. The relevance of Turner's theory of *communitas* to ISKCON is not coincidental, since Turner uses the religious community founded by Bengali saint Chaitanya as one of his examples for religious and social movements that deliberately invoke *communitas* (Turner 1969). As mentioned earlier, this movement is ancestral to ISKCON, and initiated members of ISKCON trace their religious lineage directly back to Chaitanya, who is considered to be an incarnation of Krishna himself (Rosen 2004a).

I found that a cultural analysis method, such as that described by Naomi Quinn and the contributing authors to *Finding Culture in Talk* was a fruitful way of examining the transcripts, field notes, and other products of my research. Quinn uses cultural analysis to uncover "the cultural understandings underlying discourse" and construct the "cultural models" shared by members of a community (Quinn 2005, 7). This involves a close examination of what is said, but also an awareness of the ways in which messages are communicated. For example, Quinn notes that "metaphors in speech are like flags waving, or Xs that mark the spot" (Quinn 2005, 49). I found metaphor to be a common

mode of explanatory speech in my research, used by priests in their lessons to devotees, and used by devotees in their explanations to me. In Chapter Two I lay out devotees' discursive constructions of prasadam as spiritualizing food, including the common use of the metaphor of prasadam as a "drug" or "medicine."

While I employ this methodology to attempt to understand some of the cultural models at work in the devotee community, I am also cognizant of the diversity of Honolulu's ISKCON community, and I do not claim that all devotees share the same set of cultural models. Nor do they perform devotion to Krishna and membership to the community in identical ways; indeed, far from it. At the same time, membership in ISKCON is predicated upon at least a basic degree of adherence to a set of beliefs as set forth in a body of Sanskrit religious texts, and their interpretation and teaching by the movement's guru, Srila Prabhupada. One of the powerful points of continuity in my interviews and unrecorded conversations with devotees was the frequency with which they used scriptural allusions to explain and support their point of view. Briggs notes: "In anthropological terms, scriptural allusions connect an ideal model with a real, temporally bounded event, specifying how the former applies to the latter" (Briggs 1986, 87).

Thus I attempt to discuss not only the doctrinal basis of devotee's conceptual/cultural models of food, society, and place, but also the ways in which they integrate them into their lives, and the way in which their understandings of themselves as Krishna devotees living in O'ahu are informed by these understandings. As such, I am not only interested in symbolic and cognitive approaches, but also in experiential and

phenomenological approaches. Especially with my focus on food—which is quintessentially sensory, experiential, and embodied—I recognize the importance not just of cognitive models, but of bodily experience. A phenomenological approach, with its focus on experience before and independent of its mediation through language (Jackson 1996, 2) might seem at odds with my interest in cultural models and discourse, but I found that both were instrumental in shaping my understandings of what I saw, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched in my research experiences with ISKCON, and in my interpretations of those experiences.

Phenomenology focuses on sensory experience, and services at an ISKCON temple are designed to involve all senses, with intensely loud music, the smell of incense and flowers, bodily movement through dancing, hands held to camphor flame, water sprinkled on the congregation, call and response singing, chanting, gazing upon ornately decorated images of the deities, and finally, the eating of prasadam. Jackson advocates an ethnographic “shift from standing *outside or above* to situating oneself *elsewhere within* the field of inquiry,” which I found relevant in my own participatory fieldwork at the temple, since participation in this full sensory experience was necessary for me in order to come to some understanding of it (Jackson 1996, 9). Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Jackson argues: “Bodily activity is not a way of expressing or objectifying meanings first formed in the mind. The meaning of a bodily action is not *given to* the action by some external agent but is *in* the action itself” (Jackson 1996, 32). Indeed, as much as ISKCON membership involves a textural, scriptural component, the role of bodily ritual and performance is inescapable. Phenomenological emphasis on “the

interdependency of body and mind, self and world” eliminates the need to try to segregate the cognitive from the sensory, and physical (Jackson 1996, 9), and indeed at ISKCON, the two go hand in hand, since bodily practice is seen as intimately related to mental and spiritual conditions of being.

## **Methodology**

Research for my thesis involved a combination of solicited interviews, and participant-observation work done primarily at the temple, but also at Govindaji’s restaurant, Govinda’s food stand, and at the urban garden project founded by a Krishna devotee. My first visit to the temple was in November 2009, and fieldwork continued—even through the process of writing this thesis—until July 2011. I conducted semi-formal recorded interviews with ten Krishna devotees, representing a range of ages, ethnic and national origins, and time of involvement with ISKCON. Additionally, I have unrecorded phone interviews with two more Honolulu-based devotees, and online chats with two other devotees, one raised in the ISKCON community and currently living in Hawai‘i, and one man born and raised in Hawai‘i, who joined and participated in the ISKCON community here at its outset and has since moved to an ISKCON farm community on the mainland (he represents my only interview with a devotee not currently residing in the Hawaiian islands). I have used pseudonyms for all devotees, with the exception of Daiva, who requested that I use his spiritual name, used within the ISKCON community. However, it was the regular visits to the ISKCON temple, generally during the Sunday night services—the largest service held during the week,

usually attracting around 75 people, and sometimes more than one hundred—that provided the greatest degree of exposure to ISKCON philosophy and lifestyle. I generally tried to elicit conversations about prasadam during these visits, and it was during these visits that I met almost all of those with whom I conducted more formal interviews. The Sunday services include an extravagant, free, vegetarian meal to any and all who show up to eat<sup>9</sup>. All the food served is, of course, prasadam. This is, and is meant to be, an attraction to non-devotees. The meal is preceded by a “lesson,” from a half-hour to an hour in length, given by an initiated devotee of Krishna, generally centered around a passage from a holy text such as the *Bhagavad Gita*. Following the lesson is the sankirtan, during which a group of devotees lead devotional chanting, backed by musical accompaniment of hand cymbals, the Indian mirgdandam drum, and harmonium, and the larger congregation of devotees dances and chants along in front of the installed images of the deities as the aarhi—the blessing—is conducted by a pujari, or priest. Following at least an hour of sankirtan, there is often a tulsi worship ceremony, in which the sacred plant is ritually watered by devotees (although unlike the other portions of the Sunday service, this was not always done). Finally, all in attendance line up to receive prasadam, which consists of an elaborate buffet dinner generally composed of rice, lentils, several Indian-inspired curry dishes, and Indian desserts such as rice pudding, but sometimes also incorporating pasta dishes, and cakes or cookies. Each week, the temple president asks who is visiting the temple for the first time, generally several hands will be raised, and

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<sup>9</sup> The temple feast is spoken of—and advertized as—free, however, donations are accepted, and indeed, usually made. Chapter Three discusses the financial exchanges involved in prasadam.

these newcomers are welcomed and invited to the front of the line for prasadam. Often, a long-time devotee invites them up to Prabhupada's room to eat the meal, while explaining the philosophy of Krishna Consciousness.

Early into my research, the temple president announced my status as a student from the University of Hawai'i during the weekly Sunday announcements. Additionally, I injected my university affiliation, and my status as a student of anthropology into conversations with devotees whenever I could. Nevertheless, my perceived status and role at the temple became a source of concern for me as I became a regular temple attendee, for I worried that my *interest* in ISKCON was at many times in my research experiences understood as an *affiliation* with ISKCON. I worried about the degree to which the nature of my interest in ISKCON as I might understand it (ethnographic, academic) might be differently interpreted by those I encountered through my research (as religious, devotional). One example was discomfort at being charged the discounted "devotee" price on one visit to the temple's lunchtime buffet (which is run as a restaurant open to the public). Yet nevertheless, my student status was clear; I can remember more than one devotee joking with me about it as we ate plates of prasadam together, with comments like, "studying prasadam?" while I ate. At the same time, I also received countless anecdotes about the transformative properties of prasadam, and was told again and again that this food I was eating was—right now and forever—changing me. In Chapter Two I further describe and analyze members' attitudes about the universal efficacy of prasadam as a spiritual medium.

Over a year after my first visit to the temple, on a Sunday evening, after reaching the end of the line to receive prasadam, I dropped a modest monetary donation into the basket, and was handed a plate by the temple president, who told me, “Here you go, Prasadam Dasi.” Dasi is the feminine form of servant in Sanskrit (the masculine form is das). It is also a surname taken on by Krishna devotees (although it is often used only in ISKCON circles and does not entail a legal change of name), who see themselves as servants to God. Thus the nickname translates to, “Servant of Prasadam.” This interaction revealed the complexity of my relationship to ISKCON, for the president was recognizing my scholastic interest in prasadam, but framing it in terms of religious membership and devotion. Susan F. Harding’s writing on her experience of fieldwork with Fundamentalist Christians in the United States reflects many of the same experiences I had doing research with the missionary religious organization of ISKCON. She writes: “It was inconceivable to them that anyone with an appetite for the gospel as great as mine was simply gathering information” (Harding 1987, 171). Similarly, my “appetite” for prasadam was interpreted as a sign of my receptivity to ISKCON. A belief which must have been bolstered, too, by my ability to operate within the expected codes of dress and behavior for ISKCON devotees, and indeed, my willingness to do so. Having lived for more than 12 months in South India, I own saris and know how to wear them (and indeed, did wear them to the temple, where long skirts and covered shoulders are expected of women, and Indian dress is uniquely privileged for men as well as women). And in ISKCON, performing belonging in such a way is actually a way of working towards it. “Chant, and be happy,” is a common ISKCON slogan for indeed it is

*through chanting*, as through eating prasadam, and viewing Krishna,<sup>10</sup> that devotion becomes an internalized value. As I heard a pujari explain in a Sunday lesson, one of the miraculous properties of Krishna is that when one opens himself up to Krishna in any small way, Krishna becomes available to him. Thus, opening oneself up to Krishna Consciousness was viewed as the first step to becoming Krishna Conscious. Similarly Harding, studying a religious tradition in which hearing gospel is believed to induce conversion, found that “anything that makes you more likely to listen, including the work of ethnography, is actually what makes you susceptible [to conversion]” (Harding 1987, 178).

I found myself negotiating my own internal boundaries concerning how deeply I was willing to enter the practice of Krishna Consciousness. When sending emails to devotees, or encountering them off the temple grounds I usually did not use the customary greeting, “Hare Krishna,” yet I found myself trading it back and forth with devotees at the temple, as though remembering my host sister’s voice whispering in my ear: “If they say Hare Krishna, you should say Hare Krishna back to them.” Devotees claim that Krishna is *irresistible*, and in the space of the Sunday temple hall, I sometimes agreed, as I was swept up with *other* worshippers in the Sunday service, until, post-service, when the reverberations of the music ended, I would remember my ethnographic purpose, and go home to write up field notes. While I did not find myself drawn to join ISKCON, I did find myself drawn to participate, and these rituals, though different in key

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<sup>10</sup> *Darsan*, in which the blessing of a deity is visually transmitted through the gaze of the deity on the devotee (and the devotee’s receptive gaze back towards the deity) is a fundamental aspect of worship at ISKCON temples—and indeed in many Hindu traditions (see Eck 1998).



respects, mirrored the type of prayer I had been taught, and also willingly participated in, during the time I lived in India. And yet, when the temple president asked me on several occasions, “do you chant?” My response was, always, “only in the temple.” Thus my fieldwork became a process of managing this productive proximity, while negotiating for myself some level of distance.

### **Outline of The Thesis**

Though prasadam is both the starting point, and the central theme of my research, this thesis extends beyond the acts of food preparation and consumption, into issues of food provision, cultivation, and, essentially, relationships to the land. It is these elements that reveal both fundamental values about social structure and lifestyle, and also reveal the ways in which the temple community is locally contextualized in Hawai‘i.

In the next chapter, “Food as Faith: Feeding the Body and Soul in ISKCON Honolulu,” I discuss the importance of prasadam offering and consumption in ISKCON. I identify discursive models of prasadam as spiritualizing food, and examine how devotees make sense of their prasadam consumption, and their identities as devotees, through their understandings of prasadam as a powerful tool for spiritual reconfiguration. I also discuss the ways in which transforming one’s innermost self through prasadam entails transforming one’s social positioning into that of an ISKCON devotee.

In the third chapter, “Preaching Through Prasadam,” I look at the ways in which prasadam, and its distribution, is used as a medium of interaction within ISKCON and with those outside the ISKCON community. I argue that prasadam distribution is felt to

be a powerful tool for spreading Krishna Consciousness because prasadam is felt to embody the all-attractive, universal nature of the movement's philosophy and doctrines. I discuss food distribution projects run by ISKCON in Honolulu, as well larger ISKCON food distribution organizations, illustrating the ways in which these projects are felt to effect spiritual transformations in those to whom prasadam is distributed.

In the fourth chapter, “‘You can’t eat nuts and bolts’: Food as a Refusal of Capitalist Consumption,” I bring ISKCON’s dietary practices in dialogue with other alternative food movements, including national trends towards local, organic, and non-genetically modified food, and specifically Hawaiian struggles for food sovereignty and against genetic modification of taro. I argue that the ideology of loving exchange of prasadam poses a refusal to incorporate the consumption of food into capitalist models of consumption, and the “back to the land” goal of self-sustaining farms represents a desire to escape modernity.

In the fifth chapter, “Sacred Places and Contested Spaces: Rooting ISKCON in the ‘Āina,” I further develop the models of ideal land use that emerge in the fourth chapter. I address visions of an idealized “Vedic Hawai‘i,” revealing the visions of an ideal society that undergird this image, as well as the social activism it fuels. I look at the ways in which devotees describe traditional Hawaiian culture as similar to the privileged referent of “Vedic” culture and argue that this is at once a way of attesting to the universality of Vedic culture, and “indigenizing” ISKCON’s presence in Hawai‘i. Lastly I retrace the flow “From Prasadam to the Politics of Place” in the conclusion.

This study of food in the form of prasadam at once expands the analysis of food back to its production, and engages with the symbolic meanings of food and the act of eating. My approach therefore is to take food production not just as economic labor but as ritual performance, showing that food is not just a commodity in exchange but also a process to be grown, and reflective of a whole set of relations of power and politics. Examining prasadam's deep religious importance in the larger context of food politics (and the politics of place in which food production is wrapped up) reveals that "the spiritual is political and the secular turns out to be spiritual" (Van Der Veer 2009, 263). Indeed even apparently secular food movements such as the "locavore" movement—which promotes the consumption of locally grown and produced food—like prasadam, *also* embody symbolic meanings, and index identities that are tied to particular places and landscapes.

The thesis's presentation, expanding from prasadam to the politics of place, is also meant to widen the scope of the ethnography's subject material from a study of individuals within ISKCON, to the organization's philosophy and mission, to the interactions with local communities engendered by its placement in Hawai'i. This highlights the other important theme of this thesis: the way in which one branch of a transnational religious organization becomes locally embedded.

Thomas Csordas's edited volume *Transnational Transcendence* takes as its title a phrase which "is intended to point to the existence of modalities of religious intersubjectivity that are both experientially compelling and transcend cultural borders and boundaries (while in some instances, forging new ones)" (Csordas 2009, 1).

ISKCON devotees often told me that their faith was transcendental, in a way that signaled that they themselves were aware of the word's double layering of meaning, that the experience of Krishna Consciousness allowed them access to a spiritual domain above and outside of the mundane and material, but also that the philosophy was seen as transcendent in its universality. Yet the transnational and transcendental aspects of ISKCON do not merely float above landscapes unanchored, but instead become moored in specific contexts, and, as I hope to show in this thesis, mutually shape and are shaped by them.

Because of this, this thesis is not an ethnographic account of ISKCON as a single looming entity, but rather an exploration of the role of prasadam in Honolulu's ISKCON community that attends both to its transnational connections, and its local moorings. Exploring prasadam allows me to explore not only the devotees' sense of transformation of herself or himself, but the concomitant interpellation to engage in a religiously grounded project of social, political or environmental transformation that accepting ISKCON's religious doctrines provokes. Such dimensions of social transformation inevitably accrue meanings and consequences that are shaped by the intersections of local dynamics and the transnational networks behind such projects. ISKCON's transnational networks are widespread and closely linked. But no less significant are the local entrenchments of ISKCON temples (and satellite operations, such as restaurants) within a cultural, political, historical, and geographic context. It is in this capacity that this exploration of prasadam in an ISKCON temple in Hawai'i is also a study of Hawai'i's influence on an ISKCON community.

It is my hope that my thesis will provide useful to a broad range of scholarly interests, from the anthropology of food, to New Religious Movements, to land policy and cultural politics in Hawai'i. I hope, too, that my efforts will not disappoint the devotees with whom I spoke, ate, and experienced Krishna Consciousness, and whom I very sincerely thank for allowing me into their community. I have tried to come to an anthropological understanding of my fieldwork with Honolulu's ISKCON community. Though I know that for those devotees with whom I interacted, only a spiritual understanding would truly reveal the nature of the movement, I nevertheless modestly put forth my own attempts to understand, in my own terms, aspects of food, farming, and land among the Hare Krishna community of Honolulu, Hawai'i.

## CHAPTER TWO

### FOOD AS FAITH: FEEDING THE BODY AND SOUL IN ISKCON HONOLULU

“Then what could compare to *prasadam*? It was prayer, meditation, purification and enlightenment. It was a celebration, communication, indoctrination and intoxicating. It was everything I had ever wanted. I couldn’t believe how wonderful *prasadam* was from every angle of vision. Simply to taste it, simply to prepare it, simply to see it, think about or talk about it. Any way one encounters *prasadam*, he immediately becomes joyful” (Taru 2007).

The above passage is from a series of articles chronicling the author’s conversion to Krishna Consciousness, published in an ISKCON periodical in the early 1970s, and made available in 2007 in online archives. The articles were titled, “Confessions of a *Prasadam Addict*,” and focused on experiences with *prasadam* as a central component to Taru’s conversion narrative. Taru’s evocative description of *prasadam* eloquently illustrates the significance of (edible) *prasadam* in ISKCON, and it reflects the views of many Krishna devotees with whom I spoke—often over a plate of *prasadam*. In fact, the passionate language about *prasadam* that I heard from devotees even on my first visit to the New Navadvipa Dham ISKCON temple in Honolulu signaled me to *prasadam*’s important role in their lives. Anthropologists have long noted that the daily, embodied necessity of food makes it a powerful cultural symbol. In this chapter, I explore a particular discursive model of *prasadam* that emerged from my research. I seek to intertwine my analysis of various devotee-generated media with interviews with devotees, and my own ethnographic observations of the temple, to present the ways in which understanding of *prasadam* are discursively constructed and articulated by members of the Honolulu ISKCON community in ways that attest to their membership in

ISKCON and the development of a “Krishna devotee” subjectivity. I therefore concentrate less on the specific food taboos surrounding prasadam’s preparation—chiefly strict vegetarianism—and more on the discursive models that emerged from interviews, conversations with, and publications by Krishna devotees. These center on the conceptualization of prasadam as “transcendental food,” gaining its spiritual potency from being ritually offered to Krishna. For prasadam is not “merely” food, indeed to describe it simply in terms of the specific food taboos surrounding its preparation would fail to capture its true role, which is, for devotees, to propel its eater forwards on the path to Krishna Consciousness, and thus simultaneously deeper into the social world of ISKCON. Susan Kalčík notes the ability of food to form social identities:

“Since foodways operate at a symbolic level to communicate information about group membership, status, boundaries, and so on, they would be an obvious choice for symbolic manipulation by individuals and groups who wished, consciously or unconsciously, to make a statement about identity” (Kalčík 1984).

Prasadam provided a “way in” to my own research with ISKCON, just as it provides a “way in” for many who come to the temple—or its satellite food-stand—for the food, and leave, according to devotees, having imbibed much more than the material foodstuffs of which prasadam is made. Prasadam is conceptualized by devotees as chiefly and essentially “transcendental food,” gaining its spiritual potency from being ritually offered to Krishna. Prasadam is a spiritual medium, said to unlock the eater’s dormant spiritual consciousness. Yet prasadam is also a material reality, taken as a response both to the body’s need to eat and the spiritual quest to escape the cycle of birth and death by communion with Krishna—going “back to Godhead.” Conceptualizations of prasadam among devotees span the divide between medical and theological models, and focus on

prasadam's role as divine, rather than simply bodily, sustenance. Among devotees, prasadam is conceptualized as beneficial on two planes, the physical and the spiritual, of which the former is subordinate to the latter. These two discursive formations may initially appear contradictory, but in the deeper context of the philosophy of ISKCON, the apparent conflict is resolved, for controlling the physical body is recognized as the means to achieving a greater spiritual state, ultimately resulting in liberation from the body itself. On the social level, consuming prasadam becomes a marker of participation in ISKCON, indeed ISKCON's "food-related restrictions set [devotees] apart from the rest of the society, even including many Hindus who eat non-vegetarian foods" (Kumar 2008, 210). In this chapter, I analyze devotee narratives surrounding prasadam, showing how devotees make sense of their identities as prasadarrians—eaters of prasadam—and what ideologies sustain them in adopting and continuing this role.

### **Prasadam and ISKCON**

The importance of prasadam in ISKCON becomes quickly apparent to anyone coming into contact with the temple. At the temple, a small stack of booklets, printed in black and white on rough newspaper, are placed on a table directly across from the main entrance. Next to the booklets is a sign-up sheet, where the visitor can add their email address to be added to the temple's email list. Directly next to the table is a pillar, on top of which is a statue of blue-skinned Krishna, ever-present flute at his lips. The booklet is entitled "On Chanting Hare Krsna," and the front cover reveals that it is "a reproduction of the book first published by the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust," and is one of the "pre-1978



literary works of His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivdeanta [sic] Swami Prabhupada.” On the first page it explains: “Devotional service in Krsna consciousness means regular chanting in the temple, hearing talks about the pastimes of Krsna from *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, and taking foodstuffs prepared for and offered to the Supreme Personality of Godhead” (Prabhupada 2005, 1-2). This introductory tome almost immediately introduces the reader to prasadam as one of the basic, necessary practices of Krishna consciousness, highlighting the central importance of prasadam in ISKCON philosophy and in the daily lives of its adherents.

In the words of one Hawai‘i-based devotee, explaining prasadam in a video posted on YouTube: “Prasadam is non different from Krishna Himself. It is transcendentalized.” (suchandradasi 2007). While temples in India typically offer worshippers a small quantity of prasadam, at ISKCON one can expect to receive a full meal. Gaurahari, a *pujari* from Mumbai explained the difference in attitudes about prasadam between “mainstream” temples in India and ISKCON:

[In India] they don’t have the proper understanding that whatever you eat—it’s not just when you go to temple there is prasadam—whatever you cook should be offered and then that becomes prasad and then you should take that. So yeah, in ISKCON whatever you eat starting from your morning breakfast and then until dinner, it’s all prasad<sup>1</sup>, it’s all offered to the lord on the altar.

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<sup>1</sup> Prasadam and prasad are used interchangeably here. Both are vernacular forms of the Sanskrit term *prasāda*. For the most part, I use prasadam, both because it is commonly used in this temple community here in Honolulu, and because it is the terminology I was most familiar with going into the study, having been introduced to the concept and term while living in South India (where prasadam is the local term). I therefore made use of this term in my interviews, perhaps influencing the choice of devotees to use this particular pronunciation. I observed devotees using prasadam and prasad interchangeably, but never heard the Sanskrit “*prasāda*” spoken aloud.

Toomey notes that: “The practice of making large offering to Krishna has firm roots in the Vaishnava cosmology and ritual” (Toomey 1992, 118). Prasadam’s role in ISKCON links directly to its centrality in earlier *bhakti*<sup>2</sup> movements (indeed ISKCON is a contemporary *bhakti* movement). According to R.S. Khare:

Ideologically, prasadam is very much a new cultural code that flowered with the spread and the strength of the bhakti movement...In devotion, it codifies the divine principle; it is Grace ‘unlimited’ of the deity in ‘in a solidified state’...It can be given to all, and received by all. True bhakti for the deity is the only precondition for producing the prasadam category of foods” (Khare 1976, 103).

Prasadam thus serves an equalizing function in *bhakti* movements, in that it is distributed to and consumed by all on an equal footing, contributing to an environment of *communitas* (Turner 1969). In ISKCON, prasadam also serves this function to the extent that the preparation, consumption, and distribution of prasadam are defining features of the movement. Communal meals in the temple, and prasadam served in religious and social gatherings hosted by devotees also build and maintain bonds within the devotee community. But while prasadam can foster forms of egalitarian *communitas*, as a distinctive food practice, it also defines the community’s boundaries since “the use or avoidance of certain foods becomes identified with a group and symbolic of it” (Kalčik 1984, 47). Food comes to possess a semiotic richness such that it can serve as a “sensory code,” communicating “critical aspects of cosmos and society” (Turner 1974, 240).

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<sup>2</sup> *Bhakti* means devotion. *Bhakti* movements are Hindu practices that focus on personal relationships with the divine, and carry an equalizing message that spiritual communion is possible for everyone, regardless of gender, caste, or other social divisions. These movements gained popularity in North and South India beginning in the Middle Ages.

But why and how does an all-powerful, all-encompassing God eat? All devotees told me that of course God doesn't really need food because since God is the source of everything, the food already belongs to God. It is the loving devotion expressed in the act of offering which pleases God. *The Hare Krishna Cookbook* explains that while God does not "hunger" for food, "He becomes 'hungry' for the loving offering of a pure devotee..." (Svami 1973, 8). And if God hungers, can he eat? According to ISKCON, God does eat prasadam, but although he has consumed it, it remains materially present. R.S. Khare defines prasad as "deity's left-overs" (Khare 1976). Bhagavan is a Euro-American who joined ISKCON in the movement's early days. He is a leader in the Honolulu devotee community, although he himself is a relatively recent arrival to Hawai'i, having relocated with his family from the mainland U.S.A. to perform temple service as a pujari. He explained to me the mechanics by which Krishna both eats the food, and leaves the food to be eaten by devotees:

...That food, then, God eats, God is absolute so any of his senses can do the function of any of the other senses, like for us we need to see from our eyes, but God can see from any of his senses and he can eat with any of the senses. Cuz we need to eat with our mouth and our tongue, he can eat with his eyes. So he has eaten this food considering that we've prepared it nicely and with love and devotion and stuff, and so then that food still remains, though, because he's, because of the nature of God, so that food now is considered prasadam, or the mercy of God.

Bhagavan's explanation to me closely adheres to verse 5.32 of the Sanskrit holy text *Sri Brahma-samhita*, which Prabhupada translated and explained through the following commentary:

The distinction between this material body and spiritual body is that just like this hand is made for particular purpose—you can pick up something, you can touch something, but you cannot taste something. If you want to taste something, then

the hand will bring that food to your mouth and will touch your tongue. Then you can know that it is bitter or sweet. But simply by touching the hand it is not possible to understand what is the nature of that particular... Therefore God's body is described here that *angani yasya sakalendriya-vrtti-manti angani yasya*. Each and every part of the body has got the capacity for other parts of the body. Just like if you want to eat, we have to taste it through the tongue, through the mouth, but Krsna, or God, if He simply sees only, He can eat, simply by seeing. This is spiritual body (Prabhupada 1971).

This same verse, followed by the commentary quoted above, was given to me (as a print-out) during an interview with another devotee, Rishi, illustrating the degree to which devotees' understandings of prasadam adhere to the scriptural cannon of the movement—Prabhupada's translations and commentaries of Sanskrit holy texts including the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Sri Brahma-samhita*.

There is a synesthetic fluidity to the ritual exchange of prasadam, and in the divine mechanics explained in the verse Bhagavan and Rishi recited to me, whereby eyes can eat, and the tongue can taste the divine. Scholar and ISKCON devotee Steven Rosen has described of the practice of Krishna Consciousness as “a realm of synesthesia, where the senses are transformed—heightened—by active engagement in Krishna consciousness” (Rosen 2004b, 10). Rosen uses the term synesthesia to refer to the double-sensory action of *tasting* prasadam (as physical sense perception) and *tasting* Krishna Consciousness (as spiritual sense perception). My own use of the term here follows the first entry in the Oxford English Dictionary: “A sensation in one part of the body produced by a stimulus applied to another part” (OED Online 2011). This synesthetic quality is present in other South Asian religious traditions, as well. In her ethnography of devotees of Sai Baba—a Hindu Indian guru with a global following—Smriti Srinivas writes “the eye is also an organ of touch in the sense that it is used to

form a connection between guru and devotees” through *darsan*, a divine visual exchange (Srinivas 2008, 76). David Sutton discusses synesthesia in migrant experiences of consuming food from home (Sutton 2001a). His argument is relevant in describing how food can act as a synecdoche for homeland, recalling a host of remembered “sensory domains” that provoke a return to the whole from the fragmented condition of migration (Sutton 2001a, 122). ISKCON devotees could be said to use prasadam towards their own return to the whole, which also necessitates a spiritual refashioning that is grounded in both temporal and geographical referents—namely, (ancient) Vedic India. In this way prasadam may also serve as a synecdoche for a particular vision of an ideal past way of living, thus moving the eater closer to that way of life through the act of eating. However, in the migrant experiences Sutton describes, synesthesia is on some level metaphorical, since it recalls the *memory* of previous sensory acts, which may indeed cross sensory domains from taste to other spheres. What is distinctive in the case of ISKCON, Sai Baba, and the concepts of *darsan* and *prasadam* themselves is that they are understood not just a metaphorically evoking synesthesia, but as actual instances of divine synesthesia—evidence of a deity with super-human sensory perception.

The fundamental principle behind offering prasadam is the expression of devotion to Krishna, an act that also forms a direct connection between Krishna and his devotees.

Time and time again, devotees recited to me the same verse of the Bhagavad Gita:

*patram puspam phalam toyam  
yo me bhaktya prayacchati  
tad aham bhakty-upahrtam  
asnami prayatatmanah* (Prabhupada 1983, v. 9.26)

Most devotees had memorized the Sanskrit verse, as well as its translation (by Prabhupada) into English, “If one offers Me with love and devotion a leaf, a flower, fruit or water, I will accept it” (ibid). Devotees interpret this passage to mean that making offerings to Krishna is a fundamental form of “service” to Krishna, and that offering all that one eats to Krishna is a way of recognizing that all things belong to Krishna and are created by Krishna. This includes oneself, who is a servant to Krishna, which is why devotees often take the title Das or Dasi—male and female forms of *servant* in Sanskrit—in place of their family names at the time of initiation into ISKCON. This interpretation is expressed by Prabhupada in his lengthy commentary on *Bhagavad Gita* verse 9.26, which lays out many of the fundamental principles and practices of ISKCON (ibid). The specific reference to “a leaf, a flower, fruit or water” is taken as the justification for a strictly vegetarian diet in ISKCON:

One who loves Krishna will give Him whatever He wants, and he avoids offering anything which is undesirable or unasked. Thus meat, fish and eggs should not be offered to Krishna. If He desired such things as offerings, He would have said so. Instead He clearly requests that a leaf, fruit, flowers and water be given to Him, and He says of this offering, “I will accept it.” Therefore, we should understand that He will not accept meat, fish and eggs. Vegetables, grains, fruits, milk and water are the proper foods for human beings and are prescribed by Lord Krishna Himself (ibid).

Indeed, the pujaris and other devotees with whom I spoke all explained that the reason for their vegetarianism was Krishna’s vegetarianism. Although adherence to Krishna’s food preferences is the paramount reason for vegetarianism among devotees, there are others, including health concerns and ethical concerns with killing animals. Interestingly, many devotees were vegetarians *before* joining ISKCON. These motivations for vegetarianism are discussed in Chapter Four. Offering one’s food is a

fundamental practice of ISKCON since “Those who do not make an offering of their food...are eating only sin” (ibid). Indeed unoffered food (all food that is not prasadam—or not *yet* prasadam) is referred to in ISKCON as *bhoga*. Another pujari, Vajranatha, a British man who has been a “celibate monk” in ISKCON for over two decades, and who came to Hawai‘i through the network of the temple, explained: “The way it’s [*bhoga*] traditionally meant within ISKCON is it’s unoffered food and there’s also a connotation of sin in it” (recorded interview). Therefore, a devotee needs to ensure that one’s food is suitable for Krishna, hence vegetarian, so that it may be offered.

Krishna devotees believe that eating prasadam will unlock a preexisting but dormant Krishna consciousness, this is what is meant by “going back to Godhead.” Going back to Godhead is the devotee’s ultimate goal; it means escaping the cycle of birth and death, fueled by karma, and escaping the material world through absorption into Krishna’s divine love. Krishna’s love is at the center of these exchanges as devotees are told to honor their relationship with Krishna above all else. Such an attitude entails not only a spiritual repositioning, but a profound social repositioning as well. Prasadam alone is karma-free food (as both the ISKCON publication *The Higher Taste: A Guide to Gourmet Vegetarian Cooking and a Karma-Free Diet* and devotees with whom I spoke explained). Normally, human beings are doomed to accumulate negative karma through the act of fueling their material bodies with food—even when they try to minimize this through a vegetarian diet (Dasa et al. 2006). Prasadam provides a way out of this dilemma. Prasadam works on the body to produce the spiritual transformations necessary to effect karmic liberation. Since all beings are caught in this same cycle, prasadam is

beneficial for all beings, not just humans. Although humans are uniquely and favorably positioned to achieve karmic liberation, prasadam is felt to have positive effects on animals as well. Madhavan, a European American initiated priest who has been a Krishna devotee since ISKCON's early period, told me, "I like to see my dog eat prasadam so he advances," two other devotees told me they feed prasadam to their pet cat and dog, respectively. Another long-time devotee explained to me that feeding prasadam to animals is beneficial "because it's sanctified, that it guarantees that especially an animal body will at least take a human birth in the next life." I was given the same account by another devotee on another occasion, at the temple, who spoke of the divine power of prasadam to move beings up the karmic ladder into more desirable births. He told me that Prabhupada "said that if a human eats prasadam once, they will be reincarnated as a devotee, if an animal eats prasadam, he will be reincarnated as a human" (field notes, 12/6/09).

### **We are not the Body**

Prasadam has the power to affect what form the soul will take at its next birth, or whether it will be born again at all. *I Am Not My Body* is the title of Angela Burr's 1984 study on ISKCON (Burr 1984). It is also a claim frequently made by ISKCON devotees. Madhavan, for example, told me in conversation, "I know you're not really your body, and I'm not my physical body, but I'm still here having fun, enjoying the ride" (field notes, 2/21/10). Several other devotees used the metaphor of the body as a set of clothes that one simply puts on at the beginning of one life, and takes off at the end of it. It is



this view of the subordination, and relative unimportance of the physical form, which might suggest a contradictory attitude towards food and cooking in Hinduism. Since, as Khare notes: “Any treatise on cookery to treat the Hindu palate is after all illogical and contradictory with the emphasis on the principle of the soul—an antipode to body. To perfect a cuisine to pamper the body is to have the labor lost for a decidedly trifling cause” (Khare 1976, 63). This potential conflict is resolved within ISKCON, as in bhakti movements preceding it, through the concept of cooking for Krishna (Singer 1984, 211; Khare 1976, 64). For prasadam deals with the body’s needs in ways which subvert everything the body represents—i.e. the illusory, material world. Instead of merely feeding the body, prasadam feeds the soul, enabling liberation from the body itself.

### **The Taste of Devotion**

Eating prasadam is a pleasurable act for devotees. Devotees take pride in cooking up delicious meals for Krishna—and enjoy eating the “sacred left-overs”<sup>3</sup> themselves. Devotees explained that becoming “prasadarrians”—i.e. eating exclusively prasadam—improved the quality of their diets. Devotees praise the quality of ISKCON cookery, and no festival or temple visit would be complete without a taste of prasadam—often a veritable feast (indeed the Sunday programs are known as “the Sunday feast”). The incredible taste of prasadam—a recurrent theme in Taru’s articles, devotee-created media

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<sup>3</sup> Aklujkar, Moreno, and R.S. Khare all use the terminology of blessed, sacred, or divine leftovers in their discussion of prasadam in *The Eternal Food*, 1992.

in general (see Chapter Three), and in my conversations with devotees<sup>4</sup>--takes on deeper layer of meaning when understood in the context of ISKCON philosophy, in which taste itself is a metaphor for intimacy with Krishna. Therefore, the emphasis on the divinely delicious nature of prasadam, and the transformative effects of its consumption, hinges on the eater's developing a "taste" for prasadam, which, in turn, will lead to developing the Sanskrit concept of *rasa*, meaning religious intimacy with Krishna, but also literally signifying "taste." "The word *rasa*, a term originally used in Sanskrit dramaturgy and poetics, means literally, 'taste.' It can mean, connotatively and more generally, 'spiritual experience,' or more specifically, a particular 'relationship' with God" (Schweig 2004, 20). Prasadam has the ability to make meaning through the act of consumption, as the bodily act of eating prasadam becomes linked with a deepening relationship to Krishna. Desjarlais describes his approach to "critical phenomenology" as one "that can help us not only to describe what people feel, think, or experience but also to grasp how the *processes* of feeling or experiencing come about through multiple, interlocking interactions" (Desjarlais 1997, 25). The relationship between prasadam and *rasa* highlights just such a process, as exchanges and consumption of prasadam are among of the "multiple, interlocking interactions" which alter one's feelings, thoughts, and experiences such that by consuming prasadam a devotee not only experiences the taste of prasadam as delicious, but also the cosmological framework from which prasadam

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<sup>4</sup> With one partial exception, all devotees to whom I posed the question maintained that prasadam *tasted* better than non-sanctified food. Several devotees urged me to "experiment" with the contrast between offered and non-offered foods myself. See Chapter 2 for more on opinions about the taste of prasadam.

emerges, and which prasadam itself is felt to embody and transmit through the act of eating, thereby *tasting* spiritual intimacy with the divine.

A devotional song written about Prabhupada by devotee Michael Cassidy (Mangalananda), entitled “Lover of the Lord” is available on YouTube. It was posted on a devotee’s Facebook page, where it was met with a series of approving comments left by other devotees in the poster’s online network. The song uses the metaphor of taste as spiritual intimacy. The video is of compilation of footage of Prabhupada, including a long scene in which he distributes prasadam to children; the chorus sounds: “When I see his love I know I’ve got a long long way to go. When will I taste the love that he is feeling inside?” (Cassidy 2008).

Just as, through its transformation into prasadam, food takes on the role of spiritual teaching, spiritual teachings themselves are discursively constructed as food. The Hare Krishna Cookbook’s dedication, for example, tells the reader, “Srila Prabhupada has not given us some dry, canned philosophy to chew; he has given us the nectar for which we have sought so long...” (Dasi and Dasi 1973). This statement clearly relates to the anti-industrial ethos in ISKCON, discussed further in Chapter Four. During a lesson at the temple, the pujari urged his listeners to “taste the meaning of each word of the scripture,” explaining that to “taste” the meaning is to truly comprehend it (field notes, 4/25/10). While Prabhupada cautioned his followers to avoid, “chanting from the lips of nondevotees” because: “Milk touched by the lips of a serpent has poisonous effects” (Prabhupada 2005, 9). ISKCON philosophy is thus discursively constructed as milk, or nectar, whereas the very words of non-ISKCON devotees are “poisonous.” Such

discursive models point to the social repositioning demanded of devotees, who must make the move away from “poisonous” associations outside the temple, towards the “nectar” of ISKCON devotees.

**“Control the tongue by supplying prasāda”<sup>5</sup>**

While on the one hand discourses on prasadam emphasize the pleasure of taking prasadam, ultimately these pleasures are meant to be subordinate to the spiritual and devotional purpose of prasadam. We are reminded that prasadam is not just for pleasure. Since the material benefits are secondary to the spiritual benefits of prasadam---and taste is firmly in the world of the material--considerations of taste need to be secondary to the fact of offering to God, and honoring prasadam. It is from this perspective of focusing all energies on developing Krishna consciousness that the narrative of control emerges:

In all spiritual affairs, one’s first duty is to control his mind and senses. Unless one controls his mind and senses, one cannot make any advancement in spiritual life ... One who wants to become a perfect devotee of Krsna must become a gosvāmī. Go means “the senses,” and svāmī means “the master.” Unless one controls his senses and mind, one cannot become a gosvāmī. (Prabhupada 1993, viii)

Senses are a distraction to Krishna Consciousness because they draw the devotee into the material world of *maya*, illusion, which is felt to be fundamentally wrapped up in suffering, and therefore an obstacle to developing Krishna Consciousness. Luckily, the devotee can “control the tongue by supplying prasada” (ibid, 6). The following passage, by Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura, translated by Prabhupada in *The Nectar of Instruction*, is extremely important to ISKCON devotees. It is recited as prayer before eating (or

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<sup>5</sup> This phrase comes from Prabhupada’s *Nectar of Instruction* (Prabhupada 1993).

“honoring” prasadam), and it appears written on a large cardboard placard in the main temple room of the Honolulu temple:

O Lord! This material body is a lump of ignorance, and the senses are a network of paths leading to death. Somehow or other we have fallen into the ocean of material sense enjoyment, and of all the senses the tongue is the most voracious and uncontrollable. It is very difficult to conquer the tongue in this world, but You, dear Krsna, are very kind to us. You have sent this nice prasada to help us conquer the tongue; therefore let us take this prasada to our full satisfaction and glorify Your Lordships Sri Sri Rādhā and Krsna and in love call for the help of Lord Caitanya and Prabhu Nityānanda (ibid, 10)

This prayer is reworked by “suchandradasi,” the user name of a Krishna devotee on the Big Island of Hawai‘i, in a video and rap song called “Prasadarian,” posted on the site YouTube. Multiple devotees mentioned this video to me on hearing of my interest in studying prasadam. Indeed, the video extols the goodness of prasadam, and its centrality to the devotee lifestyle, and the reference to prasadam is explicitly in the context of ISKCON. Suchandradasi includes several scenes of herself in her home, including a few with her child, alongside images of Krishna, Prabhupada, and of course, prasadam. She appears to be European American, and is wearing a sari in many of the scenes, as well as the tulsi wood bead necklace that devotees nearly always wear. Her dress, her admiration for prasadam, and even her role as a mother present her to Krishna Conscious viewers as a dedicated ISKCON devotee. As of spring 2011 the YouTube video had nearly 14,000 views.<sup>6</sup>

Suchandradasi’s lyrical reworking of above prayer shows the influence of this prayer in devotee conceptions of prasadam, taste, and control: “The senses are a network of paths leading to death. Of the senses the tongue is the most voracious, it keeps us in

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<sup>6</sup> On 3/5/11 it had 13,948 views.

the cycle and the cycle is vicious. But Krishna makes it easy, distributing his mercy, the recipe for perfect harmony” (suchandradasi, 2007). Both the medium and the message are notable here. “Prasadarian” and “Lover of the Lord” are two among many ISKCON-themed videos circulating on the internet. Beyond that there are websites, message boards, groups on social networking sites, and even a downloadable “VedaBase” containing the collected works of Srila Prabhupada. Gelberg notes the use of such diverse media as a “spiritual and material utilitarianism in practice in ISKCON in its unabashed willingness to employ the fruits of material technology in spreading its message (vehicles, computers, print presses, communications technology). It involves not only the use of material objects as such, but also of the body, the senses, and the creative instinct” (Gelberg 1989, 148).

By using prasadam to control the tongue, inappropriate sensory experience is channeled into a directed, devotional sensory interaction with the divine (Singer, 1984, 206). Similarly, “material technology” is redirected to the service of the Lord, to be a conduit for contemplation of the divine, rather than a diversion from it. Controlling the senses is meant to enable constant Krishna Consciousness. Recalling her adoption of the ISKCON prasadam-based diet, Priya, an Asian American college student who joined ISKCON at the beginning of her college years, told me, “you know it makes you feel different after a while. It’s like totally—it’s like kind of controlling. You have a control over your diet. You control, like, a lot of other things.”

Another aspect of the ISKCON diet linked to control is the division of foods into three categories:

In this material world things are governed by the modes of material nature: goodness, passion and ignorance, and everything in this material world is governed by either one of those or a combination of those and, uh, so is different foodstuff, so these are considered foods in the mode of passion or ignorance, foods that are too spicy, foods that are rotten or putrefied. (Bhagavan)

Avoiding these foods is considered necessary for cultivating the appropriate mentality for spiritual advancement. The tripartite categorization Bhagavan describes is not unique to ISKCON; it is discussed in Chapters 14 and 17 of the *Bhagavad Gita* and remains relevant in contemporary South Asia and continuously-practiced South Asian traditions. Bhagavan explained the three terms to me in the terms used in Prabhupada's English translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*: the mode of goodness is known in Sanskrit as *sattva*, the mode of passion corresponds to *rajas*, and the mode ignorance is *tamas*. Together, they form the *triguna*, which are the "modes of material nature" (Prabhupada 1983, v. 17.3). Jean Langford describes how the *triguna* are used in Ayurvedic<sup>7</sup> medicine:

Sattva, rajas, and tamas refer to the three possible responses we can have to the world. All three are necessary, but ideally sattva should exist in the greatest proportion since it fosters tranquility and detachment. It is useful to recall that these qualities apply not only to mind, but to every other kind of matter as well. Food may be more or less sattvic, rajasic, or tamasic, as may particular activities, living environments, and so on (Langford 2002, 237).

Prabhupada explained,

Although one may be conducted by some impression, or some conception of life, originally he is nirguna, or transcendental. Therefore one has to become cleansed

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<sup>7</sup> "Ayurveda can be translated simply as knowledge of life or of long life, although for strategic reasons having to do with its promotion as medicine, it is more often translated now and the science of life. For thousands of years the name has been used across South Asia to refer to an eclectic range of healing practices. While there is some discussion of healing practices in the early Vedic texts collectively known as the *Atharvaveda*, the word Ayurveda is associated today with three ancient Sanskrit texts that are the extant works most fully devoted to praising and prescribing Ayurveda" (Langford 2002, 4).

of the material contamination that he has acquired, in order to regain his relationship with the Supreme Lord (Prabhupada 1983, 641).

The importance of prasadam, then, is to reverse one's "material contamination" through appropriate food practices, a reflection of the ways in which "food directly matters to the formation of a Hindu's inner being and its becoming from one birth to the next" (Khare 1992, 5).

### **Prasadam is the Prescription**

A metaphor which emerged with astonishing regularity was that of prasadam as a drug. This metaphoric description broke down into two discursive currents: those that compared prasadam to a drug prescribed to us by a higher authority/doctor so that we may be cured of our material delusions and understand the true nature of reality (Krishna Consciousness); and those which compared prasadam to a recreational drug which propels the "user" into an altered, blissful state, or "hooks<sup>8</sup>" us into becoming "prasadam addicts<sup>9</sup>." In both cases the model of prasadam as a drug highlights the way in which prasadam spans the divide between the physical and spiritual.

Making use of the metaphor of medicine suggests that prasadam's potency is rooted in its effects on the body, and through these "scientific" physical effects, able to

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<sup>8</sup> In an interview, pujari Gaurahari told me that devotees get "hooked up with the food first," before joining ISKCON. See Chapter Three for a discussion of the way prasadam distribution is used to "hook" others into Krishna Consciousness.

<sup>9</sup> As in *Confessions of a Prasadam Addict*, a series of articles originally published in the 1970s, suggested to me by a devotee as "food for thought." I suspect that Taru's use of the term "addict" is somewhat tongue-in-cheek since Taru remarks in the final installment: "We have attempted to be a little amusing and in this respect, there may have been a certain amount of success. But actually what we are trying to do is to describe the process of purification in Krsna Consciousness" (Taru 2007).



impact consciousness. In my interview with Bhagavan, he explained that prasadam works, regardless of whether the person eating it knows it to be prasadam or not through the metaphor of medicine:

...So that's like when you go to the doctor and he prescribes you some medicine, right, you may not know how it works or whatever. Cuz the doctor just says, "oh take this." And you take it, and it works! You don't know how it worked, you don't know anything about it, you don't know the chemical reaction or any of that kind of stuff, and still it works.

He expanded on this point, "Now just like when you take medicine you take one pill or you take—you may not notice an improvement or the reaction right away from that you may have to be on a particular regimen. They call that a prescription." Priya used an almost identical explanation in our interview, when talking about how strictly devotees need to follow the ISKCON regulations: "And it is suggested that you do follow these things strictly but...Cuz it is like a science, you know, it's like when the doctor gives you medicine they tell, you know, you need to do this three to four times a day and if you don't do it it's not going to get better." Madhavan, too, used a medical framework, which he frequently invoked in our conversations about prasadam, to explain different levels of potency in prasadam: "Not all prasadam is equally potent. Just like antibiotics, he said, you can have different dosages, 25 mg, 50mg, etc, but it's the same medicine" (field notes, 3/27/10). That such potent and prolonged forms of "medicine" are necessary for spiritual advancement is a reflection of devotees' negative perceptions of what they describe as "the material world" or simply "*maya*" (illusion), which is to say, life as it is lived by the physical body, in opposition to the transcendental spiritual realm. Thus belonging to the world is in and of itself a disease that must be cured. *Maya*, or illusory

social, political, and economic bonds should be subordinated to spiritual and religious engagement.

Comparisons to recreational drugs were also made. This is interesting to note in and of itself since the use of intoxicants, even down to the levels of caffeine present in tea, is strictly prohibited in the movement. On the other hand, in the early days of ISKCON in the United States, many of the converts were LSD-using members of the counter culture. Two devotees at the temple told me that they had been regular LSD-users before joining ISKCON. According to Haripada Adhikary, the ISKCON temple in San Francisco served as a refuge for drug users “coming down” from LSD, but for those wishing to join, the use of LSD was prohibited (Adhikary 1995, 196). I heard the drug metaphor used several times in my fieldwork. The first time I attended the temple I was surprised to hear two separate devotees joking about “something” in the food. My field notes contain the following two anecdotes: “He made a joke about how this food could be laced with LSD, but it’s laced with something far more powerful—love,” and, “The man talked about how delicious the Hare Krishna food is, and how they must put something in it because you’ll see that you’ll keep coming back” (field notes 11/15/09). In his *Confession of a Prasad Addict*, Taru talks about halwa prasadam as though it were a drug: “After some time, they asked me if I wanted more. I took another hit. More? Well, I could have easily done in the whole hunk but I felt too embarrassed” (Taru 2007).

These examples illustrate the way in which, through talking about prasadam like a drug, the connection between states of consciousness, and substances introduced to the body is highlighted. Like, mind-altering drugs, prasadam is ingested into the body, but

changes the state of mind. And like a medical drug, the process is scientific, and therefore universal. Just as medicine works on the body through prescribed regime, the dietary regime of taking prasadam will, devotees insist, slowly but surely, transform the eater. Also implied by this metaphoric language about prasadam is that prasadam can effect the same “escape” from society as recreational drugs. For example, in 1968 the San Francisco ISKCON temple, in the notorious Haight Ashbury hippie district, advertized, “Stay high forever. No more coming down. Practice Krishna Consciousness” (Burr 1984, 45). Additionally, even for those who are not actively seeking escape, prasadam will cure the “illness” of complacency in a mundane world which is seen as illusory at best, and spiritually corrupting at worst.

## **Conclusion**

The daily, embodied nature of food makes it a powerful cultural symbol. This is particularly true of prasadam since the devotee is able to reaffirm her commitment to ISKCON several times throughout the day (Singer 1984). In this way the act of taking prasadam is both performative and transformative. Devotion to Krishna is performed through offering, while membership in ISKCON is performed through attending communal meals of prasadam and through speaking of prasadam in the shared discursive models I have outlined in this chapter. Prasadam is understood as transformative insofar as it is believed to calm the body, ensure good health, and reveal a reality outside and beyond the material world. The mystical properties of prasadam are felt by devotees to be its most important attributes, but the role of the body is also important, as a

disciplined, healthy body will itself lead to greater capacity for devotional practice, a point further discussed in Chapter Four.

The spiritual is privileged over all the material aspects, which are felt to be dangerous and illusory. Yet at the same time, the material elements do remain important, as illustrated by the strict requirements on the kinds of foods, concerns with the purity, both ritually and in terms of its potential contamination by genetically modified ingredients or pesticides (concerns addressed in Chapter Four), and the sensory act of eating. The sensory act of eating prasadam is bound up in a philosophy based on the untrustworthiness of the senses, and the goal of overcoming the senses. Senses need to be controlled and channeled to support appropriate devotional service. This is accomplished through prasadam, wherein the sensory act of tasting prasadam becomes a metaphor for the very spiritual intimacy that it at once encapsulates and facilitates. *Rasa*, taste, intimacy with the Lord is the objective of eating the food, not the gratification it brings to the eater. The tongue is thus controlled, but controlled by an act so wonderful that it merits celebration and feasting. Discursive conceptualizations of prasadam incorporate medical, biological, moral, and cosmological models, illustrating the ways in which devotees integrate multiple frameworks in their understanding of ISKCON philosophy, and the central role of prasadam within it. The next chapter addresses the ways in which food distribution in ISKCON uses the powerful medium of prasadam as a vehicle for spreading Krishna Consciousness, highlighting the ways in which prasadam shapes relationships with others both within and outside of Honolulu's ISKCON community.

### CHAPTER THREE PREACHING THROUGH PRASADAM

The food is definitely a reflection of the philosophy, I mean it's irresistible, it's good, there's plenty of it, and it all mixes in. You know, like prasadam, all the curry, the rice, the salad, even some of the desserts, it's okay if it touches a little of the non-sweet ones, it'll still taste good, you know? So, I guess in that symbolic sense I think yeah, the people that intake prasadam you know they're only like one step away from like, you know, Krishna or like learning the full-blown philosophy (Olivia).

Olivia, is an Asian-American non-initiated devotee, in her early 20s, who has been attending the temple for about three years, and regularly volunteers at Govinda's food stall. Olivia's comparison between prasadam and ISKCON philosophy illustrates the extent to which the two are intimately linked. Chapter Two showed how prasadam is felt to effect spiritual transformation on members of ISKCON, and illustrated the same conflation between food and philosophy that Olivia neatly presents through the metaphor of ISKCON's philosophy as a collection of different dishes coming together in one divinely delicious meal. It is clear that prasadam is intimately linked with the divine; prasadam is, in itself, a tool for salvation. In this chapter, I explore the ways in which this tool for salvation is deployed by ISKCON members in service of ISKCON as a missionary faith. I argue that prasadam is a privileged medium of missionary activity because devotees make an explicit linkage between universal necessity of eating and Krishna Consciousness, which is understood as a universal spiritual practice. In this chapter I examine how the Honolulu ISKCON community uses food distribution as a missionary activity, and I examine the ways in which devotees frame their own

experiences of joining ISKCON (or belong to ISKCON, in the case of informants who were raised in, rather than converted to, the movement) in terms of prasadam's transformative properties.

A defining feature of ISKCON today, and from its inception, has been its missionary tenor. For ISKCON members, proselytizing is a way of living one's faith and fulfilling the obligation to their guru. Devotees with whom I spoke were very conscious of this. Daiva, a Latino European American man, who has been a devotee for more than two decades, explained:

When you take on a spiritual master, you take on helping him in his mission to his guru. And so the chain continues like that. So you can't separate the order of the guru and his mission from your life, once you're initiated. And so, you always have, as a disciple, a feeling of wanting to help in the mission.

Spreading this missionary religion is thus a means of ensuring one's own spiritual salvation while working to extend that possibility to others. But it is also a way of maintaining ISKCON as an organization, allowing it to reproduce and sustain itself. As Mary Douglas noted in her classic text *Purity and Danger*, "The analysis of ritual symbolism cannot begin until we recognize ritual as an attempt to create and maintain a particular culture, a particular set of assumptions by which experience is controlled" (Douglas 1966, 128). This does not diminish the spiritual importance of ritual to its practitioners, but rather highlights the concomitant social work performed by and through ritual actions. P. Kumar, in his analysis of ISKCON festival, notes:

Spreading the message of any religious organization is driven not only by its spiritual quest but equally importantly by its desire to increase its membership and commitment to its doctrines and rituals. As historians and social scientists, we do not have any way of knowing the benefits of these doctrines beyond our world, but we certainly can see the social and cultural benefits to the followers and the

organizations concerned. The creation of identity and establishment of organizational strength in the face of other religions and denominations are certainly the most visible goals of religious institutions that we can study (Kumar 2008, 211).

Distributing, and eating, prasadam are therefore key rituals for both the individual devotee, and the institution of ISKCON. Thus prasadam distribution can be looked at the individual scale and the institutional scale. On the individual level, prasadam consumption *and* distribution are forms of “service” which are the duty of a devotee, while at the institutional level, these actions sustain the functioning of the organization—both through revenue generated from prasadam distribution, the attraction of new potential members, and the positive image of the religion because of its charitable acts. These two levels of analysis—individual and institutional—need not be seen as conflicting, but rather illustrate the ways in which the individual performs belonging and membership to ISKCON.

### **The Structure of ISKCON**

Devotees told me that all that is needed to be a devotee of Krishna is a loving attitude of service towards God. For much of the ISKCON community the basis of their membership is purely informal. However, there are also formal mechanisms for membership and advancement in ISKCON. The highest status for an ISKCON devotee is that of Brahmin,<sup>1</sup> this is the standing of those who are qualified to cook for the deities,

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<sup>1</sup> While the traditional (Indian) definition of Brahmin is that of a caste position (the highest, or priestly caste) which is exclusively transmitted through heredity, within ISKCON, it is a position and demeanor that can be earned through advanced spiritual service.

and to attend to them on the temple altars. It is open to both men and women, although in the ISKCON temple I saw a few initiated priestesses conducting service on the altar, while there are many initiated priests in the temple community. There are two rounds of initiation, and a devotee may choose to undertake one, or, if they aspire to a deeper level of spiritual practice, both. Bhagavan explained the process of initiation to me in an interview:

Our founder and acharya, Sri Prabhupada, our spiritual master, he set the standard that for first initiation that one should have fulfilled a commitment to chant 16 rounds of the Hare Krishna mahamantra everyday and have done that for like six months. And then followed the four regulative principles of basically human life, which are no meat, fish or eggs eating, no intoxication, which means coffee tea, cigarettes, drugs, stuff like that, no gambling, and no illicit sex, which means sex outside of marriage, and then within marriage only to have children. So, then, one makes a commitment to follow those “do-nots” and then the “dos” are to chant sixteen rounds on his beads every day. So that at the end of six months one could you know, if he finds a spiritual master that he feels comfortable with, then he could take initiation. Now, then, I think Prabhupada said another six months of actually following all that and then one could become initiated as a Brahmin. And then he would be able to engage in the worship of the deity [on the altar].

Anyone and everyone, according to ISKCON, can and should worship Krishna, but following the procedure described by Bhagavan is necessary to higher levels of service in settings that demand greater levels of spiritual purity, such as the temple.

Temples typically require several fully (twice) initiated devotees to meet the demands of the temple schedule, which begins with the first worship of the deities at 4:30 am, and concludes at 7pm after a full day of services, including the regular offering of prasadam to the deities at meal times. Thus, a temple has multiple pujaris, or priests. Each ISKCON temple has a temple president who is both the administrative and spiritual leader of the community.



During Prabhupada’s lifetime, he acted as both administrative and spiritual head of ISKCON. Before his passing, Prabhupada established a committee of twenty disciples called the Governing Body Commission (Deadwyler 2004). This remains the organizational framework for ISKCON today, although it has undergone some transformations in leadership. In particular, a decade of controversy (between 1977 and 1987) concerning the role of the guru (the spiritual leader with the authority to initiate disciples)—including allegations of corruption by some gurus—in ISKCON led to a series of reforms which expanded the number of initiating gurus from 11, at the time of Prabhupada’s death, to more than 50 (Deadwyler 2004)<sup>2</sup>.

### **Proselytizing through prasadam?**

While discussing the themes explored in this chapter with a devotee friend of mine, Lila, at the ISKCON temple, I used a modified version of this chapter’s title to suggest the phenomenon of “proselytizing through prasadam.” Lila disagreed with the terminology, noting that *conversion* isn’t necessarily the goal of prasadam distribution. Instead, she highlighted the spiritual benefit of taking prasadam, noting that even if the person given prasadam never steps foot in an ISKCON temple, the experience of having ingested prasadam will benefit that person spiritually (field notes 9/12/10). Because of her critique, I have changed the title of this chapter to “Preaching Through Prasadam” to reflect the fact that prasadam distribution is in fact a way of spreading Krishna

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<sup>2</sup> See Deadwyler (2004) for a more detailed account of the organizational structure of ISKCON and its transformations; see also Desai et al. (2004); Collins (2004); and Joseph (2004) for more discussion of controversies in ISKCON leadership

Consciousness, one which devotees firmly believe will have positive spiritual effects, yet at the same time, the scale and time-frame of those effects is very flexible. While many devotees related to me their own dramatic transformations via prasadam, as Lila points out, sometimes the transformations affected by prasadam are subtle, and as many other devotees also pointed out, perhaps not realized in this lifetime, but rather the next.

Prasadam is thus a gentler form of preaching—less demanding than other forms of proselytizing, it in some ways represents a retreat from traditional forms of proselytizing that hinge on provoking a conscious conversion experience since, in the case of prasadam distribution, the agency is given over to the food in effecting change. The ingestion of prasadam can thus been viewed as a “rite of bodily manipulation” in Douglas’s sense: “Certain cultural themes are expressed by rites of bodily manipulation...The rituals enact the form of social relations and in giving these relations visible expression they enable people to know their own society. The rituals work upon the body politic through the symbolic medium of the physical body” (Douglas 1966, 128). Prasadam, as a medium, effects transformations, both subtle and grand. The importance given over to the purely experiential act of prasadam ingestion is a notable practice in a religion as philosophically rich and textually and scripturally moored as ISKCON since, in this instance, words are abandoned, and sensory experience becomes the medium of knowledge transmission. This justifies a phenomenological perspective since acts of eating—the profound sensory experiences of smelling, tasting, chewing, swallowing, even becoming sick from prasadam—are the steps towards spiritual transformation.

### **Food as Uniquely Universal/Food as Bearer of “Universal Truth”**

As is expected in a missionary faith, ISKCON devotees engage in many forms of proselytizing. The main examples, and the ones which often bring ISKCON into public view, are sankirtan and book distribution. These reflect other important mediums of spiritual cultivation within ISKCON—the innately purifying/spiritualizing sound of the *mahamantra*, and the importance of the printed word and of fidelity to the movement’s written sources of the Vedic texts, and Prabhupada’s interpretations of them. Yet although these forms of proselytizing are also important, I found through my interviews and fieldwork that food distribution—what I term preaching through prasadam—holds a special distinction. Other researchers have found the same in other branches of ISKCON: “Indeed, food was to become a major vehicle for missionary activity in ISKCON. Through vegetarian food offerings to the temple deities that were then distributed to the public, deity worship was strongly linked to propagation” (Valpey 2004, 51; see also Singer 1984).

In fact, where other forms of proselytizing are limited by either legal restrictions (see Rochford 2004 for a discussion of legal limitations on ISKCON’s solicitation in public places), or concerns about lack of receptivity, food distribution is still possible. As Madhavan commented to me, “very few people are philosophically inclined,” meaning that rather than strike up conversation about Krishna Conscious philosophy, sharing prasadam and chanting were more appropriate ways to expose outsiders to Krishna Consciousness (field notes 3/27/10). Food is also a medium that very few people resist,

and a medium of communication that is privileged as universal. Indeed, food, in the form of prasadam, comes to both physically embody and symbolically represent the universality of the ISKCON doctrines. As Vajranatha put it: “So, since prasadam is spiritualized, and since prasada can also be distributed, that is a transference of knowledge in a sense as well. A connection with God, and that connection with God is the knowledge of God, you know?”

Prasadam is thus taken as a universal medium, a medium without translation. In our interview about prasadam Olivia told me: “everyone needs to eat and you know, who can resist food? Good food. I would hope that everyone would like prasadam.” When I asked her why there was not distribution of pamphlet or books at Govinda’s she responded that they were prohibited by the University of Hawai‘i from doing so, highlighting again that prasadam distribution is both a spiritually beneficial, and pragmatic, means of preaching. The exception to the anti-pamphleting rule is the sale of *A Higher Taste* at Govinda’s--a text which is both a cookbook and a religious treatise on the importance of prasadarianism. In this instance it seems that once again the fact that the book could be seen to fall into the domain of cookbook, rather than being construed as a missionary material, allowed for greater potential for its distribution.

Anthropologists of food have long noted its ability to code membership and exclusion. As Mary Douglas noted, sharing a meal is in itself a sign of intimacy (Douglas 1975). Within ISKCON, the shared diet, and the shared experience of following such a diet, sets members apart from the non-devotee community. One

devotee at the temple emphasized this difference in characterizing the local diet as

“junk.” This is just the phenomenon Brown and Mussell describe when they write:

[F]oodways in subcultural groups are rooted in tradition but express dynamic aspects of in-group culture through a process that is highly charged with meaning. Foodways bind individuals together, define the limits of the group’s outreach and identity, distinguish in-group from out-group, and serve as a medium of inter-group communication, celebrate cultural cohesion, and provide a context for performance of group rituals (Brown and Mussell 1984, 5).

Yet while food can be a means of subcultural group differentiation, it can also be used to level boundaries, and indeed, prasadam outreach is one way in which devotees do so, not only symbolically, by extending an invitation to eat together, but substantively, through distributing prasadam which is believed to *transform* the eater to be more spiritual—that is, more like a devotee. Rishi, who joined ISKCON more than a decade ago in India—his country of origin—explained the importance of prasadam thusly:

Eating prasad is also spiritual service and it has the equal benefit as going on the altar and actually worshipping the deities. And that’s probably the easiest thing because everybody eats. And that’s probably the most accessible way for people to offer their service, so that’s why it’s given that much emphasis.

In Rishi’s account, prasadam is a great equalizer, bringing the “newbie” to the same level as the initiated pujari (who worships on the altar). This attitude recalls Victor Turner’s notion of *communitas* since “*Communitas*, or the ‘open society,’ differs in this from structure of the ‘closed society,’ in that it is potentially or ideally extensible to the limits of humanity” (Turner 1969, 112). This chapter examines the ways in which prasadam is used both to define boundaries, and to erase them in its dual role as a marker of ISKCON membership, and a tool for preaching Krishna Consciousness even *past* the limits of humanity, as prasadam is distributed not only to humans, but to dogs, cats, birds, and

even ants. First, I turn to devotees' accounts of their own miraculous encounters with prasadam.

### **“I’m actually a product of prasadam”**

It is not surprising that prasadam is regarded as such a powerful medium for interaction with others, when so many devotees identify it as the impetus behind their own entry into the movement. Prasadam was the lure to the temple, or the reason to return. Olivia told me her first trip to the temple was for a Sunday feast. Most devotees I spoke with had a story of how eating prasadam drew them into the temple, and many could remember the exact foodstuffs that brought them there. Vajranatha told me during an interview: “I’m actually a product of prasadam because I would never have got involved if it wasn’t for that.” He, like other many other converts to ISKCON, was already a vegetarian and was attracted first to ISKCON as a source of vegetarian food.

Similarly for Olivia, responding to my question “what first brought you to the temple?”:

The food. I was invited to, you know those little buffets that they have every day? (NB: um-hum) by my best friend. Her mother like ate prasadam there like just on a random basis and then I was like “oh wow, this food’s really good.” And then I started—right after that I started college at UH and I saw Govinda’s and I knew that the food came from there, and I started helping [the main devotee who funs Govinda’s] out, and that’s how I really got into ISKCON.

But far from being a mere source of food, Olivia experienced her dietary change as a personal transformation: “I could feel my body like transition from my regular diet to like, you know, eating the, you know, prasadam every day...I really do feel like it has like helped me to be more Krishna Conscious.” Gaurahari, an Indian pujari who moved

to Honolulu to serve as a temple priest, talked about his own process of initiation by food:

They [referring to potential devotees] get hooked up with the food first, and then they come to the other part, the philosophy part. So in my case also, it's something similar experience. Like when I went to the ISKCON temple in Juhu, Mumbai, and that's where I tasted prasadam—it was halwa.

He then went on to recall in detail the flavor and content of that first prasadam—which he took in 1988. Jaya also had long-range sensory memories of eating prasadam for the first time, initially at a Hindu temple (non-ISKCON affiliated) in Bali, where she lived for several years as a young woman. She was served rice cakes—a form of prasadam she continues to seek out on visits to Bali—and later, at the first ISKCON function she attended:

That [rice cake] was my first prasadam, [it] was really in Bali. The next time, when I first went to the Krishna temple in Denver, 1975, it was halwa, it was this cashew halwa that just, I couldn't stop thinking about it, I just wanted it so bad after having one taste of it, and I, first time I ever went into a Hare Krishna temple it was like the biggest day of the year, so there was like hundreds of [food] preparations, but it was that cashew halwa that never left my mind. Same with the little rice cakes in Bali...

The intensity of these recollections, and the undimmed sensory memories they communicated highlight the same linkage between food and memory that anthropologist David Sutton explored in his ethnography of Kalymnos, *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory*. Like the Kalymnians, ISKCON devotees also “use the transitory and repetitive act of eating as a medium for the more enduring act of remembering” (Sutton 2001b, 2). Though these stories actually recount one single act of prasadam-consumption, they certainly gain their intensity in respect to the repetitive acts of prasadam-eating that followed.

Taru, author of the humorous articles *Confessions of a Prasadam Addict*, published in the 1970s and republished online, describes at length his first experiences with prasadam, highlighting his heightened sense of taste and pleasure in eating. His account of his first experience eating prasadam already presages the total transformation of his diet, and the power of the account comes from the reader's knowledge that Taru will be transformed through this encounter, as Taru finds himself going back and back again for more food in a single meal, foreshadowing the way in which he will begin to go back and back again to the temple (which he recounts later in the article):

But when I sat down and began to eat, it was a whole other story. I had never before been so excited, actually thrilled, simply by eating something. Every preparation was better than anything I had ever tasted in my life...I quickly finished off my entire heaping plate and went back for seconds. Then thirds, fourths. I stopped counting after a while. I just couldn't get tired of anything. I ate at least four times more than the biggest meal I had ever had. I couldn't understand what had come over me. Factually, I had never seen anyone eat as much as I did at that feast (Taru 2007).

Taru's account, first published in print during the early period of ISKCON's establishment and later online, combined with several devotee experiences which follow the same format of amazement and attraction at the goodness of prasadam indicate that this is a standard form of discourse about prasadam in ISKCON, one which reflects the speaker's commitment to ISKCON through the frame of a transformative personal encounter with prasadam. Priya's first memories of prasadam are more recent than Gaurahari's, Jaya's, and Taru's, but no less vivid. She has become highly involved in temple activities and services since first visiting the temple a year ago, while a student in a religion class. She recalled her early visits to the temple, when she would meet with a pujari who explained to her the ISKCON philosophy:



We always met in the back, beneath the banyan tree and we'd eat and talk and I would ask him my questions about whatever. And I was always like amazed by how good the food was, and I was like, "oh this is really great." And everyday I would come and he would always have a plate for me like that. And later, like several months later, after I'd already settled in there and everything, I realized that it was all maha<sup>3</sup> that I was getting since first coming to the temple (Priya).

The element of taste was an important theme in her account of how she came to adopt ISKCON's dietary practices, as well as the philosophy. She felt her tastes had been changed by "a whole couple weeks of just eating straight prasadam" such that foods she previously ate became unpalatable to her.

Devotees also expressed the belief that the prasadam was equally appealing to non-devotees, and therefore prasadam became a way to share Krishna's divine love—and message—to those outside the group. And non-devotees do in fact come to the temple for the food. There is a regular rotation of newcomers, who are escorted to the front to the prasadam line. One "local" Asian American middle-aged man, Brian, comes regularly, after the sankirtan, to eat prasadam, and indeed, he eats copious amounts. He is there, he told me somewhat sheepishly, for the food. While Brian seems unmoved to join into the religious side of temple life (often, for example, he eats without speaking to devotees), devotees—having had powerful experiences with prasadam themselves—expect others to have those experiences as well. Olivia spoke of the sense of service she feels from serving food at Govinda's, knowing that her own consumption of prasadam made her more "Krishna conscious," she is happy to share the spiritual conduit of

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<sup>3</sup> "Maha" as used by Priya in this quotation is a shortened form of "mahaprasadam," prasadam directly from the deity's plate, which is considered to be the most "potent" form of prasadam.

prasadam with others. Priya also considers her volunteerism distributing food, both at the temple and Govinda's, to be important service:

And I see the way people react, like when they're eating prasadam. Especially here, a lot of people come by and say, "oh, like, your food makes me feel so good," and things like that. And when I used to work at the temple I used to hear that a lot too. Just the food would make them feel happy.

In fact, whether the non-devotee consumer of prasadam articulates a transformation or not, devotees fully expect such a transformation to have taken place. George Harrison's proclamation on Krishna Consciousness: "The proof of the pudding is in the eating—All You Need Is Love (Krishna)" (published in ISKCON's booklet *Chant and Be Happy*, and referenced by a pujari during a lesson given on 5/23/10) was echoed by many with whom I spoke, who insisted that they had experienced this transformation themselves, and therefore expected others to as well. Vajranatha told me that the transformation affected by prasadam is "not something you can convince someone through logic or whatever, it's something that you practice, and by the practice you can judge for yourself whether it is good or not." For devotees, prasadam is performative ritual, one which generates its own meaning through its very enactment. According to Slavoj Žižek, "religious belief...is not merely or even primarily an inner conviction, but...an institution and its rituals...which far from being a mere secondary externalization of the inner belief, stand for the very mechanism that generates it" (Žižek 1994, 12). Žižek's conception of the ritual-as-belief resonates with Jackson's phenomenological understanding, drawn from Merleau-Ponty, that "the meaning of a bodily action [such as eating prasadam] is not given to the action by some external agent but is *in* the action itself" (Jackson 1996, 32). I see these approaches to meaning, belief, and ritual in dialogue with Judith Butler's conception of

ritualized performance through “a reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (Butler 1993, 2). Though of course Butler theorized this process in regards to gender performance, I would argue that it also reflects key aspects of the kind of ritualized performance affected through the repeated act of eating prasadam. Additionally, I wish to highlight both the bodily mechanism of generating belief, and the linguistic mechanism by which discourse creates its own reality in its image. That such a process is at work in discourses about prasadam is strongly indicated by the repetitive themes, and indeed, parallel discursive models, deployed by devotees in our conversations about prasadam.

### **Subtle Transformations**

[O]ne finds within ISKCON a fairly wide range of missionary outreach programs, including its well-known Sunday feasts (held in all its centers), large public festivals such as the *Jagannatha Ratha-yatra* (“Festival of the Chariots”), its impressive pilgrimage-cum-tourist complex in West Virginia (New Vrindaban), public distribution of sanctified food (*prasadam*), and various video and audio productions that are disseminated to all ISKCON centers and from there to the public. In large measure, these programs are viewed by devotees not as direct recruitment strategies per se, but as a means of effecting a subtle, very gradual purification of the material world by exposing it to the transcendental, transforming power of Krishna Consciousness (Gelberg 1989, 150).

While it is hoped that some who take prasadam will join the movement wholeheartedly, experience shows that many simply eat the food, and leave. But this does not contradict the view of prasadam as innately transformative, instead, it points to the long-range time frame with which devotees view the process of spiritual transformation.

While devotees will do everything in their power to achieve spiritual liberation within their lifetimes (which is to say, at their death), they recognize that others who are not

engaged in the process of Krishna consciousness are not in a position to return to Godhead, but will rather be reborn. Prasadam then is helpful both in this life and the next, as many devotees related that a non-devotee who eats prasadam in this life, will be born as a devotee in the next life.<sup>4</sup> This understanding of the long-range, subtle transformations affected by prasadam resolves any possible contradictions surrounding its failure to convert all those who encounter it to Krishna Consciousness, since in such a view full conversion is not the only mark of success, and the process may rather be gradual, spilling over into the next lifetime. This relates to Lila's distinction between proselytizing (which she understood as demanding conversion) and spiritualizing (which she presented as a service which demanded no short-term acknowledgment of its having been rendered). Such a perspective relates to the long-term temporal focus in ISKCON in which time is understood as a cyclical process expanding over billions and even trillions of years (Deadwyler 1989).

Additionally, contact with prasadam is felt to be innately powerful because food/prasadam and philosophy are so intimately linked that one becomes a vehicle of the other: Krishna consciousness is “nectar” to be “tasted,” and prasadam is God’s “mercy” to be distributed. Thus for Olivia, even people who “just come for prasadam” at the temple’s Sunday feasts are expressing a deeper “curiosity for the philosophy” since, she suggests, “intake of the food—it could be a reflection on their curiosity for the philosophy.” Prasadam is always spiritualizing, according to devotees, and those who do not realize it, should nevertheless continue eating it, for if they do, they will inevitably

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<sup>4</sup> This also applies to animals, who will be propelled into higher births through prasadam. See Chapter Two.

feel its transformative effects. Ironically, devotees conceded that sometimes the best way to achieve this was by *not* explaining what prasadam is. Since prasadam is understood to be the type of “sensory code” for which “the medium...is the message,” no verbal message need be explicated stated (Turner 1974, 240). Since devotees recognize that most people in the Kali Yuga are woefully uninterested in spiritual pursuits, a couple devotees even went so far as to say that the *best* way to reach them (and preach to them) was through prasadam disguised as ordinary food. Madhavan referred to this as “transcendental trickery,” while a young woman devotee, raised in Hawai‘i by ISKCON devotee parents jokingly responded to my observation that many who eat at Govinda’s and Govindaji’s aren’t aware that they are eating prasadam by exclaiming, “Don’t tell them! They might stop going!” (field notes 2/7/10).

Prasadam distribution is not a method of radical social transformation but rather of a slow and steady transformation of souls, reflective of the long-range temporal frame of the movement. In such a view, non-devotees’ rejection of the philosophy is not viewed as a failure to spread Krishna Consciousness, as long as food is being distributed to create as one devotee described it, “a spiritually receptive population” (field notes 8/15/10).

### **Divinely delicious**

As the devotees’ accounts of their first encounters with prasadam, and their subsequent deep appreciation of prasadam show, devotees take pleasure in their food. Narratives of the amazing taste of prasadam were ubiquitous in my interviews, and show one way in which “the proof“ is found in “the pudding”—prasadam tastes delicious

because it is divine. Virtually every devotee with whom I spoke expressed the belief that prasadam was not only tasty, but tastier than *bhoga*, unoffered food. Although pujari Madhavan told me during our interview that he felt taste was *not* indicative of potency in prasadam, maintaining that “I would much rather have food cooked by a cook that is a lousy cook but full of devotion,” on another occasion he told me that to a true devotee “even prasadam which is rotten will be delicious” (from field notes 3/27/10). Gaurahari, also a pujari, told me “taste-wise it’s definitely different from anything. You can experiment it yourself, just eat fruit, just by itself, and then we eat a fruit after offer[ing] it to the Lord and we can taste [the difference].” On an early visit to the temple, I remember a senior devotee telling me that Krishna gave him the ability to cook, a skill he had never before possessed. He gestured to paintings of Krishna on the temple walls, and told me that similarly, Krishna had granted the painter the ability to create such beautiful paintings, after the painter became a devotee.

Devotees clearly relish their prasadam. Olivia told me, “the food is so good and it’s good for you. I, yeah, I’m really blessed to have—to be able to eat prasadam every day.” And not only devotees are “attracted” to prasadam, the majority of Govinda’s customers are not devotees, but students and faculty of the University of Hawai‘i, Govindaji’s serves a largely non-devotee population as well, and even at the Govinda’s buffet run out of the temple itself, non-devotees regularly come to eat. P. Kumar, writing about the annual ISKCON Rathayatra (festival of the chariots) celebration in Durban, South Africa, which is the largest event of the year, celebrated at every ISKCON temple, notes that prasadam distribution draws in large numbers of non-devotees:

Whether they believe in ISKCON's religious views or not, the people who participate in the communal meal certainly appreciate it as tasty and free. The books and the food are a most important means of transmitting ISKCON religious ideas. They are certainly very effective in drawing large crowds to the venue. (Kumar 2008, 210)

Eliot Singer writes, “taking prasadam is, for the devotees, the most sublime of experiences. The meal is anticipated with pleasure and continuously praised” (Singer 1984, 206). I found the same to be true in my own fieldwork. Yet Singer also contends that “the daily meal with its combination of the very hot and the very sweet serves to demonstrate worldly discomfort by producing an enormous thirst which, at least to the neophyte, is unpleasant” (ibid). I have never heard a devotee express “discomfort” in eating prasadam. Also, the excessive use of spices in prasadam is discouraged, since to do so would risk indulging in the mode of passion, so while the food is spiced, it could hardly be considered spicy. Finally, beverages—most often a ginger lemonade or an herbal iced tea at New Navadvipa Dham—are served with the meal. Yet allegations that devotees “accept a poor diet” also surface in Angela Burr’s ethnography, in which she includes diet as one way in which devotees “abuse their bodies and treat them badly” as a sublimated protest on the social body that their own individual bodies represent (Burr 1984, 176). Both Singer and Burr present the ISKCON diet as some sort of penance. While certain aspects of the diet are indeed challenging for devotees to uphold (injunctions on garlic and onions, for example, or the twice-monthly fasts from grains during *ekadasi* were spoken of as difficult in several interviews), the clear consensus emerging from my research is that devotees see their diet as a source of pleasure, not penance. Indeed ISKCON media, like the accounts of ISKCON devotees, highlight the

tastiness of prasadam. One wonders whether the diet practiced by devotees in the 1980s was stricter and more limited. However, perhaps these mid-80s judgments of ISKCON dietary practice point instead to changing dietary practices and ideologies *outside* of ISKCON, since, as I will argue in chapter Four, the current concern with organic, sustainable diets and “alternative” dietary practices, including vegetarianism, bring the ISKCON diet more in line with national dietary trends.

ISKCON produced cookbooks serve a proselytizing function, as they make appetizing the renunciation of a non-ISKCON diet through the acceptance of prasadam, setting the stage for the deeper renunciations demanded by the Four Regulatory Principles, the foundational rules of conduct in ISKCON:

1. No eating meat or eggs
2. No illicit sex (defined as non-procreative sex)
3. No gambling
4. No intoxication (including a prohibition on caffeine)

Cookbooks are widely distributed at low prices, or even for free, as I myself was given a copy of *The Higher Taste*, and was present at an ISKCON sponsored lecture at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa at which cases of the book were distributed free of cost to attendees. In addition, there are many online sources for ISKCON recipes, which are of course free to access. The rap song “Prasadarian,” and accompanying music video created by a Krishna devotee on the big island of Hawai‘i, is popular among the Honolulu devotee community, and goes about accomplishing the same objective in a “humble attempt to glorify Prasadam” (suchandradasī 2007). This ode to prasadam consists of a



tantalizing slide show of foods, interspersed with images of Krishna, explaining the concept of prasadam (“prasad is more than just a tasty treat, when I offer it to Krishna it becomes complete”), the injunctions of what cannot be offered as prasadam (“Krishna tells in the *Gita* what we should eat, he doesn’t say fish and he doesn’t say meat, he doesn’t say eggs and he doesn’t say wine, he doesn’t say legs and he doesn’t say guts and butts and everything else like that”) and finally listing a vast array of foods accompanied by appetizing pictures, explaining, “prasadam comes in many different cuisines” (ibid). Perhaps this lyric best sums up the spirit of the video: “I can spit recipes of the top of my head, if you think I’m deprived you must be misled” (ibid). Indeed, the video depicts prasadam as abundant and tasty, while those foods which are prohibited are accompanied by images of dead animals and close-ups of animal parts, and described in unappetizing terms (“guts and butts,” for example) that are designed to provoke a “core disgust” response in the viewer (Rozin et al. 2007, 68-69). In contrast, most of the video focuses on the divinely delicious nature of prasadam as a tool for encouraging others to eat it.

### **The Scale of Distribution**

Large-scale prasadam distribution is a defining feature of ISKCON temples, and New Navadvipa Dham in Honolulu is no exception. While I have outlined the temple’s food distribution through its restaurants and food stall, here I will address the charitable distribution of prasadam. Charitable food distribution is an important goal for ISKCON devotees, since a hunger-free zone surrounding each temple is a goal set by Srila Prabhupada:

[Prabhupada] emphasized that every temple, even though it's not really happening right now, it should. The ideal is there so that hopefully in the near future, he said that around every temple no one should go hungry for ten miles. Um, he put a really strong emphasis on prasadam. Chanting and prasadam. His two strongest emphases. So, prasadam is not only to keep the devotees, you know, happy or whatever, it's also part of the preaching process as well. (Vajranatha)

While, as Vajranatha points out, the temple has not achieved the goal of distribution within a ten-mile radius of the temple, it does take steps to ensure that those in need are supplied with prasadam. In Hawai'i, where there are "about 15,000 people annually who fall into homelessness at some point during a given year, and...about 6,000 homeless on any given day of the year," the need for food distribution is great (Pang 2011). New Navadvipa Dham supplies food to O'ahu's homeless population through a partnership with an outside organization that picks up food from the temple and distributes it to Honolulu's homeless population. Generally, the temple has enough fresh prasadam leftover at the end of the day to send out. If not, a special batch of prasadam will be made for the purpose of distribution to the homeless. Bhagavan highlighted the importance of distributing prasadam, as opposed to simply distributing food:

We don't want to feed the people just to feed them. We want to feed them prasadam. We understand they may be hungry people and we want to feed them, but we want it to be prasadam, so we offer it to God.

Bhagavan draws the crucial distinction here between hunger relief for the sake of hunger reduction, and prasadam distribution with a missionary purpose. Once again, such distribution is not missionary in the sense that it is not contingent on the recipient's acceptance of Krishna Consciousness (indeed, through the third party distribution, the link to ISKCON may not even be apparent to those receiving the prasadam), but is missionary in the sense that it is inspired by ISKCON's mission to spread Krishna

Consciousness—even and especially through the subtle transformations effected by prasadam distribution.

Several devotees expressed the desire to extend the distribution of prasadam, for example Olivia related a discussion held among Govinda’s volunteers working on “extending the Govinda’s food chain” to cover a larger range of territory on O‘ahu, since as she noted currently “all the prasadam is...served in town,” meaning urban Honolulu. Daiva has taken action towards expanding prasadam distribution to reach O‘ahu’s homeless population. Daiva previously operated a branch of Food for Life on O‘ahu. Food for Life is a network of ISKCON prasadam distribution. According to their website, Food For Life extends to over 60 countries “serving more than 1,500,000 free plantbased [sic] meals daily” (Food for Life 1995). Daiva described his work distributing food on O‘ahu:

I had a van; I had retrofitted it into kind of a lunch wagon. It had paintings of Krishna on all three sides. And, it was real attractive, and then I would play the music, and I would even take *tulsi* out—the sacred plant. And that was the payment, they would have to water *tulsi* to get the plate of prasadam.

Daiva is still involved in prasadam distribution, although he no longer works for Food for Life distributing food, he now works with O‘ahu’s largest homeless shelter, where the urban food garden he initiated provides fresh produce to the shelter on a regular basis, and where he and other devotees serve a vegetarian meal of prasadam to the shelter’s residents monthly.

Devotees in Hawai‘i are also concerned with prasadam distribution on a global scale. At a “spiritual ecology” lecture given by Radhanath Swami, a leading ISKCON guru, at the campus of the University Hawai‘i at Mānoa on September 16, 2010, a free

meal of prasadam was served, while donation boxes were set out for the Akshaya Patra Foundation. The Akshaya Patra foundation is an Indian charity inspired by the same proclamation by Prabhupada that Vajranatha recounted to me: “No one within a ten mile radius of our center should go hungry” (Akshaya Patra 2009). The Akshaya Patra feeds free vegetarian mid-day meals to schoolchildren in India, “reaching out to 1.2 million children everyday” (ibid). The foundation’s website sites their inspiration as His Divine Grace A.C Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (whose picture is featured on the page detailing the organization’s ten year long history), but aside from this, is not overtly religious, and, unlike the Food for Life Global site, does not prominently discuss ISKCON or prasadarism, focusing instead on the distribution of healthful meals in support of children’s education and well-being.

Through initiating local prasadam distribution, and fund-raising for international ISKCON affiliated and inspired organizations, the Honolulu devotee community engages with social issues on both the local and international scale. For devotees, it is essential that these social issues be met with a spiritual solution. This is because hunger and poverty—like all aspects of one’s material condition on earth—are shaped through past karma. Bhaskari, her mother Jaya and I were having a recorded conversation over a plate of prasadam. Bhaskari, a European American woman in her mid-20s who was born to and raised by Krishna Conscious parents in Hawai‘i recalled: “I was just looking at this [plate] saying, oh we still have a little bit of rice left. My dad used to always say, you better not take more than what you need because if you don’t finish the prasadam in this

life you'll have to come back and finish it in your next life.” Her mother added, “or you might go without. You'll just go without that much food.” She added:

Someone asked [Prabhupada], why are there so many hungry people in India and [he answered] because of the fact that if you've hoarded things in one life and you've been just gluttonous and not considerate, in the next life you're gonna come back and be without. So Prabhupada said one time in answer to that question, he said, “because sometimes the doctor prescribes no food.” In other words, karmically, you have to learn the lesson from being too gluttonous in the last life to come back and you'll be hungry in this one. And that's the understanding. Someone just was so offended when I told them that once. I said, well come on, think about it. You know? You don't just go through life just take take take and feed your tongue and feed your without some kind of—especially in this day and age when people are starving everywhere and food is a high priced commodity (Jaya).

Taken in conjunction with Prabhupada's injunction to feed all those within ten miles of each ISKCON temple, clearly such a morally causal explanation of hunger is not meant to disregard the karmically predestined suffering of the hungry. Instead, it points to the particular necessity of providing prasadam, for prasadam, and not mere food, has the ability to get to the root of the problem, which is identified not in terms of social or economic inequalities, but as a spiritual deficit, which can only be replenished through devotional acts, such as both the consumption and distribution of prasadam. Jaya's articulation of the relationship between karma and hunger also points to a belief in one's own responsibilities surrounding the consumption of food, and an awareness of hunger and starvation on a large scale (and their linkage to the status of food as a “high price commodity”). Indeed, Jaya and Bhaskari extensively praised the work of Food For Life, both globally and in Hawai'i, during the same conversation. Krishna devotees have been moved to create food distribution organizations on a massive scale, but while they fill hungry stomachs, they also seek to awaken dormant spirit-souls.

## **Prasadam and Boundaries**

Arjun Appadurai's notion of "gastro-politics," which he defines as "conflict or competition over specific cultural or economic resources as it emerges in social transaction around food," is an interesting framework from which to examine the way that prasadam both erects and collapses boundaries for ISKCON devotees (Appadurai 1981, 495). Appadurai notes that "food [is] a bearer of moral properties, cosmic meanings, and social consequences" (Appadurai 1981, 496); prasadam is a meaning-laden entity in and of itself, but its strategic deployments (i.e. its gastro-politics) add another level of complexity. Just as in the South Indian temple Appadurai describes, the prasadam distributed from the temple are "not simply...emblems of honor, but constitutive features of the rights, roles, and ranks of donors, priests, temple servants, and worshippers-at-large" (Appadurai 1981, 506). Just as those who perform the most service for the temple will receive free prasadam in return, devotees will be rewarded with prasadam in other ways, and potential devotees—as I myself was perceived on my many visits to the temple—will often be gifted with prasadam. Devotees who eat lunch at the temple will be charged a lower "devotee price" on their meal, while I myself experienced receiving extra-large helpings and sized-up orders from Govinda's food stall on campus. Non-food prasadam such as flowers and flower garlands are often distributed to new temple attendees and devotees who make extraordinary donations of either service or money. In this way, the distribution of prasadam reflects borders between devotees and non-devotees, and status hierarchies within the devotee community. Yet as the same

time, the large-scale distribution of prasadam to any and everyone actively demolishes boundaries, drawing non-devotee towards Krishna, at least by degrees.

Another boundary that prasadam concerns itself with is that between humans and animals. In ISKCON, the boundary between humans and animals is a worryingly flexible one, we share the same souls which cycle through bodies both human and animal, we may have been animals in our previous lives, and we may, if we do not conduct ourselves appropriately, become animals again. Perhaps because of the flexibility on the spiritual level, there seems to be a desire to assert the special case of the human form, that these *human* bodies alone elevate our spirit-souls to the point of transcendental liberation. Thus, there is a discourse that demarcates the differences between humans and animals, and seeks to de-animalize the human body. This is exemplified in the way that Rishi described spiritual progress to me, as a way of gradually distancing oneself from the “animal” necessities of life: “eating, mating, sleeping, and defending,” which are “the four things that animals do and humans do.” They are also the very activities that will “automatically reduce” with spiritual practice, he told me. Thus the human must be carefully set apart from animals through spiritual life, because the division between humanity and animalia is otherwise fluid, and in a state of constant flux. This is graphically portrayed as well in the illustrations in the *Bhagavad Gita As It Is* of humans transfigured into animals, both symbolically through their actions, and *in their actual physical forms* through the process of reincarnation. The colored plates in my hardcover addition of *The Bhagavad-Gita As It Is* show a man wielding a blood-spattered ax above a cow’s neck, but the faces of the man and cow have

been exchanged, so that a human's frightened face is attached to the cow's body, and the man holding the ax aloft is a monsterish man-ox hybrid (Prabhupada 1983, plate 12).

Another double page spread shows half-human, half-animal faces, illustrating the caption: "If the living being has made his consciousness like an animal's he is sure to get an animal body in his next life" (ibid, plate 14). In particular, we see a half-woman, half-bear depicting the consequences of human greed: being born as a bear in the next life. Similarly a glutton will be reborn as a pig, and a man grilling meat over flames is transfigured into a tiger ripping into a bloody carcass (ibid, plates 13 and 14).

Importantly, prasadam is not only for humans, but for animals as well—beings whom a compassionate soul will also seek to set on the path back to Godhead. Prasadam is therefore a food that reinforces the otherwise troublingly porous boundaries between humans and animals since prasadam makes one less animal-like, propelling animals themselves into "higher," human births, and reducing the animal-urges in human beings, liberating them from their "animal" bodies into their spirit-souls.

## **Conclusion**

Prasadam is a major means of interaction between devotees, and between devotees, and outsiders. Experiences with prasadam substantiate the beliefs of devotees because their transformative experiences with prasadam are experienced as "proof" of the universal truth of Krishna Consciousness. In turn, the desire to spread the word is expressed through the universal medium of food in the form of prasadam. Experience and beliefs combine, revealing the non-duality of body and mind that prasadam



represents. According to devotees, prasadam has the power to transform the eater, and transform the world. Inequality is made comprehensible through the framework of karma at the same time that it is confronted and combated with prasadam distribution.

Meeting over a plate of prasadam is also a leveling of borders between devotees and others, while at the same time, adherence to the ISKCON diet is itself an act of asserting one's membership in ISKCON, and thus one's distance from the material world. On the one hand, the missionary tenor of the faith seeks to destroy all borders, to fold those from all backgrounds and walks of life into the movement for Krishna Consciousness, into the kind of social (anti)structure Victor Turner describes as *communitas*, yet on the other hand, the focus of the philosophy is intensely inwardly-oriented. It is a practice of self-mastery and self-transformation in which a practitioner must retain their focus in order to gain mastery over their senses and resist the material world that surrounds and threatens to corrupt. In such circumstances maintaining what is referred to by Krishna devotees as "good association," i.e. relationships with others in the movement, is just as critical as avoiding "bad association," which is to say maintaining boundaries between the ISKCON community and those outside of it. Yet by mediating interactions with non-devotees through the distribution of prasadam, bad association is made good.

In the next chapter I will address the ways in which following a prasadam-based diet allows devotees to protest social structures they find abhorrent, and, in ways both symbolic and concrete, to both retreat from and interact with a world envisioned in a state of decline.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **“YOU CAN’T EAT NUTS AND BOLTS”: FOOD AS A REFUSAL OF CAPITALIST CONSUMPTION**

In this chapter I examine attitudes about healthy eating and a healthy body, and connect them with attitudes towards a healthy society. Relating to Mary Douglas’s notion of the “two bodies”—the physical body and the social body—in a “continual exchange of meanings,” the concern with appropriate methods of sustaining the body relates to larger social concerns (Douglas 1970, 65). Thus the personal, private, individual-level act of eating becomes in the first degree a group activity within the ISKCON community, and secondly, a point of connection with larger social and environmental concerns facing the wider community of the Hawaiian Islands, the United States, and the world. Those who follow a prasadam-based diet, assert that the physical consumption of food is a domain inappropriate to capitalist modes of consumption. As such, ISKCON devotees’ attitudes towards food, and a “back to nature” ethos towards food provisioning at the core of the movement, can be understood as elements of the rejection of modern industrial consumer capitalist society.

While the previous chapter dealt with the ways in which cultural models transform bodily maintenance into spiritual transcendence, this chapter will deal with the ways in which the personal practice of a prasadam-based diet relates to broader concerns with society and how ISKCON members seek to at once escape modern living, and transform it. I therefore examine the way religious beliefs in ISKCON shape social values, and how those values are expressed through the act of eating, and through activist

concerns with food policy, genetically modified organisms, and concerns about farming and development in the Hawaiian Islands. Yet I argue that these connections are also sites of tension between the ideology of the movement, and the reality of its practice. ISKCON's interest in food issues is motivated by the ideology of *prasadam* and the larger anti-modern, anti-consumer ethos of the movement, expressed through its nostalgia for a pre-modern past. This anti-capitalist, anti-modern feeling contributed to ISKCON's popularity with the counter-culture in the 60s—leading to a lingering “public perception of the Hare Krishna movement as a countercultural faith *par excellence*” (Ketola 2004, 305), and it is now in alignment with a growing concern in the United States—and a related, but particular set of concerns in Hawai‘i, specifically—with food policy and sustainability. I will review the points of connection and disjuncture between these two movements, as well as examining the extent to which local and organic food movements represent *participation* in capitalism consumer systems, and how ISKCON's attempts at transcending capitalism through gift exchange and self-sufficiency might resolve that contradiction, at least in part.

### **Life in the Kali Yuga**

ISKCON philosophy offers a fundamentally distrustful vision of society. All material nature is but *maya*—illusion. Furthermore, according the Vedic cycle of four ages, Satya, Dvapara, Treta, and Kali *yugas*, we are currently in Kali Yuga.

The progression of *yugas* from Satya to Kali is one of a successive decline so deeply rooted and all-pervasive that it amounts to a sort of ontological decay; the power of life itself seems to be eroded by the force of time. The character of this decline is expressed by a familiar metaphor of the four *yugas* as ages of gold,

silver, copper, and iron respectively. The human lifespan, set at 100,000 in Satya-*yuga*, is diminished in each *yuga* by a factor of ten, reaching only 100 years in Kali-*yuga*, our age. Each age also brings about a reduction in the earth's productive energy, so that food loses more and more of its sustaining power, until by Kali-*yuga* people are mental, physical, moral, and spiritual runts compared with their status in the golden age (Deadwyler 1989, 63).

References to Kali Yuga were a regular feature of the Sunday lessons I attended at the temple. Joining ISKCON expresses a commitment to free oneself from *maya*, and this predicated a very different encounter with one's surroundings, and society at large—an encounter premised on withdrawal from and progressive distance and detachment towards “the material world” which is understood as both innately corrupt and constantly degenerating. While Chapter Two illustrates the ways in which prasadam can be used as a technology for self-cultivation of an appropriate spiritual development, here I concentrate on the social values that prasadarianism communicates. The refusal to treat food as a commodity, but rather to view it as one of Krishna's many gifts, is connected to the rejection of commodity capitalism and its attendant social institutions. Food is a gift which we receive from Krishna, unconditionally, and, through the symbolic reversal of re-gifting it to Krishna, the devotee shows recognition and appreciation for that food. As such, food is a value-laden object in ISKCON and “eating [is] a deeply social act intimately associated with identity” (Roy 2005, 174).

Certainly this is true in ISKCON where treating self-sustenance as an act of intimate exchange with the deity, rather than as participation in consumer society is an act of protest against capitalist-based society, in favor of one in which production and trade are voluntary activities done in service of God. The model of this ideal society is a pre-industrial, small-scale agricultural society; according to devotees, this was Krishna's

way of life in his much-beloved Govinda (cow-herd) incarnation. Yet the question remains whether this protest is merely symbolic, since even while denying the consumer exchange, the devotee inevitably participates in it.

Prasadam of course, can be obtained at the temple or produced in the home. However, in either case, the devotee cannot simply eat for free. In the case of prasadam prepared in the home, a devotee must shop for ingredients just like any other consumer. Here, the departure from consumerism is a question of degrees, fresh vegetables must inevitably be purchased, but the devotee may attempt to avoid “industrial” or processed foods, for example the *Hare Krishna Cookbook* proclaims “No canned foods—please!” when describing the foods which a devotee should offer to Krishna (Dasi and Dasi 1973, 12). Instead, the devotee is entreated to find “suitable foodstuffs” with the following guidelines: “...vegetables should be fresh and appealing to the eye, grains should be wholesome, fruits large and sweet, and milk fresh and pure” (ibid). Although the authors concede: “Obviously, living under the conditions of the modern metropolis, these are often impossible to procure—at least on our budgets; but we must do the best we can” (ibid). Many other devotees echoed to me these sentiments, that fresh is best—ideally fresh, organic, and non-genetically modified—a point I will return to later in this chapter—and at the same time, that a devotee must make do with what she or he has, and that if one’s intentions are pure, than Krishna will accept the offering, transmitting in turn pure prasadam to the devotee. Madhavan insisted, “we’re practical” when it comes to offering prasadam. Indeed many devotees acknowledge that they do not always meet the strictest guidelines in selecting and offering prasadam, not for lack of desire, but for lack

of time, money, or simply willpower to avoid certain prohibited foods like garlic, onions, or even caffeine. Rishi, when I asked him “What kinds of foods do you offer at home?” responded, “Mostly rice, vegetables, beans. Fruits...Or sometimes ready-made snacks that you get. Like bar type foods and such. I mean, I am a single student, I have to improvise! I can’t cook every time.”

Neither is prasadam at the temple entirely “free,” although monetary transactions are not always made, or at least not in straightforward ways. A devotee is expected to engage in devotional service, both privately through eating prasadam, chanting the mahamantra, and abiding by the four regulative principles (no meat-eating, no intoxication, no gambling, and no “illicit”—i.e. nonprocreative—sex), and publically, through service to the temple and the temple deities. Devotees who engage in enough temple service will often be compensated with free prasadam, while devotees who come to eat at the temple during the lunch hours when it operates as a buffet-style restaurant will be charged a lower “devotee” price for the meal. Yet money flows between the devotees and the temple in transactions of prasadam, despite the fact that these transactions are represented as an exchange of gifts, circulating from devotees to Krishna, back to devotees, and finally among devotees themselves (and in many cases, non-devotees). I argue that such monetary transactions, though necessary, represent a tension between the anti-capitalist gift-based ideals of prasadam distribution, and its actual distribution. Though the Sunday feasts are famously free, the devotee who hands out plates to the temple-goers, is invariably standing next to—and monitoring—a donation basket. Donations are in no way obligatory, nor have I ever seen a devotee explicitly

request a donation for Sunday prasadam, but the fact remains that a member of the community witnesses who puts in money, and how much. There are other very public acts of monetary transaction in the temple as well. I regularly witnessed donation drives during the Sunday services. In the period after the sankirtan and before the prasadam is served, a devotee—usually a pujari who is highly active in temple service—will ask for donations. Usually the donations are being collected for specific purposes, and the donors may specify that they desire their donation to go to the deities’ flowers, for example, or a new outfit for a deity, or for prasadam for a festival. These donations are called out publically and then marked on a board which is posted in the temple. Anonymous donations are also accepted. But those who make their donation in this public forum are often thanked with garlands of flowers offered to the deity (another form of prasadam). Such an exchange points to the Maussian implications of gift giving, in which both the giving and receiving of gifts are acts that enmesh the participants in social bonds (Mauss 2000). However, the element of monetary exchange in these interactions is coded in spiritual terms. Devotees are asked to provide “service” or “support” either through a monetary contribution or time spent volunteering at the temple. Furthermore, on many occasions I heard devotees referring to money as Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity. Through relying on spontaneous donation, insisting on these transactions as *gifts* (rather than a formal system of tithing), and by recasting cash as a divinity, ISKCON members can resolve the contradiction of their participation in a consumer exchange, even in the holiest of domains.

## **Economic Class and Spiritual Hierarchy**

While all members of ISKCON—or at least all those who commit to the organization over the long term—share the vision of an anti-capitalist society in which work is a form of service performed because of spiritual, rather than monetary motivations, not all members engage with that vision in the same way. Some devotees will give themselves over entirely to the service of Krishna by becoming full-time pujaris in ISKCON temples, or full-time temple residents, working in temple restaurants or gift-shops. Most, however, will maintain employment outside of the temple. Some may see their work as an expression of Krishna devotion, even if it is outside of a strictly ISKCON framework. Jaya works in a vegetarian health food store, an occupation which she sees as very consistent with her values as a devotee. Madhavan makes use of his spiritual training—and legal status—as a temple pujari to organize and officiate weddings, often destination weddings for couples traveling to Hawai'i to be married. For other devotees, their employment is the means to sustain themselves materially, while spiritual service occurs during non-working hours in the home and at the temple. Historically ISKCON's membership has undergone a shift from full-time, residential membership, to a congregational membership (Rochford 2007). This has been attributed in part to demographic shifts in membership to include more immigrant Hindu Indian membership, typically middle-class professionals who did not seek full-time involvement at the temple, but rather attended congregationally for worship and festivals (Rochford 2006; 2007). Yet, the role of Indian devotees should not be overly generalized, since in



the case of New Navadvipa, Indians (and Americans of Indian descent) are well represented among full-time devotees (those residing in the temple and performing religious duties as their primary occupation). Non-Indian devotees are also involved in the embourgeoisement of ISKCON, since many devotees shifted from the role of celibate renunciant, to that of married devotees living in self-supporting nuclear families, rather than communally (Rochford 2007).

Given the different lifestyle and employment patterns of ISKCON's membership, it is not easy to make a statement about the class status of ISKCON devotees. As I suggested in my introduction, the occupational and income status of devotees is diverse, however, based on my interview sample, it seems the most of the membership is drawn from middle class backgrounds. This is in line with other studies of ISKCON that have found middle class background to be a common demographic feature of ISKCON's membership (Rochford 1985). For middle class converts to Krishna Consciousness, joining the movement represents a refusal of their class position, and a repudiation of class hierarchy more generally. For some devotees, membership in ISKCON will result in downward class mobility, since those who serve and live in the temple-full time live in conditions that are modest to the point of austere, while for others, who worship at the temple while maintaining outside employment, there may be not appreciable change in economic standing. ISKCON ideology rejects class standing as a basis for social or spiritual standing, but it does not necessarily demand a leveling of class differences. Instead, a new spiritual hierarchy is put in place, in which one's spiritual development is the basis on which respect is accorded. Success in worldly matters is no longer valued—

and at worst it is suspect. Yet some of the most respected members are the wealthiest, Ambarish Das donated the temple building itself through his wealth. Lavish donations are often made publically, but even in these interactions, respect is not garnered through the monetary donation per se, but rather for the religious motivation behind it. Attempts are made to level differences in ability to donate financially through the privileging of “service” in volunteering for the temple or its satellite restaurants as an equal contribution. And indeed, the simple, renunciant life remains the most respected. Material inequality therefore persists in the devotee community, but the alternate hierarchy of spiritual advancement is meant to level class distinctions, and the ritual worship of Krishna fosters *communitas*, as the temple community forms a “communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders” (Turner 1969, 96).

Bourdieu’s notion of class relates to the relationship between economic class and spiritual hierarchy in ISKCON. For Bourdieu class has two components, the “objectified properties,” or “possessions of goods, and power” but also “properties embodied as class habitus,” “in particular, systems of classificatory schemes,” which is to say, one’s preferences, one’s *taste* (Bourdieu 1987, 101). Joining ISKCON does not necessarily reconfigure the first element of class, although it may on a voluntary basis, depending on whether one joins as a congregational member, or whether one quits one’s job to join the practice of Krishna Consciousness full time, but it does necessarily involve a reconfiguration of the second element of class, since previously learned class habitus is meant to be subsumed under an acquired practice of—and taste for—Krishna

consciousness in all things (art, clothing, food, literature as well as moral and religious values). In Bourdieu's terms, acquiring a devotee habitus is a means towards reconfiguring a devalued middle-class identity into a valued *devotee* identity. Changing one's style of dress, chanting the mahamantra, and of course eating prasadam are bodily acts by which an aspiring devotee performs—and in so doing attains—their status as a Krishna devotee. Thus while ISKCON as a philosophy is critical of capitalist class hierarchies that privilege wealth rather than spirituality, ISKCON religious practice presents a way to resolve class conflict internally, without necessarily impacting class positions outside of the temple community.

### **“You Can't Eat Nuts and Bolts”**

Daiva related the title of this subsection to me in a recorded interview, while discussing his own work establishing sustainable farms on O'ahu.

Because you know when you live, you know, somewhat of a God-conscious life it's not that difficult to understand we can't eat nuts and bolts. This is quote from *Back to Godhead*,<sup>1</sup> one of these articles, or maybe even Prabhupada. You can't eat nuts and bolts. This factory business of putting people in factories makes big profit for a few, whereas a lot of people are just working hard their whole lives. Whereas an ag<sup>2</sup> economy—I was reading an article in this book and Prabhupada said, there's no need to even leave your local village, just use an oxen and that's all you need, there's no need to travel forty miles a day. You have all your needs taken care of, why leave?

This quotation reveals a number of attitudes towards food and farming. First, the critique of industrial modernity, as Daiva explains that factories benefit only a few and the

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<sup>1</sup> *Back to Godhead* is an ISKCON magazine and newsletter.

<sup>2</sup> Agriculture-based.

expense of the many, and secondly, their failure to meet basic human needs, expressing the ultimate futility of the system since “you can’t eat nuts and bolts.” Thirdly, is the desire for return to the local-level, to the community, when Daiva repeats Prabhupada’s direction that “there’s no need to even leave your local village.” In this form of nostalgic localism, I see echoes of the “locavore” food movement. “Locavore” was chosen by the Oxford University Press as their 2007 “word of the year”:

The past year saw the popularization of a trend in using locally grown ingredients, taking advantage of seasonally available foodstuffs that can be bought and prepared without the need for extra preservatives (OUPblog 2007).

The trend, and the label “locavore,” originated in San Francisco around 2005 (ibid). The idea is simple, to eat exclusively, or primarily, foods produced within a hundred mile range of one’s home. The concept is that eating locally will reduce fossil fuels used in transportation, while supporting local economies, and ingesting fresher, more healthful foods. This philosophy gained widespread exposure through best-selling books like Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, and Barbara Kingsolver’s *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, both of which have served as veritable locavore manifestos (Pollan 2007; Kingsolver et al. 2007). On the other hand, locavorism has been critiqued as being oddly selective towards food versus other types of commonly purchased imported goods (such as clothing, electronics, or homewares, to name a few) (Stanescu 2010). More troubling is the accusation from Yasmin Alibhai-Brown that local food rhetoric is “a proxy for anti-immigration sentiments,” which discourages foreign products—and by extension people—from integration into a closed-off national economy, and national political body (Alibhai-Brown 2008). B.R. Myers characterizes the locavore movement

as elitist, and quips that locavore fare is “environmentally sustainable only because so few people can afford it” (Myers 2011). Guthman’s critique of organic greens as “yuppie” food argues that organic farming continues to reproduce social inequalities, despite the fact that organic foods have been lauded as “an antidote to industrialized food” (Guthman 2003).

Yet despite these critiques, a local food movement has been gaining strength in Hawai‘i, where the extremely high percentage of food imported from off-islands amounts to between \$3.7 billion and \$4.2 billion annually (Cheng 2010); or 85 percent of food consumed in Hawai‘i (Reppun 2010, 40). Local food movements in Hawai‘i also have political implications that are differently inflected from those on the mainland. The question of “food sovereignty” is related to larger questions of sovereignty and unequal relationships of economic and political dependence between Hawai‘i and the mainland United States. Agriculture on the Hawaiian islands is also often presented as an alternative to other, dominant models of development that focus on real estate expansion and tourist infrastructure (Cheng 2010; Howes 2010). Consequently, there has been a rise in interest in local foods, developing small-scale farms on O‘ahu, and “resurrect[ing]” Hawaiian forms of cultivation in taro patches, and fishponds (Osorio 2010). Even mainstream grocery stores on O‘ahu, like Foodland, enjoin their customers to “buy local!” with special tags bearing that message marking out locally produced food items. There are a number of non-profit organizations working on food sovereignty, including Slow Food Oahu, which “works for [‘]ono & pono food for all,” Oahu Urban Garden Center, a number of privately owned organic gardens, a range of local and urban

farming cooperatives and non-profits, including a network of “Farm to School” programs on O‘ahu that establish student-run gardens in schools and use the produce in school lunches, just to name a few (Honolulu Weekly 2010, 12). Jonathan Osorio credits the resurgence of local agriculture to Hawaiian activist movements from the 1970s onwards, stating:

[T]here are areas in urban Honolulu where taro grows again, and students of the ‘āina learn again how to protect water and land resources using technologies and values that we learn from a curriculum that is many centuries old. In fact, certain words and phrases like ahupua‘a and mālama ‘āina have crept into popular lexicon, and may already be indispensable to anyone or any business that is practicing some *sustainable* activity (Osorio 2010, 16).

It is into this network of small-scale sustainable farming organizations that Daiva’s 2-year-old urban farming organization, the Laulima Eco-Friendly Alliance of Farms (LEAF), and a brand new project to establish sustainable farms for the local market on several acres of land in Waimanalo, O‘ahu, are situated. Indeed, the use of the term *laulima*, a Hawaiian word meaning cooperation, in the organization’s name reflects the relationship between Hawaiian values and sustainability in Hawai‘i that Osorio describes above. The use of such terms indexes the connections between food sovereignty and Hawaiian cultural and political practices. Yet such connections do not necessarily mean that all food sovereignty movements are in line with Hawaiian sovereignty, since, as Patrick Wolfe notes, the use of indigenous terminology by non-indigenous members of settler colonial societies can reflect a form of settler “replacement [that] maintains the refractory imprint of the native counter-claim” that attempts to legitimize—and not destabilize—settler colonialism (Wolfe 2006, 389).

While ecological and environmental issues, and questions of food security in Hawai‘i specifically, are expressed by many ISKCON devotees, there are also other reasons why local farming is so valued within ISKCON that tap into a deeper, spiritual motivations. Devotees must avoid association with non-devotees, according to pujari Madhavan, one’s associates determine their spiritual status, thus one should seek to associate with “saintly persons” and devotees of Krishna (field notes 2/6/11). Prabhupada taught that “simple living” on farms is conducive to “high thinking” on spiritual matters. Additionally, farms allow for modes of food production that ensure that the food is pure, fresh, and suitable for offering to Krishna, and a self-sustaining farm would allow for Krishna devotees to escape the system of industrial capitalist relations which dominates the modern world and which is itself indicative of Kali *Yuga*. It is no surprise then that establishing farms is an important goal for those in the movement, and in fact has been since its development in the United States and elsewhere. Although I argue that Daiva’s farm initiatives have been able to prosper in the current climate of concern for food systems, it is important to note that the desire to start a farm predates those movements. Long time devotee Vajranatha, who has been a pujari for over two decades, told me “there’s always talk of starting a farm,” he went on to discuss the difficulties of the project, but concluded by saying, “always, everyone is always open to that idea [of farming]. Actually Prabhupada originally started farms in the early days, in order to have that facility that would actually supply the temples.”

The earliest Krishna Conscious farm in the United States was established “under the direction [of] Srila Prabhupada’s first disciple in America” in 1968 as New

Vrindaban, occupying some two-thousand-acres in West Virginia (Rochford 1985, 199). Daiva began his farm with inspiration from several ISKCON-run farm organizations. Daiva spoke of the International Society for Cow Protection (ISCOWP), which operates near New Vrindaban, and raises cows to protect them from slaughter, and a farm in Hungary called Krishna Valley, as models for his own vision of “a self-sufficient run farm community.” Daiva described his vision to me, relating it back to the reality of his farming efforts:

That’s my goal, is to have a farm where we can do all that [produce our own food] and have 50 acres, a 100 acres, and have a temple there and have devotees living there and have devotees surviving there just off the land, but until then, it’s actually very nice that Krishna has arranged that we’re connected with O’ahu’s biggest homeless shelter.

Indeed, the current projects are far from being totally self-sustaining Krishna Conscious communities, and in fact, LEAF, Daiva explained, “is legally a community based organization, it’s not a religious based organization.” Nevertheless, while it may not be formally associated with ISKCON, LEAF functions as a successful non-profit, perhaps ironically in part because it is not an isolated community but rather linked to a network of donors and volunteers including The Institute for Human Services (IHS), which runs a medical clinic for the homeless as well as a shelter for men, and a shelter for women and children—where LEAF food gardens are already expanding over all usable spaces including parking strip, outside walls (through vertical herb and lettuce gardens), and soon—through an aquaponic system—on the rooftop. The garden at IHS garden provides fresh vegetables, including sweet potatoes, Malabar spinach, corn, beans, and squash, and herbs, including basil/*tulsi*, a plant sacred to Krishna devotees, to the



shelter's kitchen. Volunteers both from the shelter and outside help to cultivate the garden spaces. One of LEAF's successes is a horticultural training program, which trains homeless residents of the shelter with skills needed for "green jobs." I spoke with the first graduate of the program; she completed the horticultural training course while residing in the shelter, and now has a landscaping job.

More recently, "LEAF has partnered with the Honolulu Community Action Program (HCAP) to begin developing a healthy food system model in beautiful Waimanalo" (David 2011). HCAP is a non-profit organization, established in 1965 involved in a range of social service projects on O'ahu (HCAP 2007). The farm in Waimanalo is still in its preliminary phase, but Daiva, and other Krishna devotees have been mobilizing to clear this land in preparation for organic farming and eventually establishing a learning center. As in the case of LEAF's urban farms at the homeless shelter, here devotees are working with larger, non-profit organizations towards a common goal. Eventually, the farm in Waimanalo will provide training and employment opportunities to homeless and other economically marginalized individuals.

Angela Burr argues that interest in farming in ISKCON is "essentially symbolic," since "the majority of temples are in big cities...[and] the movement is almost entirely dependent on city life" (Burr 1984, 7). While indeed the majority of temples remain in metropolitan areas, I argue that the interest in farming is nevertheless not merely symbolic, as illustrated by LEAF, which is participating in shaping land use and food systems politics in Hawai'i by serving as a model for increased farming, even while breaking down the rural/farming versus urban/non-farming dichotomy. Interestingly,

LEAF is *not* a religious organization, yet it is nevertheless, a manifestation of Daiva's faith, and other ISKCON members serve on its board of directors, alongside those outside of ISKCON. Other ISKCON farm efforts, such as those that inspired Daiva also represent real, grounded efforts towards self-sufficiency (even where that goal is only partially met). LEAF is also expanding the definition of self-sufficiency beyond the temple grounds, and the devotee community, to the larger context of O'ahu.

Yet Burr is correct that for all the focus on rural living as a privileged lifestyle, ISKCON has remained an extraordinarily metropolitan organization. This is in fact reflected in the fact that although establishing a farm has been a decades-long goal for ISKCON Honolulu, it is only now materializing, and materializing through networks *outside* of ISKCON. Yet I argue that in addition to the extraordinary efforts of Daiva and his associates in launching a successful non-profit for the establishment of a Krishna Conscious—if not ISKCON affiliated—farms in O'ahu, LEAF benefited from the larger social and political context of Hawai'i and the United States at this moment in time, when the politics of food and farming are attracting high levels of interest. ISKCON took hold in the United States (and England) in the 1960s and early 1970s through its links to the counter-cultural movement (Ketola 2004; Adhikary 1995; Rochford 1985; Daner 1976). I argue that the success of Daiva's Krishna conscious sustainable farms illustrate that linkages between Krishna Consciousness and alternative social movements continue, as Krishna Consciousness presents an alternative to the social, economic, political, and moral structures dominant in post-industrial modernity.

## Healthy Prasadarians

Here I return briefly to the motivations for a Krishna conscious diet. While the previous chapters dealt with how prasadam is felt by devotees to effect spiritual transformation, here I dwell on the (perceived) impact of prasadam on the body. Many social science studies divide vegetarians into “health vegetarians [whose] dietary choice [is] linked to positive values associated with health” and “ethical vegetarians,” who are motivated by a moral concern for animal life (Fox and Ward 2008, 2592). While these distinctions may be useful in figuring out the primary motivations for vegetarianism, my research with Honolulu devotees illustrates that even among those who are primarily motivated for religious and moral reasons, the belief that vegetarianism is superior for health remained strong. Therefore, I argue that such a dichotomous approach to the motivations for vegetarianism is inappropriate to ISKCON (and perhaps other vegetarian populations as well) since a necessarily moral religious compulsion to follow a vegetarian diet does not preclude an interest in healthy eating, nor the widely held belief among ISKCON community members with whom I spoke that a Krishna conscious diet *is* a health food diet. I asked Bhagavan “what is the effect of eating prasadam” and he told me “the effect is two-fold.” He identified these twofold effects as spiritual purification, and “the material effect”:

So now, of course when you become a vegetarian, you don't eat meat, you don't eat fish, you don't eat eggs, then there's a certain health benefit to that also. And you, and when you're preparing food for the Lord than you want to try to get the best vegetables, and fruits, and foodstuffs that you can and you want to prepare it as nicely as possible, and then the end result is that you become benefited.

Yet while the Krishna devotees with whom I spoke expressed the belief that vegetarianism is a healthy lifestyle, they also emphatically stressed that since spiritual health is of the utmost importance, a vegetarian diet is not sufficient. Instead, one must become a “prasadarian,” eating exclusively vegetarian food that has been ritually given to Krishna.

And yet, medical and biological discursive models make up much of the discourse surrounding prasadam. The metaphor of prasadam as medicine, as discussed in chapter two illustrates the way in which prasadam is felt to resolve an individual’s spiritual, and by extension social, malaise. But on a physical, bodily level, prasadam is also seen as curative of, and prophylactic against, disease. Here the avoidance of sickness is treated as a result of—and certainly perceived as a symbol of—spiritual health. Gaurahari noted that he has not gotten sick since he began eating prasadam exclusively (more than twenty years ago). And many devotees, when asked whether they experienced any changes after switching to a prasadam-based diet, noted that they simply *felt* better. And indeed, the vegetarian diet is uniformly spoken of as more healthy than a diet involving meat. Devotees were quick to point out multiple health complications which they saw as uniquely dangerous for meat-eaters—heart problems, colon cancer, etc.—and quick, too, to point out that these issues, and the general healthiness of a vegetarian diet, have been widely accepted by biomedical authorities.

Much of ISKCON’s promotional media addresses the benefits of vegetarianism. For example, I was generously given a copy of the cookbook *The Higher Taste* by Madhavan, and also signaled by another devotee to where I could download a free and

legal copy of *The Hare Krsna Cookbook*. Rishi, another devotee who I interviewed in my research emailed me a PowerPoint presentation entitled “Why Embrace Vegetarianism?” Rishi could not tell me who created the PowerPoint, as it was forwarded to him by another devotee who was also not its creator, however it was created by ISKCON devotees, and the very fact of its circulation beyond the original creator shows the importance of the promotion of vegetarianism to ISKCON. The PowerPoint slideshow uses many different arguments to promote a vegetarian diet. Slides 2-12 attempt to show the biological appropriateness of a vegetarian diet for humans, slides 13-21 depict famous vegetarians, among whom athletes figure prominently, as if to suggest that the body can thrive on a vegetarian diet. Slides 22-26 focus on the negative health effects of meat consumption, slides 27-34 focus on world hunger and the resource-intensive nature of meat-production. After slide 35, the slide show transitions to affective and religiously-based arguments for vegetarianism, but the first half focuses on medical and ecological arguments for a vegetarian diet (although the affective is not absent from these sections, either: a slide illustrating herbivores shows a young deer, whereas the carnivore slide shows a tiger’s bloody mouth ripping into a carcass, and slides addressing world hunger show heart-rending images of emaciated children). Yet, the arguments used are not based directly on ISKCON philosophy, rather slides 22-34 address the impacts of meat-eating on health and the environment, concerns frequently addressed in discussions of vegetarianism outside of (exclusively) religious, or moral motivations for vegetarianism. These slides therefore illustrate the linkage of ISKCON to other vegetarians, motivated by health concerns or concerns for environmental sustainability.

The Vegetarian Society of Hawai‘i, a non-ISKCON-affiliated “not-for-profit volunteer organization founded in 1990 to promote human health, animal rights, and protection of the environment by means of vegetarian education” attended the temple’s annual vegetarian Thanksgiving dinner, in another example of social and economic connections between ISKCON Honolulu and other local vegetarian groups (Vegetarian Society of Hawaii, n.d.).

The PowerPoint also presents the argument that human beings are biologically herbivores. Such a position is a distinctive aspect of ISKCON’s conceptualization of the human body. Such a view argues that not only is the consumption of meat immoral, but also biologically aberrant. As temple priest Bhagavan explained:

If we take and slaughter a cow, then we by that act, we become degraded, because *that food is not for human consumption*. And there’s all, there’s all kinds of reasons or arguments that we can make just pertaining to the way the body is arranged—the kind of teeth we have the kind of digestive system we have, things like that, that are *reasons that can prove that really we’re meant to be vegetarian*.

This again underscores the ways in which for ISKCON devotees, vegetarianism is both ethical, and healthful. The arguments Bhagavan alludes to are also made in the slide show in support of human herbivory, and are identical to those presented in *The Higher Taste*, including a table of “Physiological Comparisons” with three columns labeled “Meat-eater,” “Herbivore,” and “Human” (Dasa et al. 2006, 2). Listed in the columns are biological traits such as “Has claws” under Meat-eater and “No claws,” for Herbivore and Human. This pattern continues, with traits given for Herbivore and Human (shape of the teeth, length of the intestinal tracts, “perspires through skin pores,” and strength of stomach acid) listed as identical, and contrasted with those of Meat-eater (ibid). The

message is compounded by the language used in the text surrounding the table, for example, the phrase, “humans and other herbivores,” and the chapter’s conclusion with a Yale study that found greater physical endurance in vegetarians over non-vegetarians (ibid, 2, 12). Both the slide show and *The Higher Taste*, take care to quote biomedical practitioners, university studies, and health organizations such as the American Heart Association (Dasa et al. 2006).

The structure of the arguments for adopting a prasadam-based diet in both the slide show and *The Higher Taste*, follow the same format of beginning with the argument that vegetarianism is superior for health, and ending with a focus on *prasadarianism* specifically, as spiritually necessary. This shift in emphasis from material to spiritual reasons was expressed by several devotees with whom I spoke, who insisted that it’s *not* enough simply to be vegetarian. Gaurahari summed this up nicely during my interview with him:

So health-wise definitely there’s a lot of benefits. And if you see the statistics, the stats here in US, regarding the meat eaters then vegetarians, that way, they have higher risk of some things, so it’s on the safer side. But definitely if you’re a prasadarian, it’s much more beneficial. It helps us progress in Krishna Consciousness, and to obtain our main goal in life, our ultimate goal in life, to obtain Krishna prem or love of Godhead, to go back to Godhead.

While he firmly believes in the health benefits of vegetarianism, ultimately it is the spiritual consideration that is key. My online chat with Prakasatma, a European American male devotee who was initiated at the Honolulu temple in 1969, and lived here for many years before moving to an ISKCON community on the mainland, revealed the same priorities: “It seems that people who stop eating meat for health reasons usually have difficulty keep there [sic] path but people who stop eating meat for spiritual reasons

never go back to eating flesh.....higher convictions.....<sup>3</sup>” Just as one must dig a bit deeper, and read a bit further into ISKCON media to find the shift from physical to spiritual reasoning, those mediated messages targeted at members furthest from the core of the ISKCON community are more likely to make use of a health-based discourse.

Another point of connection between health food movements and ISKCON is that many devotees were already vegetarians before joining the movement. While this was not a question that I addressed with all devotees with whom I spoke, it nevertheless became clear that this was a common pattern among Honolulu devotees, and other researchers have found the same to be true in other ISKCON communities (Leman and Roos 2007; Rochford 1985). It is not surprising that ISKCON as an organization and belief system would appeal to those who are already vegetarian. It may also be that by embedding Govinda’s in the network of “healthy vegetarian” restaurants, vegetarians come into contact with ISKCON, enabling conversion experiences (see Chapter Four for more on this). Another important inference from the rates of vegetarianism among ISKCON converts is that the already-vegetarian members of ISKCON presumably also share concerns with food policy and diet which link ISKCON up with these concerns, thus they may not only be issues which the philosophical/scriptural basis and leadership of the movement promote, but rather concerns that members bring to the movement with them at the time of their conversion.

### **Managing Impurity**

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<sup>3</sup> Ellipses are authentic to the original and do not represent redacted material.



Spiritual pollution and food pollutants from pesticides form overlapping categories expressed in the idea that a diet of “pure offerings” leads to a pure body (and pure spirit). Industrialized food production is both a symptom and symbol of the societal structures ISKCON is rebelling against with their “back to nature” views. This reflects the correspondence between purity of body, environment, and society—the links Mary Douglas formulated. And yet the potential for tension here is that *all* prasadam is by definition pure, suggesting that such concerns with purity are misplaced, and worse yet, mundane reflections of a lack of faith in Krishna’s power to purify. Given that stories in the movement tell of poison and other inedible foods (such as refuse, or even clay pots) purified and made edible through being offered to Krishna and consumed as prasadam, a concern with pesticides may be interpreted as a lack of faith in Krishna’s ability to purify prasadam. And yet, this concern can be reframed as a concern with offering Krishna only the very best.

Devotees with whom I spoke affirmed that it was a positive sign of devotion to seek out fresh (local) and organic ingredients to offer to Krishna, yet I also encountered devotees who expressed hostility to people who focus too much on the constitutive ingredients—which is to say the material aspect—without trusting that it is the level of devotion with which a dish is offered, and not the dish itself, that matters when it comes to prasadam. It is through these critiques that ISKCON devotees with whom I spoke distanced themselves from a “health food” orientation, even as they affirmed that prasadam is healthy food. Vajranatha spoke of the difference between organic and non-organic produce:

Vajranatha: It really depends on the means. What finances there are. Obviously the idea was to grow your own stuff, organically and then produce it. I mean I've had organic stuff that I've taken out of the ground and it's completely different than the stuff we buy at the store. I mean it's//<sup>4</sup>

Nicole Berger: it's better//

Vajranatha: it tastes better, it's better, it *feels* better for you. It just it gives you this, I don't know, energy. But, according to means, according to what there is and what we have, you just have to make the best of a bad deal, you know. So if you haven't got enough to spend on, on organic then just use whatever you have, and just, then, again the same thing, you know, it's like you're really, depends on sincerity. Prabhupada also emphasized sincerity. If you're sincere and you just don't have access to the best whatever then just offer what you can and whatever you offer will be accepted if you're sincere about it, right. And then it can be purified in the same way that Prahlada, and his poison, right? That's the same thing.

Vajranatha is referencing the story of Prahlada, which he knew I had previously heard at the temple. Prahlada was a devotee of Krishna; this displeased Prahlada's demon father, who tried to murder his son with poison. Prahlada offered the poison to Krishna before he ingested it—just as he offered all his food and drink—and thus survived because Krishna purified and neutralized the poison. While Vajranatha admits that he thinks organic produce not only tastes, but even *feels*, superior, he ultimately dismisses its importance. A Krishna devotee need not be concerned about pesticides since a prasadam-based diet is, by definition, pure.

Similarly, Jaya discussed her time working in a health food store, stressing that people who were merely attracted to health foods were, essentially, missing the point:

So I had a lot of interesting observations about people and their *food* [while working in a health food store in Hawai'i]. And their diet. And people get *obsessed* with diet, you know. And I—just, it's so interesting. Because everybody's got their dietary [short pause] things. When you work in a health food store you see it. But ultimately, everything, it doesn't matter if you're

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<sup>4</sup> Double slashes (//) represent overlapping speech.

vegetarian. *Like lots of really bad people are vegetarians. A lot of vegetarians, or vegans now. Vegans are the ones they're—they criticize us.* They call it [the Hare Krishna diet] the wheat and cheese diet. I've had someone go, "oh you guys eat the wheat and cheese diet!" Well, yeah, but you know, you can follow whatever you want and just as long as it's offered. That's the difference. And yeah I noticed, I noticed a big difference [after I started eating prasadam]. Like we were eating restaurant food [last week], I'm almost getting where I'm losing the taste for it.

This account parallels Priya's account of losing her taste for non-prasadam vegetarian foods:

And then I remembered, cuz I was going to temple a lot in the beginning, like all the time, I was always eating there, and I remember the first time I ate, like, Subway—you know I used to eat like veggie subs at work—like I worked at a movie theatre at Kahala Mall, and I would always go to the Subway there and I remember the first time I ate the veggie sub there afterwards, I couldn't! I like spit it out and threw it away it was so gross. (Laughs). So, yeah, that was something, I really remember that.

Both accounts can also be read as a refusal of consumerism as represented by the restaurant (or the health food store). Though the foods described by Jaya and Priya both met the requirements for prasadam (by being vegetarian), because they were *not* prasadam, they were rejected. Jaya's account also shows the reversal, as she criticizes those who are more interested in health food eating practices, than in religious offering of food. Priya's account represents a reconfiguration of taste and values towards food that is, in her own terms, expressed as a sensory reaction; she recounts her body's rejection of the *taste* of commercial food items before her conscious decision to reject it. What is striking about Priya's and Jaya's remarks is that they were made during interviews in which we ate at Govinda's food stand, which could easily be considered a restaurant. While it is true that Priya volunteers at Govinda's and thereby receives free food,

meaning she is not in the position of consumer vis-à-vis Govinda's, it was she who rung up my meal before we began our interview. Jaya, and her daughter Bhaskari who was also present, purchased their food before our interview as well (on a separate occasion). Yet despite the fact that Govinda's is run by the temple *as a restaurant*, for Priya and Jaya, food from Govinda's it is precisely *not* restaurant food. In fact, it stands in opposition to restaurant food, because it is prasadam produced in the temple. Eating at Govinda's is thus not understood in terms of market exchange, but rather the loving exchange of food between devotees, and Krishna. The same is true for Govindaji's restaurant in downtown Honolulu. In fact, according to Rishi, prasadam is always sanctified and sanctifying, in opposition to the consumption (in the sense both of eating and purchasing) of restaurant food, even if the eater is unaware:

So eating prasad even if it seems like, 'oh I'm paying for it,' or 'oh, I'm just eating it' it looks like a simple activity, but on the spiritual level it already has started [you] spiritually, it's already the beginning of your spiritual life... You have chosen prasad over food. And that's a big difference. And that counts as like your spiritual blessing or your spiritual service. So that's why the service is not just like cooking food, but eating food is also a service. Because, yeah, you are doing it as an honor to the god. Even if you are totally don't know about this. Even if you think, "oh it's just a restaurant, I paid for it." But at the same time it already starts that effect on you even if you're not aware of it.

Rishi, like Priya and Jaya, presents prasadam in opposition to restaurant food, and the act of service through prasadam consumption in opposition to bodily and market consumption. Rishi also points to the fact that eating as well as cooking/feeding is a form of service. This is the same framework Olivia and Priya, both of whom volunteer at Govinda's, use to insist that their work at Govinda's is not a form of market labor, but rather a form of loving service (an interpretation which is facilitated by the lack of

remuneration by wages, but rather through the “gift” of free prasadam). Again we see the commercial aspects of ISKCON relations to prasadam denied by those who participate in it.

### **Devotion, Control, and Gender**

Anthropologist Ellen Messer asserts, “most cases of ‘health food’ faddism...use concepts of natural foods and syncretize Indian and other Eastern cosmological beliefs with Western consumer dietary behavior” (Messer 1984, 225). One example of overlap between ISKCON and larger alternative health practices is “The Master Cleanse.” The Master Cleanse is a fast in which one drinks only a lemonade mixture, over a period of several days, supplemented by a concentrated mixture of salt in water nightly to induce multiple bowel movements. It is important to note that “The Master Cleanse” is *not* an ISKCON-prescribed dietary practice, but rather a widespread American diet trend. One temple-goer explained how it is practiced by devotees: “To do the master cleanse, devotees will first use offered water, offered lemon juice, offered cayenne pepper” (personal communication, 2/25/10). When I spoke with two young female devotees doing The Master Cleanse, they explained that it was necessary to get rid of “toxins” in the body (field notes, 12/6/09). Significantly, I have only come into contact with women who have participated in “The Master Cleanse,” both among both ISKCON devotees, and those outside of ISKCON. Certainly some men must have tried it as well, but the gendered rates of participation suggest gendered relationships to food and the body. In discussing “Western Women’s Prodigious Fasting,” in both religious and non-religion

domains (i.e. disordered eating behaviors like anorexia), Carole Counihan recalls Mary Douglas's argument that "bodily control is an expression of social control" arguing that "Western women's strong concern to control their food intake is a metaphor for their efforts to control a moral imperative" (Counihan 1999, 100). Recall Priya's remark that, "You have a control over your diet. You control, like, a lot of other things." The relationship between bodily control and social control holds true for ISKCON devotees, both male and female, but here, in one of the most extreme food practices, the narrative of control is stricter and more taxing for women, reflecting the more intense social pressures of diet, body, and control faced by women in the United States.

The official position in ISKCON, as laid forth by Prabhupada is that men and women are spiritually equal, since the spirit-soul itself is genderless and eternal, and male and female bodies are merely transitory receptacles for the soul (Knott 2004, 293). Prabhupada also initiated women as disciples and taught that a woman could be "accepted as spiritual master" (ibid, 299). However, Ekkehard Lorenz contends that "the historical and prolonged abuse of women in ISKCON has by now been acknowledged even by the most conservative elements in the movement" (Lorenz 2004, 123). Nori Muster, an ISKCON devotee from 1978 to 1988, describes a progressive decline in women's positions from full equality towards status "as second-class citizens" (Muster 2004, 315). Burke Rochford, in a long-term study of the ISKCON movement in the United States, writes that "significant gender reforms" were made during the 1990s, including open acknowledgement of past discrimination towards women: "In 1998, the then chairman of the GBC openly acknowledged the mistreatment of women in a letter

widely circulated throughout the movement” (Rochford 2007, 136). Rochford describes a change in “gender attitudes...among rank-and-file members,” stating that:

Women and men agree that women should be allowed to chant in the temple with men, have equal access to the deities during worship, and have the same opportunities as men to realize their potential in devotional service...Both sexes agreed that women are the spiritual equals of men and that Prabhupada never intended women devotees to be treated as other than equal to devote men (Rochford 2007, 133).

Muster is less optimistic, writing in 2004: “It’s still rare to see women lead the pre-dawn *kirtanas* or teach the *Bhagavatam* class. There are several women temple presidents now, but only one women on the GBC [Note: As of 2011 there are two women serving on the GBC] and not even one woman guru [Note: As of 2011, there is one woman guru]” (Muster 2004, 319). When devotees spoke to me about gender, they often highlighted Prabhupada’s statements on spiritual equality between men and women, and indeed there are many highly respected women devotees in the Honolulu community. Nevertheless, it is not yet the case in ISKCON that men and women are equally represented in positions of authority in temples, the Governing Body Commission, or among the gurus.

### **Alternative Foods and Alternative Lifestyles**

Both men and women in ISKCON prepare, offer, and consume prasadam as a way of expressing their religious practice. I see that religious practice as increasingly in line with the goals and concerns of alternative food movements. For example devotee concerns about food and pollution are expressed in the widespread concern among devotees about genetically modified (GM) food sources. Food activists and consumers

around the world are raising concerns about GM crops. Debates rage over the cultivation of genetically modified crops in Hawai‘i, where more genetically modified produce is grown than in any other U.S. state (Boyd 2008). There are environmental, economic, and health concerns about growing genetically modified crops in Hawai‘i (ibid). There are also uniquely Hawaiian objections to GM crops, which have emerged most clearly over the question of the genetic modification of taro crops. Taro, or *kalo* in Hawaiian, was traditionally the staple food source of the islands. It also carries deep cultural and religious significance:

[T]he first-born offspring of Wākea, Sky Father, and his daughter Ho‘ohokukalani, maker of the stars in the heavens, Hāloa Naka, is stillborn. When buried, Hāloa Naka grows into the first *kalo* plant. Their second-born child, Hāloa, is a progenitor of the Native Hawaiian people. This tradition, again, establishes that Native Hawaiians are the young siblings of the *kalo* plant and that both descended from the deities Wākea and Ho‘ohokukalani (McGregor 2007, 13).

Not surprisingly, then, efforts to genetically modify and patent taro in Hawai‘i have been met with large-scale protest. Native Hawaiian activists, working with a coalition of nonprofits, such as Hawai‘i SEED<sup>5</sup>, were able “to move the University of Hawaii to relinquish its three patents on taro and to agree not to genetically engineer Hawaiian varieties of taro” (Hawai‘i SEED 2011a). Despite these partial concessions on taro engineering, activist efforts continue to put a full moratorium on genetic modification of taro (Hawai‘i SEED 2011b; Hoshijo n.d.).

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<sup>5</sup> Hawai‘i SEED is coalition of nonprofit groups and community activists “dedicated to promoting diverse, local, healthy and ecological food and farming that supports real food security for the Hawaiian Islands” (Hawai‘i SEED 2011a).



Devotees express concerns about GM foods as well, especially in regards to the possibility of introducing animal DNA into vegetables, potentially compromising their innately vegetarian nature (field notes 9/16/10). Prakasatma told me that avoiding GM ingredients in prasadam is necessary in order to keep it “pure...the way god made it...not messed up by humans.”<sup>6</sup> And yet, in line with ISKCON philosophy on the purity of prasadam, the resolution is not to ban the use of genetically modified food sources, but rather to seek purification through offering. As Jaya says:

[Regarding GMOs] they just can't get that picky about it and the whole idea is that when it's offered and becomes prasadam, it's purified anyway. And this is the point that people just don't quite understand is that you know ultimately it's been offered with love and devotion, it's going to be purified.

Although there is some concern with combating these sources of pollution through restructuring the food system—best expressed through ISKCON devotees involvement in local, organic farming—the less revolutionary mechanism of purification through offering also serves as a way of bypassing these issues, as well as mitigating the financial strain of a totally organic and/or local diet in Hawai'i, which would be prohibitively expensive for the scale of ISKCON's food distribution, and beyond the means of much of its membership. Thus while organic and local produce may be privileged types of *bhoga*, they are still *bhoga*, and have no greater suitability to be offered to Krishna than any other “fruit, flower or leaf” that Krishna accepts. For this reason devotees characterize those that do not identify the impact of food as coming not from its mode of *production*, but rather from its *ritual offering* as lacking a deeper

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<sup>6</sup> Ellipses are authentic to the original and do not represent redacted material.

spiritual awareness, in short they are “just vegetarian,” which, in Krishna Consciousness, is not enough.

### **“Back to Nature” to go “Back to Godhead”**

The concept of a progressive state of decline into our current Kali Yuga situates the contemporary world as a degenerated form of an earlier golden age. Similarly, the back to nature movement is linked to a temporal positioning, in which calls to go back to the land also evoke a desire to go “back to” an earlier golden age. As an anti-modern protest, efforts to establish Krishna conscious societies outside of market capitalism defy narratives of social progress, and instead, insist that one must look backwards in time to rediscover past lifestyles that will provide a way out of the degeneration that modernity is felt to entail. For the devotee, the movement’s calls to go “back to” the land and “back to” ancient spiritual traditions are the means to go “back to Godhead,” and escape the suffering of life on earth in favor of eternal paradise with Krishna.

Saurabh Dube, discussing the construction of “modernity” and its implications, notes that due to legacies of orientalism, modernity is not only a temporal marker, but also linked to geographic delineations as, through a series of orientalist binaries, the West is taken to embody modernity and rationality, while the East is seen as the domain of tradition and spirituality (Dube 2009). Vijay Prashad linked these attitudes to “hippie” counter-cultural anti-modern movements in the United States, arguing that:

The hippie worldview saw the United States as the industrial-consumer society par excellence and thereby as the antithesis of spirituality (the nullity of the spiritual). India, on the other hand, was seen as the answer to the crisis of

[economic downturn from] stagflation and social discontent not in its economic policies but in its supposed spiritual social relations (Prashad 2001, 51).

Anti-modern protests thus entail “hierarchical mappings of time and space” in which models of alternative lifestyles are drawn from geographically and/or temporally distant realms (Dube 2009, 6). Clearly, as the privileged cultural referent in ISKCON, pre-modern Vedic India serves as such a temporally and geographically distant model of an ideal society. Yet for devotees in Hawai‘i, the islands’ own pre-colonial past serves as another model of anti-modern protest. Models of precolonial Hawai‘i also inspire contemporary Hawaiian activists with slogans to “Go back to get back” implying a needed return to both the land, and precolonial lifestyles, as a method for combating disenfranchisement of colonization (Coffman 2010, 12). In the next chapter I will discuss how the referents of Hawaiian and Vedic tradition influence devotees’ relationships to land and place in Honolulu, and how such relationships converge and diverge with Hawaiian activist claims.

In this chapter I have argued that the glorification of farming in ISKCON is at once an activist social project, leading to meaningful engagement with O‘ahu’s social and political concerns, and a retreat from a society viewed as irreparably corrupt, in favor of alternate social models constructed in opposition to modern industrialism. This simultaneous engagement and retreat illustrates the complexity of ISKCON devotees’ engagements with food movements on O‘ahu. Life in the urban metropolis, impelling as it does participation in consumer capitalism, is a condition which devotees reluctantly accept in order to “make do.” A self-sustaining farm, however, is seen as embodying the characteristics of a *puer* past, and is thus a privileged site.

## CHAPTER FIVE SACRED PLACES AND CONTESTED SPACES: ROOTING ISKCON IN THE 'ĀINA

The ISKCON temple of Honolulu, New Navadvipa Dham, is named after the birthplace of Chaitanya, a 15<sup>th</sup> century Bengali saint who is at once the spiritual ancestor of ISKCON, and an incarnation of its supreme deity, Krishna (Brooks 1989, 85).

Navadvipa Dham is located in the Indian state of West Bengal. The name Navadvipa Dham means nine islands in the Bangla language. ISKCON temples all over the world are commonly named after holy sites in India that are associated with Krishna. Diana Eck discusses this naming practice in terms of Hindu immigrant communities in the United States, but her statement should be understood to include ISKCON temples as well,<sup>1</sup> although most of its membership in Honolulu is not composed of Hindu immigrants, but rather citizens of the United States:

In naming their temples and establishing the deities within, Hindu immigrants have replicated the sacred geography of India in the American landscape. Perhaps nowhere on earth have myths been so extensively inscribed in the landscape and the land so profusely storied as in India, where pilgrimage to sacred shrines, called *tirthas* or 'crossings,' is still one of the most common forms of travel (Eck 1998, 229).

The home page of ISKCON Honolulu's web site illustrates this point clearly:

Since 1969, His Divine A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder-acarya of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, has been distributing the matchless gifts of Krishna Consciousness throughout the Hawaiian Islands...Between 1974 and 1976, His Divine Grace performed that sacred duty especially swiftly here in Hawaii, in his room upstairs.

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed Eck also notes: "Temple-centered devotional Hinduism was really introduced into the United States by the Krishna Consciousness movement" (Eck 2000, 229).

That is how these grounds became a tirtha, a holy place... If you feel Srila Prabhupada's spiritual presence at his tirtha, it is not surprising (Das 2009).

Thus it is also not surprising that ISKCON's temple in the Hawaiian islands should recall the city of nine islands in which Krishna is believed to have entered into one of his earthly incarnations as Lord Chaitanya, a key figure in ISKCON, for it was he who introduced the practice of *sankirtan*, or devotional chanting, that Prabhupada taught as the means of spiritual liberation appropriate to the current era (Rosen 2004a, 66).

This transposition of place names reveals an important element of ISKCON's presence in Honolulu: the way in which sacred Indian landscapes are transposed onto Hawaiian land, which is to say how ISKCON comes to be rooted in the 'āina, or land, of Hawai'i. The word "'āina" carries its own set of cultural relationships of place, food, and farming. Handy, Handy, and Pukui described the term's etymology: "It is essentially a term coined by an agricultural people, deriving as it does from the noun or verb 'ai, meaning food or to eat... 'āina thus has connotations in relation to people as conveying the sense of 'feeder,' birthplace, and homeland" (Handy et al. 1972, 45).

Thomas Csordas suggests that one of the factors enabling the global spread of religion is the degree to which a religion communicates a "transposable message," a message that "can find footing across diverse linguistic and cultural settings" (Csordas 2009, 5). Yet *transposability* "includes the connotations of being susceptible to being transformed or reordered without being denatured, as well as the valuable musical metaphor of being performable in a different key" (Csordas 2009, 5).

How are ISKCON's models of sacred land and appropriate relationships between humans and their environments transposed onto Hawaiian landscapes? How do these

transpositions mediate relationships between ISKCON devotees living in Hawai‘i and Native Hawaiians? In this chapter I examine discourses surrounding Hawai‘i as a sacred place, often articulated in terms of the Vedic nature of Hawai‘i, expressed by ISKCON devotees in Honolulu, and through videos produced and posted onto the website YouTube by a devotee on the island of Hawai‘i. Broadly, these discourses express the idea of Hawai‘i as a sacred land. More particularly the image of a specifically *Vedic* Hawai‘i emerged in many contexts.

At the most basic level *Vedic* refers to the earliest collections of Hindu scriptures—or rather the body of religious texts that would come to define “Hinduism.” More broadly, *Vedic* can be used to describe the values and lifestyle prescribed by those texts, and a purported historical period (the Vedic Era) during which they are believed to have flourished (Kurien 2007, 29). When devotees use the term Vedic, they refer to both of these meanings, but also see their own religious practice as part of what ISKCON devotee Steven Rosen refers to as a “Long-Term Vedic Restoration Paradigm” (Rosen 2004b, 22), which seeks to recreate a specific vision of the Vedic past. Rosen writes: “From a Vaishnava point of view, the original Vedic system was highly monotheistic; it supported vegetarianism and basically extolled the Vaishnava way of life (as now seen in the Hare Krishna movement)” (ibid). In this chapter I discuss how this vision of Vedic society is invoked in devotees’ conceptualizations of Hawai‘i, and their positions as Krishna devotees in the Hawaiian Islands. Hawai‘i was referred to by devotees with whom I spoke as *uniquely* spiritual—an understanding that was expressed through comparisons with India, understood as a spiritual place *par excellence*. But it was also

spoken of as universally spiritual since, I heard from some devotees, in Hawai‘i one can find evidence of a *universal* Vedic culture from which *all* of human spiritual heritage stems. These dual discourses serve to naturalize the presence of a Vedic tradition in Hawai‘i, and thus, by extension, legitimize ISKCON’s presence in Hawai‘i.

In order to analyze these discursive constructions of sacred and/or Vedic Hawai‘i, and situate them properly within the context of Hawai‘i, I address how the term “Vedic” is constructed and deployed, and how these constructions and deployments interact with other models of land and place in Hawai‘i. I attempt, too, to contextualize these discourses in contemporary Hawai‘i, where land is inevitably a contentious issue, for the seizure and control of land was the principle mechanism through which Hawai‘i was brought under foreign (U.S.) control. Political and economic power in Hawai‘i have always been intimately tied to access to the land (McGregor 2007). American settlers progressively seized control of Hawaiian lands, culminating in an illegal overthrow of the internationally recognized Hawaiian Kingdom, and later, improper annexation of Hawai‘i, finally leading to U.S. statehood through a referendum which did not meet United Nations standards (Kauanui 2008). The result of over two hundred years of progressive loss of land and sovereignty is that Hawaiians today are disproportionately disadvantaged in domains from healthcare, to education, to homeownership (Stannard 2008). Land has also been a central feature in Hawaiian activist struggles:

[Hawaiian scholar and activist] Haunani-Kay Trask said that the modern Hawaiian movement began when some fifty families living the Kalama Valley protested the eviction notices served by the Bishop Estate in 1967. Their resistance to a new suburban development, and the loss of one more productive working community, has grown over forty years later into a dynamic political,

cultural, and social movement that has come to be a large part of the way that Hawai‘i defines itself to the world (Osorio 2010, 15).

Consequently, any examination of attitudes towards land in Hawai‘i must recognize that land—how it is conceptualized, who owns it, and what is done to it—is a contentious and contested domain.

### **Earthly Paradise: Images of a Vedic Hawai‘i**

A Krishna devotee on Hawai‘i Island has created a YouTube channel called “Vedic Hawaii.” The video I discuss below is of the same title (VedicHawaii 2009). This devotee has created multiple YouTube videos about Krishna Consciousness, including the “Prasadarian” rap (discussed in Chapter Two) under the separate account “suchandradasi.”<sup>2</sup> The “Vedic Hawaii” video differs in tone from the Prasadarian rap. Whereas the rap is her original composition, and maintains a light-hearted tone, the tone of this video is more serious, with the musical accompaniment of the holy chant of the mahamantra, rather than an original song. The video begins with a voice-over accompanied by text: “Similarities between India and Hawaii.” Suchandra dasi recites the text, and a child’s voice repeats it, an opening which points to the explicitly didactic purpose of the video. The video then proceeds to a slide show of photographic images, introduced first by a text heading flashing across the screen as “Nature”, then “Tall Mountains,” illustrated by pictures of the Himalayas followed by Mauna Kea on Hawai‘i island. Next come pictures of Indian palm trees, followed by Hawaiian ones. First we

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<sup>2</sup> The end of “Vedic Hawaii” credits “Suchandra dasi” with the video. The artist is shown in other videos in the Vedic Hawaii channel, and is clearly recognizable as “suchandradasi” of the “Prasadarian” video.



see Indian jackfruit flash across the screen, then Hawaiian jackfruit, and so forth for various other fruits and vegetables. As the introductory beats lead way to the *mahamantra*, chanted slowly and clearly, the heading “Faces” flashes across the screen, and a photograph of Indian film star and former Miss Universe Aishwarya Rai comes on screen, captioned “India,” followed by an old black and white photograph of two female hula dancers wearing grass skirts, and many lei, this photograph, predictably, is captioned “Hawaii.” The video is 5:59 minutes in length, the first five minutes continuing this juxtaposition of images, Indian and Hawaiian, and continuing on to topics such as kings, dance (“can you imagine her dancing hula?” the on-screen text asks of a photograph of an Indian actress, before flashing onto the screen another vintage image of a group of women wearing only grass skirts and lei, this time holding ukulele and guitars), ships, flower culture, the iconic “grass skirt,” and so forth. While these photos juxtapose Indian and Hawaiian imagery, they also juxtapose images of contemporary India against historical images of Hawai‘i. Rona Halualani argues that Western depictions of Hawaiians portray them in an “anachronistic space” of “temporal difference” from European and American settlers, casting Hawaiians as “vestiges of a cultural past” (Halualani 2002, 6). For Halualani, these past-tense depictions of Hawaiians serve to delegitimize Hawaiian claims to land and political sovereignty (ibid). Similarly, Haunani-Kay Trask argues that such representations also naturalize U.S. control of Hawai‘i as the “inevitable if occasionally bittersweet triumph of Western ways” (Trask 1999, 115).

At minute 4:35 the heiau Pu‘ukoholā is shown. At first glance this seems to reinforce the temporal disjuncture between the Indian and Hawaiian images, since the

heiau, now a U.S. National Historical Monument, is shown after the statement “Though Heiau’s [sic] in Hawaii were destroyed there is still remnants of those temples” (VedicHawaii 2009). However this heiau is an active site of ongoing anti-colonial cultural, spiritual and political practices by Hawaiian groups (Tengan 2008).

At about five minutes in, the video switches to text on a black background, accompanied by the chanting of the mahamantra. “Caste system,” flashes in white letters across a black background, and then a breakdown of it: “Kahuna=Brahman=Priest, astrologer, doctor,” “ali’i=ksatreya=royalty,” and “kauwa=sudra=servant.” Next direct equivalencies are drawn with “The Trinity Hikapoloa.” “1. The Originator / Kane=Vishnu=Krishna=Kana,” “2. The Creator Architect / Ku=Brahma,” and “3. The Executor and Director of Elements / Lono=Shiva.” And the video concludes with the message, “These are just a few similarities between India and Hawaii...and between Vedic and Hawaiian Culture.” The video thus argues for a direct, one-to-one correspondence between Hindu and Hawaiian cosmology and social structure, as well as perhaps suggesting some kind of shared biological lineage through the comparison of Indian and Hawaiian “faces.” Scholars of settler colonialism have identified the practice of “indigenization of the settler,” in which the settler legitimizes their presence through claiming indigenous values and characteristics (Johnson and Lawson 2000, 369; see also Fujikane 2008; Wolfe 2006; Trask 1999). The video’s direct transposition between “Vedic” and Hawaiian imagery minimizes cultural difference, by highlighting the Vedic nature of indigenous Hawaiian culture, thereby legitimating ISKCON’s presence in Hawai‘i, through indigenizing Vedic culture.

Interestingly, the image of the hula dancer is a powerful and recurrent one in the video. Jane Desmond has traced the emergence of “the female hula dancer, ‘iconicized’ as the ‘hula girl,’” as “the most ubiquitous symbol of Hawaiian culture” and, indeed, “a representative body” signifying “Hawaiian-ness” (Desmond 1999, xxii). While hula continues to be practiced widely as a meaningful cultural and spiritual practice, and indigenous art form, a commercialized hula girl described by Desmond is undeniably part of the representation of Hawai‘i as a tourist destination (see also Trask 1999). The mass-produced, globally-disseminated model of Hawai‘i as a tourist paradise was, Christine Skwiot argues, instrumental to the consolidation of U.S. power in the Hawaiian islands (Skwiot 2010) and, according to Haunani-Kay Trask, continues to uphold it (Trask 1999).

According to Trask:

Since the eighteenth-century arrival of Westerners in my Native land, Hawai‘i has been much vaunted as a ‘paradise’ of sunny beaches, lush, unspoiled valleys, erupting volcanoes, and happy Natives. Thanks to Hollywood movie and tourist industry propaganda, this paradisaic myth endures. To the West, and increasingly to Japan, Hawai‘i represents a Pacific playground for escape or romance or recreation. It is a fantasy, a state of mind (Trask 1999, 151).

Hawai‘i is thus a place that can also be experienced or metaphorically conceived of as a state of mind. Charles Brooks has described how the holy city of Vrindaban, in India exists for Krishna devotees as an earthly place, which can be traveled to, and as a celestial realm, which can be accessed through achieving the spiritual perfection that will allow one to escape the cycle of birth and death and “go back to Godhead” with Krishna in celestial Vrindaban (Brooks 1989). Finally, and here the connection to Hawai‘i as “a state of mind” emerges, Vrindaban can also exist as a “psychological extension of Krishna’s celestial and earthly residences” in which the devotee can mentally enter

Vrindaban through “the cultivation of a psychological state wherein Krishna is the focus of consciousness” (Brooks 1989, 29). While Trask’s description of Hawai‘i as a state of mind is meant as a critique of modes of representation which ignore the political and cultural reality of Hawai‘i, in ISKCON, the relationship between place and state of mind runs deep, and Hawai‘i is considered a location particularly conducive to establishing a spiritual state of mind.

In her 1984 study of ISKCON, Angela Burr discusses regional variation between ISKCON temples claiming that in Hawai‘i, “even the Hare Krishna mantra is sung in a more relaxed and easy-going way than in the western ‘heavy’ urban temples—at a slower tempo reminiscent of Polynesian songs” (Burr 1984, 220). This quotation struck me in my research since in my own experience at the Honolulu temple the Hare Krishna mantra was sung at all tempos, including intense and lively rhythms, and did not seem to vary significantly with its performance at the Berkeley ISKCON temple, which I had the occasion to visit once in 2010, or from online recordings of ISKCON sankirtans elsewhere (which were circulated via YouTube and posted onto the social networking site Facebook by devotees). Yet the style of performance in “Vedic Hawaii” seems to be deliberately down-tempo, and the pacing does indeed seem inspired by Polynesian rhythms, although I would still suggest that Burr’s characterization of such singing styles as “relaxed and easy-going” indexes more about stereotyped notions of Polynesian culture than characteristics inherent in the music.

In drawing out “similarities” and proposing even more direct correspondences “between India and Hawaii,” the video seems to be deploying signifiers of the “tourist”

semiotic system of Hawai‘i. Similarly, as the video itself states, a particular model of India is being juxtaposed with Hawai‘i: an India which is explicitly, and *authentically* Vedic. The image of a Vedic Hawai‘i emerged with some regularity in interviews with Krishna devotees and the image of a Vedic *India* seemed to be accepted by all with whom I addressed the topic.

Prema Kurien writes that the Vedic era is “conventionally dated between 1500-1000 B.C.” but some, especially those who view this period as representing “the essence of Indian culture,” push back the date further, “as early as 3000 B.C.” (Kurien 2004, 369). Kurien discusses the meaning of “Vedic” within a politically and religiously conservative Indian Hindu context; and she critiques this view on the basis that viewing Indian culture as essentially and originally Vedic marginalizes non-Hindu religious traditions in India as being less authentically Indian (Kurien 2004). Vijay Prashad also criticizes the “Vedic age, [as] an age textually re-created not a century ago by orientalist scholars, a distant age whose purity was lost over time,” writing that the concepts of India as a Hindu land and the Vedic age “are attempts by certain elements to enforce their versions of culture and tradition on all people” (Prashad 2001, 156). Such a critique is likely to be rejected by ISKCON devotees, who view the Vedic age as a legitimate historical reality worthy of emulation. Furthermore, unlike Prashad, several devotees with whom I spoke blamed orientalist scholars not for the construction of such an age, but for its historical marginalization, arguing that Vedic civilization is not given appropriate recognition by academic historians.

Among devotees with whom I spoke, the idea that Vedic civilization was the basis of Indian culture was widespread, however its age and scope were pushed back further and extended even wider. For instance, ISKCON devotee Mangala told me that the Vedic age was in fact millions of years ago, making it by far the oldest spiritual and cultural tradition on the planet and, indeed, in his mind, the original and ancestral culture of Earth. This view is not unique to ISKCON members, according to Prema Kurien: “Many Hindus also claim that Hinduism is the original religion (which at one time existed in most major regions of the world) from which all other religions subsequently developed” (Kurien 2007, 164). Several other devotees also seemed to share this view, and spoke of ancient connections between Vedic civilization and other ancient civilizations, with several suggesting that Vedic culture extended far beyond the areas conventionally identified with Hindu traditions. The website Vedic Empire, run by a second-generation ISKCON European American male devotee in Honolulu publishes articles that link Vedic traditions to ancient cultures as far away as Australia: “The Aboriginal legends and languages of central-east Australia suggest contact with Hindus and Hindu Civilization” (Welch n.d., 98). The view that Hinduism was at one time universal supports the missionary motivation to (re)introduce Hinduism globally. In the next section I examine how the concept of a Vedic culture and golden age identified with India shape devotee understandings of how Hawai‘i is and should be.

### **Paradise Lost: Visions of the Future, inspired by the Past**

The Vedic lifestyle is ostensibly the model for social interaction within ISKCON (Bromley and Shinn 1989, 190; Burr 1984, 48), although this model is in many respects necessarily aspirational rather than operative, a point recognized by devotees, who understand themselves to be living in the corrupted era of the Kali Yuga. Daiva told me in a recorded interview about Prabhupada's Gitanagari philosophy, which "literally means, the place where the *Gita*<sup>3</sup> is lived":

And that's where you know, Krishna describes in the *Bhagavad Gita* the, you know the divisions of society, and you know, the *kshatriyas*, the *brahmanas* [*brahmins*], the *shudras*, and, and the *vaishyas*, are the, the essence of the *Varnashram* isn't what became the modern caste system in India. The essence of it is that everyone is born with a particular—like we were talking over there [during lunch in another part of the temple grounds before the interview]—um, mental proclivity or inclination toward a particular type of work. [Nicole Berger (NB): um-hum] And they should be engaged accordingly. And that's how people will be happy and be the best contributors back to society. Because, you know, some people are born, yeah? To work at the land, some people are artisans and craftsmen, some people are the brahminical class, more priestly, more into the godly, you know, aspect of things, and very philosophical [NB: um-hum] and then some are the um, the businesspeople who know how to handle money real well and economics and stuff so, that's the ideal that Prabhupada wanted us to have in a farm community where everyone is engaged accordingly and Krishna's in the center—or God—is in the center.

This passage highlights several attitudes towards Vedic India. The first is that it represented an ideal social system that should be recreated. The second is consciousness that Vedic India is distinct from modern India in key respects (for instance when Daiva explains that the modern caste system does not represent the ideal, Vedic system). Daiva expresses the desire to recreate the Vedic social system, a desire which, for him, is part of his vow to "help Prabhupada in his mission," which he characterized as "the best welfare

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<sup>3</sup> Daiva is referring the holy text *The Bhagavad Gita*. Within ISKCON, Prabhupad's translation and commentary, *The Bhagavad Gita As It Is* is used.

work we could do for society” (recorded interview, 10/21/10). In one of Prabhupada’s early writings (from before his journey to the United States and the founding of ISKCON), he discusses his goal of spreading Lord Chaitanya’s teachings (namely the chanting of the mahamantra) “in accordance with the principles of the *Bhagwat Gita*<sup>4</sup> and other authentic scriptures,” hoping that “India’s original culture [i.e. Vedic culture] will not only be revived and re-established but also will foster India’s indigenous [Vedic] culture in other parts of the world. That will be a sort of cultural conquest of all (the) world by India” (Prabupad in Deadwyler 2007, 104). Yet Daiva clearly does not advocate a “conquest” that is violent or coerced and is open to creating an “ecumenical” religious community wherein the only requirement is recognition of “God as the supreme being” (10/21/10). Though his model of an ideal community is explicitly motivated by his admiration for Vedic culture, he wishes for a peaceful, voluntary return to a Vedic state that he sees as flexible and adaptable.

Daiva also indicated the difference between the Vedic social structure he is working to promote, and the existing Indian social structure, which he seems to anticipate, would draw reproach (when he quickly clarifies that he is not promoting the “modern caste system in India”). This highlights another key point, while India is viewed as the cradle of Vedic civilization, it is also recognized as having transformed since then and thus is the ancient, Vedic model of India that devotees see as the ideal social system, and not the contemporary realities of India. This pastoral idealism for a Vedic Indian past is related to Prabhupada’s insistence on the “simple” life, by which he meant the

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<sup>4</sup> *Bhagwat Gita* is an alternate spelling of *Bhagavad Gita*.



farm life, and the village life: the model of Gitanagari described by Daiva as the ideal setting for religious devotion and spiritual liberation.

Rishi, an Indian man who joined ISKCON in the 1990s, and came to Hawai‘i almost a decade ago, described, like Daiva, an ideal social structure which he identified as Vedic. But for Rishi, this structure is also characteristic of “island culture” like that of Hawai‘i. I asked Rishi, “So what are some of the similarities you were talking about between Hawai‘i and Vedic culture?” His response was:

I think there are quite a few traditions, like giving the leis, similar in the Vedic culture. Then flowers and fruits have a lot of importance, like in every worship ceremony there are flowers and fruit that are used, and even leaves. Then, I think the structure of the society that was there in India is very similar to like what is an island culture or island structure, because even though India was not an island, the villages in India used to behave as if they are islands. So there were like twelve major professions, like, blacksmith, farmer, carpenter, which will be there in every village, and there used to be barter system and none of them would get paid, like carpenter wouldn't get paid but he would get stuff like grains from farmer, or if he needs any tools the blacksmith will provide his tools, and by in return he will give his service to me. So that, to me, that was like the village functioning of, I mean the social structure of the villages in India, and that's very similar to what is there on an island, because you are on an island, you don't have an option, kind of. So, and that's why they had—so, I think it's like very similar to what it was there even though it was a continent and there was a lot of trade, but the core of the society was self-sufficient religious.

Rishi's discussion of the relationship between Hawai‘i and Vedic India presents an interesting reversal or sorts, since he measures Vedic social structure against the benchmark of a typical “island structure.” Unlike models that see India as, in the words of one devotee, “the motherland of culture” (unrecorded interview 12/3/10), Rishi doesn't suggest a definite model of cultural transmission either way, but rather highlights what he perceives to be the similar social structures. He addressed this point later in the interview, admitting “even if [Hawaiian and Vedic cultures] don't have like same rules—

there can be some people who would not agree at all Hawaiian culture has the roots in Indian culture, or--but at least they are similar in nature” (ibid).

Jaya is an American woman in her early 50s, who joined ISKCON some thirty years back. I spoke with her and her grown daughter Bhaskari over lunch at Govinda’s, and recorded our conversation. Jaya told me that her parents were both European American and “Cherokee Indian mixed” and spoke of similarities between Cherokee and Hawaiian culture by relating them both to Vedic culture: “Cherokees say that they came from the Pleiades, that their ancestors came down from the Pleiades. The Hawaiians say the same thing...And the Pleiades are connected with a long, like Vedic [tradition], too. They’re very much connected” (recorded interview 4/8/10). The Pleiades, in the Vedic text of the *Mahabharata* are six sisters, the Krittikas, who raise the god Skanda (Smith 2009). The epic Hawaiian creation story, the *Kumulipo*, contains several references to the Pleiades, including the fifth line of the *Kumulipo* which sets the beginning of creation from darkness at “the time of the rise of the Pleiades” (Beckwith 1981, 58). The reference to the Pleiades in setting the temporal frame is salient since “the rising of the Pleiades in the heavens correspond[s] with the time of the sun’s turn northward, bringing warmth again to the earth, the grown of plants, and the spawning of fish” (Beckwith 1981, 18). The Pleiades is referenced again in the 14<sup>th</sup> age of the 16 ages chronicled in the *Kumulipo*, in which the stars are established, including the Pleiades, and according to Lilikala Kame‘eleihiwa, “the seeds of the Makali‘i [Pleiades] become parents of the ancient goddess Hina” (Kame‘eleihiwa 1999, 13). However, according to Kame‘eleihiwa’s analysis of the *Kumulipo*, Hawaiians are the “descendants of the earth

mother and sky father, as well as all living things of the Pacific...As the younger siblings of the Hawaiian islands, we are inextricably part of this land” (Kame‘eleihiwa 1999, 14). This highlights genealogical connection to the Hawaiian islands as the origin of the Hawaiian people.<sup>5</sup>

Jaya’s comment on the Pleiades led her to express more similarities she perceived between Hawai‘i and Vedic culture. Jaya feels that “the Hawaiians have a really close connection with Vedic [culture],” which she talked about in terms of diet. She described learning about the diet of pre-colonial Hawai‘i in a Hawaiian studies course at the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo:

Jaya [J]: ...And the first day of that class [the professor] was telling us how the Hawaiians were basically vegetarian. She said they didn’t eat—pigs were reserved only for the most like, once a year maybe. They had a big luau, they would kill a pig and it was only for this one special day and it wasn’t for everybody. Basically they ate poi, I mean, they ate taro//<sup>6</sup>

Bhaskari [B]: fruit//

J: fruit. There wasn’t even a lot of kinds of fruit. Breadfruit and taro.

B: and a little fish

J: and the leaves of taro you can eat, that was the greens. And a little fish. They didn’t even eat that much fish. They were, they were basically vegetarian. And they do even, even offerings of food, too. I can’t specifically recall, but they had big festivals—the Hawaiian culture did, and there was definitely food offerings going on.

The idea of the traditional Hawaiian diet as vegetarian or largely vegetarian is not a normative understanding (Kirch and O’Day 2003). I interpret it as a way of conferring social prestige on Hawaiian tradition by linking it to a valued practice—vegetarianism, and by extension to a valued social system—that of Vedic India. Her description also

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<sup>5</sup> This interpretation is consistent with McGregor’s statement, which is also found in the *Kumulipo* “that Native Hawaiians are the younger siblings of the kalo plant” (McGregor 2007, 13). See Chapter Four.

<sup>6</sup> Double slashes (//) indicate simultaneous or overlapping speech.

highlights stewardship of resources, and making offerings of food to god (a central component of ISKCON worship through the offering and consumption of *prasadam*).

Daiva also spoke admiringly of Hawaiian society. Daiva described spirituality, particularly in regards to spiritualized relationships with land use, as a key characteristic of traditional Hawaiian society—and as a model of interaction that he would like to see in contemporary Hawai‘i. While he is inspired by the Gitanagari philosophy, he also returned time and again to the idea of explicitly recreating the *ahupua‘a* land management system of pre-colonial Hawaiian society. Daiva described the Hawaiian *ahupua‘a* land division system as an effective model for meeting spiritual and physical needs, and identified its destruction as the source of Hawai‘i’s issues with poverty and hunger. He is also actively working to reestablish Hawaiian agriculture, such as the cultivation of taro, and is currently consulting with Hawaiian taro farmers to establish taro plants on the LEAF farm in Waimanalo. Rishi also talked about Hawaiian “worship of the nature elements like sun god, earth, rain” as a point of connection with Vedic culture. Here, Hawai‘i appears to be a model of an ideal small-scale, land-based society—what Daiva calls an “ag-based society” and Rishi terms as “island culture” or “island structure.” In this sense, these devotees are recognizing in traditional Hawaiian society the kind of society that they privilege and which they would like to recreate. However, at the same time, they are drawing the specific example of Hawai‘i into a larger framework of connections to the land that is perceived as “Vedic.” Thus Hawaiian land use is celebrated because it relates to Vrindaban, Krishna’s eternal, bucolic home as

the cowherd Govinda. This dwelling place of Krishna is so valorized in ISKCON that it is actually the model of paradise (Brooks 1989).

### **“We’re All Natives of the Planet”**

Rishi organized a major event in the fall of 2010, centered around the theme of spiritual ecology. Prominent ISKCON guru, Radhanath Swami, an American devotee who has established a temple and several charitable foundations in India, where he has lived for several decades, had recently published his autobiography, and was conducting a global tour to publicize it. Rishi arranged for him to speak at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa campus on the topic of “Spiritual Ecology.” The evening began with bhajans led by the ISKCON devotees, followed by *Bharata Natyam* dancing, then a brief speech by Daiva, who discussed his farm projects. Before the headline speaker Radhanath Swami came to the podium, a group of Hawaiian religious practitioners took to the stage and delivered an *oli*, a Hawaiian blessing. For Rishi, it was a symbolic and pivotal moment he had been working towards for some time. Rishi told me he invited the Hawaiian practitioners seeing it as “a good start to try to make that connection between like Hawaiian culture and Vedic culture,” thus by extension between ISKCON and Hawaiian communities.

It must be noted that the two communities are not totally separate, since there are a few devotees in the ISKCON Honolulu community with Hawaiian heritage. In fact, I had met one woman, Sita, born and raised in Hawai‘i who joined ISKCON during Prabhupada’s time in O‘ahu, but did not know she had any Hawaiian heritage until the

Spiritual Ecology lecture, when she asked speaker Radhanath Swami for his opinion on historical/genealogical connections between Hawaiians and Indians, identifying herself as part Hawaiian. Radhanath Swami's response was that all people should focus on the universals in order to work together. His response, which focuses on universal values, is in line with the ISKCON belief in the universal nature of ISKCON's doctrine. This is a common message in ISKCON texts, for example, devotee and scholar Steven Rosen describes ISKCON's teachings as "the original spiritual truth found in all religion...a transcendental science that benefits everyone" (Rosen 2004b, 5). Yet while devotees see this universalism as a positive bridge towards interfaith and intercommunity cooperation and collaboration, the same universalizing framework can be seen as problematic in the context of Hawaiian anti-colonial struggles, in which the culturally and politically distinctive position of indigeneity "foster[s] the attainment of their major goals of greater political and economic power and formal recognition of their rights and entitlements as the native people of Hawai'i, including sovereignty" (Okamura 2008, 98). Okamura writes:

In pursuing these collective political and economic objectives, Native Hawaiians differentiate themselves socially and culturally from all the other groups in the islands that, as they point out, arrived as immigrants and thus do not have the ancestral ties to Hawai'i that Native Hawaiians can claim" (Okamura 2008, 98).

Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to interview any devotees who identify as Hawaiian, since I was not able to arrange an interview with Sita, nor with another Hawaiian devotee, a middle aged man, whom I met during a volunteer work day at LEAF's garden at the homeless shelter. I was also told of another Hawaiian devotee, who I was never able to meet, and there may perhaps be others who I do not know of

(since I did not conduct a census of the devotee community). There are also interactions between ISKCON devotees and non-devotee Hawaiians, both in the case of the Spiritual Ecology lecture, which I will discuss below, and also in the LEAF project, founded by devotee Daiva. LEAF's website has a section titled "Hawaiian Advisers" under which is posted:

Hawaii is our host culture. Therefore, the wisdom of the kupuna [elders] and kahunas [religious leaders] in establishing food systems and proper stewardship of the aina [land] can only be done with their blessings. We invite the native Hawaiian community to please offer LEAF guidance so that we are executing our kuleana [responsibility] in the most akamai [intelligent] and pono [morally correct] way possible (Leaf Hawaii 2007).

LEAF has in fact received guidance and assistance from Hawaiian taro farmers and Hawaiian cultural practitioners in the preliminary stages of the Waimanalo farm project. But there has also been distance between Hindu and Hawaiian communities, which Rishi referred to as "discord" surrounding a particular incident in the spring of 2010.

When I asked Rishi how he became connected with the Hawaiian religious practitioners who participated in the Spiritual Ecology event, he introduced the story of the "Shiva stone." The Honolulu Star Advertiser ran this story on June 19, 2010:

The so-called healing stone of Wahiawa, venerated for more than 20 years by a local Hindu group as an embodiment of the god Shiva, was removed from its display platform on California Avenue last week by a group of Hawaiian nationalists intent of returning it to its earlier resting place near the Kukaniloko birthing site (Tsai 2010a).

In the Shaivite tradition of Hinduism phallus-shaped stones, known as linga, are worshiped as embodiments of the god Shiva. The Wahiawa stone was understood by members of The Lord of the Universe Society (LOTUS) as a naturally occurring embodiment of Shiva, and was worshipped by adorning it with flower garlands, and

ritually bathing it. Though, “In recent years, the group had worked in loose partnership with a group of Hawaiian nationalists who valued the stone's historical significance as a kapu marker for the sacred area of Kaukonahua,” disagreement arose concerning both the form of worship and the stone’s rightful place (Tsai 2010b). The disagreement led to the eventual removal of the stone by Hawaiian activists, with the intent to relocate it to “Kukaniloko, the venerated birthing site of Hawaiian alii [sic] where it had spent the early part of the last century” (Tsai 2010b).

This issue illustrated conflicts over control of Hawaiian resources and protection of Hawaiian religious sites. Though there had been no formal, institutional relationship between LOTUS and ISKCON, there was a relationship of exchange between the two religious communities, whose facilities members of both groups mutually visited to engage in worship, Rishi explained to me. Rishi was clearly disturbed by the incident of the Shiva linga/Kukaniloko stone, and he saw his effort to build connections with the Hawaiian community in relation to it. Talking about the stone’s removal during a recorded interview in October 2010 he said:

Rishi: and also it’s not like lot of Hawaiians approve of that, and so I just thought, I mean this could be like at some, at some point it would be a good idea to start making more of closer connection because the worship that happens over there [at the LOTUS temple], I don’t see any Hawaiian people coming at that time, when Indian people do the worship.

NB: for the Shiva stone?

Rishi: yeah, and so I thought maybe that could be one of the reason of discord. I mean it would have been nice if there was like a combined or joined worship or at least that someone was invited from the community so that they also feel okay, so we are part of the common tradition. And that could be the reason for the resent[ment]...And so I though okay somewhere someone has to start making that connection between these two traditions.



Rishi was optimistic that Radhanath Swami's presence would facilitate that connection because "he has the best interest of everyone, so it's not about superiority or inferiority or like we are the originals or like Hawaiian peoples saying, 'oh, we are the people from here' and someone having negative sentiments about Indians worshiping the stone and then taking it away" (ibid). And Rishi was satisfied that the event had in fact been a good beginning in bridging the two communities, saying he received only positive feedback from the Hawaiian guests in attendance.

But Rishi's refusal of the claim "we are the people from here" coming from Hawaiians is the point around which conflict arises. To Rishi, avoiding the differences between Hawaiian and Hindu forms of worship is meant to resolve "discord," but to Hawaiian activists like the ones who removed the stone, recognition of such difference is the only possible starting point from which to work to resolve a discordant society. Tom Lechenco, the "kahu [caretaker or priest] of Kukaniloko" was quoted in *The Star Advertiser* newspaper as saying in regards to the worship of the stone in the LOTUS temple, "what people did to it, although it wasn't their intention, was disrespectful" (Tsai 2010a). Similarly, kahu Elithe Kahn, also quoted in the article, focuses not on the similarities between Hawaiian and Hindu practice, but rather on their differences:

"We truly appreciate the care that (LOTUS) provided over the years, but this is a Hawaiian icon, not Hindu," Kahn said. "Hopefully, they will be able to bring over one of their own gods or goddesses to shelter and worship to the full scope of their belief" (ibid).

Daiva does not see Hawaiian and Hindu worship as incompatible. He spoke of his attempts to establish a farm community with a "kind of Hawaiian Vedic style," saying of his organization, "we're very interested in consulting with Hawaiians" towards this

end. As discussed above, his organization has successfully forged connections with some Hawaiians in LEAF's urban garden in Honolulu, as well as in the developing farm project in Waimanalo, but he recounted a more contentious interaction as well:

I was trying to get a Hawaiian speaker to speak about the ahupua'a, and I approached this one, and she was all, one of these Hawaiians that was like, "you're not Hawaiian, why are you wanting to present something about the Hawaiian ahupua'a?" And I said, no, I want to connect with Hawaiian community out of respect. So you run into that kind of person too, and I just told her, you know, you should appreciate that somebody that's haole [white] wants to support more land-based economy and support, you know, Hawaiian values. Why do you see that as a competitive or something—it's not all about the blood, we all come from the same *akua*, the same god. I said, I appreciate so much the Hawaiian cultures and values because they are very spiritually based, they're very universal. You know, I'm sorry that you feel that haoles have exploited your culture, but if you look at any culture they've all been exploited by so-called haoles at one point or another. So you know, we could go around in circles, you know, hating each other, but in the ultimate sense we're all natives of the planet.

Here Daiva engages in an equalizing narrative, in which through "respect" and focusing on "universal" values, past grievances can be overcome. But this equalizing narrative does not recognize Native Hawaiians as a group with unique political standing in Hawai'i and unique political claims by virtue of their status as the only non-immigrant group with ancestral ties to the land (Okamura 2008, 98). In contrast, indigenous articulations of religious, spiritual, and genealogical connections to the land highlight the unique position of Hawaiians as the indigenous people of the Hawaiian islands (Ho'omanawanui 2008).

O'ahu-based devotee Mangala is interested in a different kind of connection. He has been researching Polynesian languages, relating them back to Sanskrit and is convinced from his research that Polynesian and Sanskrit are closely related. Mangala is a middle-aged man of African American and American Indian descent, and though he is originally from the mainland US, he has lived in Hawai'i, and been attending New

Navadvipa Dham temple, for many years. Though he emphasized to me that he was not a trained linguist, he is extremely interested in Sanskrit linguistics, particularly in looking for connections between Sanskrit and contemporary languages, including Hawaiian. A connection between Polynesian languages, including Hawaiian, and Sanskrit—or rather a recreated Indo-European language ancestral to Sanskrit—was put forth by several prominent linguists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and for a period “received wide acceptance among scholars” (Schütz 1994, 327). However, linguist Albert Schütz, in a comprehensive study of the Hawaiian language, states that the theory did not hold up to more rigorous linguistic methodology in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, disproving the relationship between Hawaiian and Sanskrit (Schütz 1994, 327-328).

Mangala rejects the current academic position that the two languages are unrelated, indeed he understands Sanskrit to be an original, ancestral, universal language. He says a Vedic understanding of human history leads him to believe that mankind has been on earth for millions of years, and that in the beginning, Sanskrit was the shared language, shared, too with beings on different planets. The differences in cultures and languages today, he feels, are the result of local influences and changes over the course of our long history on earth. To Mangala, however, it is our unity, what he referred to as “a spiritual center” that is of utmost import. He feels that colonization disrupted the spiritual unity of earth’s people and humans must reawaken the knowledge that all humans have always been connected and always will be (unrecorded interview 12/3/10). For Mangala, ISKCON’s beliefs are universal, and therefore they can never be foreign to any context. He told me he does his research on Polynesia because he lives here, but he

believes such connections could be found all over the world. Mangala therefore understands ISKCON not as an external missionary religion, but as a force of *restoration* for what *other* misguided missionaries and colonists have obscured.

### **Conclusion: ISKCON and ‘āina**

Though different relationships with Hawaiian culture, land, and community emerge from interviews with each devotee, and from the “Vedic Hawaii” video, all illustrate how ISKCON’s relationships to sacred land in Hawai‘i reflect the complex politics of Hawai‘i as a settler colony, and the ways in which a transnational religious organization takes hold locally. By asserting connections with the land, and framing these connections in terms of shared cultural practices, Honolulu ISKCON makes certain claims of belonging, not as a foreign organization, but rather as a universal one, which belongs here in Hawai‘i just as it does all over the world. In this way, ISKCON attempts to place itself on the same side of the colonial/colonized binary as indigenous Hawaiians, and yet these claims have, in certain instances, met resistance because they refuse to acknowledge indigenous culture outside of the framework of a presumed universal, Vedic heritage. Additionally, Hawai‘i is felt to be a spiritually powerful place and Hawaiians are spoken of as understanding the necessity of caring for the land, a value that ISKCON devotees feel they also share, in contra-distinction to industrialized, capitalist societies. However, understandings of a shared or ancestral Vedic past shift the focus from specifically Hawaiian claims to land and rights as indigenous peoples to a missionary focus on spreading Krishna consciousness, in Hawai‘i, and all over the world.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **CONCLUSION: FROM PRASADAM TO THE POLITICS OF PLACE**

This thesis has taken prasadam as its point of departure, locating food as an important site of anthropological study, and sanctified food offered to Krishna as a central practice in ISKCON. Each chapter attempted to broaden the study of prasadam by progressively moving from an examination of prasadam itself outward to look at devotees' roles in the politics of place in Hawai'i. Chapter Two, "Food as Faith: Feeding the Body and Soul in ISKCON Honolulu," is the most narrowly focused on prasadam, and illustrates the divine mechanics of prasadam—that is, how devotees conceptualize its power and potency—and its role in reforming individuals into Krishna devotees, and the concomitant social reconfiguration such a process engenders. The next chapter, "Preaching Through Prasadam," widened the approach to look at the ways in which prasadam serves as a bridge for interactions with those outside of ISKCON. This chapter underscores the religious importance of prasadam, highlighting the way in which it is made to serve as an embodiment of philosophy and as an innately transformative substance, with the power to transmit Krishna Consciousness to those outside of ISKCON. Such prasadam-mediated interactions are also a form of boundary construction and destruction in ISKCON, whereby membership is established through the act of eating prasadam, and at the same time, Krishna Consciousness is extended through charitable distribution and sale of prasadam outside the circle of devotees. The fourth chapter, "'You can't eat nuts and bolts': Food as a Refusal of Capitalist Consumption," looks at

the economic implications of prasadam transactions, and positions the ideology of loving gift-exchange of prasadam as a protest to capitalist exchange. Whereas Chapter Two focuses on the consumption of prasadam, and the Chapter Three on its distribution, the fourth chapter expands further to its production. This chapter continues to look at the dynamics of prasadam exchange, and the meanings taken by devotees from its consumption, but it also brings in larger frameworks of modernity and capitalism, arguing that the idealization of small-scale, self-sufficient farming communities illustrates ISKCON members' desires to transcend capitalist social relations which are understood as spiritually degrading. The focus on ideologies of farming and social organization takes us to the fifth chapter, the last before this conclusion, "Sacred Places and Contested Spaces: Rooting ISKCON in the 'Āina," which zooms out the furthest from prasadam, to examine land ideology more broadly within ISKCON, and understandings of place in Hawai'i, specifically. It examines the way in which ISKCON's idealization of an ancient golden era of small-scale, self-sufficient, religious society—epitomized by "Vedic India"—is transposed onto Hawaiian landscapes.

This thesis, as a reflection of my research conducted with Krishna devotees, has focused primarily on ISKCON's ideology and ISKCON-led events and organizations on O'ahu. However, I also hope to have illustrated instances of actual and potential collaboration with other groups and organizations outside of ISKCON. Further tracing these links—and attending to differences—with other movements that also address concerns with sustainability and local food production, especially Hawaiian-led movements, would be a fruitful avenue for further research on ISKCON's presence in

Hawai‘i, and for expanding the dialogue between Vedic and Hawaiian culture articulated by devotees (as explored in Chapter Five). It may also be the next necessary step for devotees themselves in maintaining and expanding the community projects they currently operate, in particular regarding efforts to bring together ISKCON and Hawaiian communities. Indeed, it seems to be a project that interests many of the devotees with whom I spoke, who variously articulated the ways in which the broader social, political, environmental, economic, and spiritual context of Hawai‘i influenced them in their practice of Krishna Consciousness.

And such influences are inevitable, as New Navadvipa Dham and its community are not just one of many identical nodes in the transnational network of ISKCON temples, but rather are one among many distinctive temple communities brought together in a specific, localized context through membership in ISKCON. While ISKCON’s ideology demands a radical repositioning vis-à-vis mainstream society, and while this repositioning is often spoken of in terms of cultivating distance from the “material world” in order to facilitate “spiritual” advancement, it is also true that engagement with the spiritual does not negate one’s involvement with the material. I have tried to make clear throughout this thesis that the two continue to be interwoven in the lives of devotees, and indeed, that “material” concerns necessarily emerge not only through obligations outside of ISKCON, but also through the practical maintenance of ISKCON itself as an organization, and the pursuit of Krishna Consciousness as a lifestyle. I hope also to have shown that the spiritual practice of Krishna Consciousness continues not only in spite of these “material” matters, but through them, as, for example, operating Govinda’s is for

devotees *both* a means of financially supporting the temple and spreading Krishna's benediction through the transcendental medium of prasadam, a dual purpose that devotees themselves highlighted. Similarly, the transcendental and transnational characteristics of ISKCON do not preclude the development of distinctive, localized ISKCON communities. Kenneth Anderson (Krishna Dharma Das), a Krishna devotee, affirms the connections between spiritual practice and material reality, and between transcendence and worldly engagement, when he writes:

Devotees do not see themselves as being in any way irrelevant or disconnected from the world. In fact they would argue that their engagement is more connected to reality than that of anyone else, at least in terms of the Vedic definition of reality, which considers everything to be a part of God (Anderson 2007, 121).

Yet Anderson's insight here is not simply that devotees are engaged with "reality," but indeed that "reality" itself is variously defined, and that joining ISKCON involves accepting a particular definition of reality. With this insight in mind, we can move from a false binary of engagement/renunciation from the "real" world to consider different kinds of engagements with the real world, variably defined. And alongside these various understandings of how things *are*, emerge various understandings of how things *should* be.

In a recent conversation with a European American female devotee who joined ISKCON just a couple of years ago, in her early twenties, she told me that what attracted her to ISKCON was the notion that Krishna Consciousness offered a means by which to be one's *best* self. Similarly, ISKCON devotees are motivated by their vision of the best possible society, and ISKCON teachings provide a framework of what such a society would be (and indeed, is believed to have once been) in the form of the self-sufficient,



religiously-oriented, Varnashram-structured community. For devotees with whom I spoke this model provided guidance, direction, and a deeper understanding of their own social roles and responsibilities. Yet it also provides a constant challenge, since this ideal society is in many ways fundamentally at odds with how things *really* are in a contemporary reality defined in ISKCON through the explanatory frame of Kali Yuga, the age of decay.

It seems to me that contemporary Hawai‘i, too, faces similar contradictions between what it once was, what it is, or what it could or should be. But in the case of Hawai‘i, these models are contested and emergent. Suppressed histories of colonization and resistance are being brought into the mainstream (Osorio 2010), and Hawai‘i’s status as the 50<sup>th</sup> American state is called into question by articulations of Hawai‘i as settler colony (Trask 1999) or occupied nation (Sai 2008). Hawai‘i’s future is meanwhile in the making. For Honolulu’s devotee community, prasadam—its consumption, distribution, and cultivation—is a means by which they attempt to participate in the project of shaping the future—and their futures—in Hawai‘i. Again, I give a word of thanks to the devotees who allowed me to explore these questions by answering the many questions I posed. The contents of this thesis are drawn from my time with Honolulu’s ISKCON community; a snap-shot of roughly a year and a half of its forty-six-year-long presence in Honolulu, and a point of departure for questions of how to understand ISKCON’s social vision in dialogue with visions of Hawai‘i and ISKCON’s position in it—complex, contradictory, but striving towards transcendence.

## GLOSSARY OF HAWAIIAN AND SANSKRIT WORDS

Sanskrit words are italicized; Hawaiian words are bolded.

*Aarthī* –Blessing with a flame in a Hindu prayer or service

*Acharya*—master or teacher

Ahupua‘a –Pre-colonial Hawaiian land division system

‘**Āina**—Land

**Ali‘i** –Hawaiian ruling class

*Ayurvedic* –Form of traditional Indian medicine

*Bhajan* –Devotional song

*Bhakti* –Devotion, also refers to Devotional sects of Hinduism

*Bharata Natyam*—A South Indian style of dance, generally depicting Hindu religious themes through movement and gesture

*Bhoga*—used by ISKCON members to refer to unoffered food

*Brahmin*—the priestly caste; the highest caste in the *Varnashram*; used in ISKCON to describe those with an attitude of sincere devotional service to Krishna, irrespective of birth

*Darsan*—Divine sight exchange with a deity

*Ekadasi*—Days when devotees abstain from grains and certain other foods

*Guru*—Spiritual teacher

*Halwa*—a dessert usually made of semolina flour

**Haole**—term used to refer to white people in Hawai‘i

**Heiau**—temple

**Kalo**—taro

*Kshatrya*—warrior caste in the *Varnashram*

**Kapu**—prohibited or sacred

**Laulima**—Cooperation; working together

*Linga*—Symbol of Shiva

*Mahamantra*—Refers to the chant: Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare

*Mahaprasadam*—Prasadam that has been offered to the deity on the deity’s plate (the most potent form of prasadam)

**Mālama ‘āina** —To care for the land

*Maya*—Illusion, used to refer to the material world (i.e. life as it is experienced on earth as opposed to in the spiritual realm)

*Mridangam*—Indian drum, worn across the chest and played with the hands

*Nirguna*—“Distinctionless,” meaning outside the modes of material nature

**‘Ono** —Delicious

**Pono**—Morally right or good

*Prasadam* (also *prasad*, *prasada*)—Food which has been ritually offered to a Hindu deity

*Prem*—love

*Pujari*—priest

*Rajas*—One of the 3 modes of material nature (*triguna*), that of passion

*Rathayatra*—Festival of the chariots, held annually in which the temple deities are publically paraded

*Sankirtan*—Group practice of devotional chanting with music and dancing

*Sattva* —One of the 3 modes of material nature (*triguna*), that of goodness

*Shaivite*—school of Hinduism recognizing Shiva as the principle deity

*Shudra*—The lowest caste, for laborers and craftspeople, in the *Varnashram*

*Tamas*—One of the 3 modes of material nature (*triguna*), that of ignorance

*Tirtha*—Holy site

*Triguna*—The three modes of nature by which all material reality can be classified

*Tulsi*—Basil, a sacred plant representing the female consort of Krishna, necessary for ritual offerings of prasadam

*Vaishnava*—school of Hinduism recognizing Vishnu as the supreme deity

*Vaishya*—the caste of farmers and businesspeople in the *Varnashram*

*Varnashram*—Vedic social organization into four categories: *Brahmins*, *Kshatryas*, *Vaishyas*, and *Shudras*

*Vedic*—Referring to the ancient set of Hindu texts, collectively called the Vedas

*Yuga*—A segment in the Hindu cyclical conception of time; an age or era

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