

# I

## Introducing the Players

### *1. Introduction*

When there are hundreds of folk deities with different names, when names of deities keep being created or fade away, how can we select and forge into some kind of coherent whole this mass of forms and names that constitutes what we call Tamil folk deities? For this book a choice was necessary. In each folk temple there are main deities and sub-deities; every main deity has a guardian. In the present chapter we would like to present those deities who are fairly well known throughout Tamilnadu and who play important roles as either main or sub-deities. Before introducing these deities, it seems important to give the reader a first impression of the setting and arrangement of the folk temples. More will be said in the second chapter.

One can find folk temples within cities, in village centers, at the outskirts of towns and villages, in the fields, beyond them on hills or in wilderness land. The researcher or devotee might have to walk a long distance before sighting a temple tower, the giant statue of a god or guardian or the horses so typical of the Aiyaṅār temples. The visitor might first be greeted by a barely visible sub-deity, as in Kuṭakippaṭṭi, where, after a three kilometer walk through the forest and the first glimpse of large white cement horses, one chances first upon a small statue, placed under a tree at the periphery of the temple area. It represents the Tōṭṭi, the village servant or village announcer, a Dalit man who beats a small drum called tamukku and proclaims weddings, festivals, deaths and other ceremonies. In many temples this statue marks the place from where the Dalits worship the main god, to whom they are not allowed a direct access. Though the Tōṭṭi is the lowest of the deities of the temple, he is called munṇōṭṭiyāṅ, the one who 'runs in the front'. In this temple he leads the royal procession when the main god, Aiyaṅār, goes out either in the form of a man impersonating him, in the form of a movable statue, or invisible at night, when, as guardian of the village, he tours the area on his horse. Steps lead up to the portico and the shrine of Aiyaṅār (the only concrete structure of the temple area). Inside the dark shrine are three gods: Aiyaṅār in the middle, left of him Śiva and to his right Perumāḷ (Viṣṇu) in his Mohinī form. This constellation is rarely

found in Aiyaṇār temples; although Śiva and Perumāḷ are part of Aiyaṇār's retinue, they are there in their avatāra or amśa forms, as we shall see later. Left and right behind the concrete temple structure are statues of guardians, Karuppar and Muṇi alias Pūtam, the latter waving a friendly hand at the visitor.

In most folk temples we can expect a number of deities, loosely placed in the area called a temple, in forms of statues, weapons, stones and so on. Of the many folk deities in the Tamil landscape, Aiyaṇār is the best known, and we shall begin our presentation with this god.

## 2. Aiyaṇār

Aiyaṇār is a god rarely appearing alone. Rather than having Śiva and Perumāḷ at his side, he is most of the time flanked by his consorts, Pūraṇai (left) and Puṭkalai (right), who look the same iconographically, each holding a flower in the hand closer to the god, and both usually hewn of the same stone as Aiyaṇār. They form a unity with the god.<sup>1</sup> Textual sources do make a distinction in color though: Pūraṇai should be black and dressed in a yellow cloth, Puṭkalai of golden color and dressed in white.<sup>2</sup> Before we have a closer look at these two ladies, let us see why there is some logic to Śiva and Perumāḷ being in the Kuṭakipaṭṭi Aiyaṇār shrine. They are his parents! Aiyaṇār is also called Hariharaputra, meaning son of Viṣṇu and Śiva.

There are two myths regarding his birth, one of them connects to the well known Sanskrit myth of the churning of the ocean (told e. g., in the Mahābhārata)<sup>3</sup>: Viṣṇu had changed himself into the beautiful woman Mohinī in order to distract the minds of the asuras and thereby cheat them out of their portion of amṛta (the drink of immortality, ambrosia) which the gods and the asuras had extracted from the milk ocean. At this point the folk myth and some later textual sources continue: When Śiva saw Mohinī, he fell in love with her and from their union was born Hariharaputra or Śāstā. (The latter is a name under which Aiyaṇār is known mostly in the southern parts of Tamilnadu and Kerala.)<sup>4</sup>

In a common folk myth Viṣṇu changes himself into Mohinī in order to destroy the asura Patmācuran:

<sup>1</sup> See plate.

<sup>2</sup> Dagens 1985: 361.

<sup>3</sup> O'Flaherty 1980: 273 ff.

<sup>4</sup> For other textual sources see Adiceam 1967: 16 ff., Gopinatha Rao 1985,II: 486; Śri Kantapurāṇam, 1988: vol. I, 284 ff.; Clothey 1982; Dessigane et al. 1964: 76 where Śiva makes Śāstā, i. e., Aiyaṇār chief of the demons, pūtam; Dumont 1986: 445 f.

There was a forest here. Patmācūraṇ (also Pasmāsura, from Skt. *bhasma*, ‘ash’) performed a great sacrifice (*yākam*) in order to get the boon that he could burn whomever he touched. Īśvaraṇ (Śiva) fulfilled his wish. Wanting to test his power, Patmācūraṇ tried to touch Īśvaraṇ’s head. The latter ran here and there and finally hid behind an aivirali plant (literally ‘five finger plant’, *bryonia laciniosa*). Īśvari saw with her ‘mind-eye’ that her husband was in trouble and she went to Perumāḷ (i. e., Viṣṇu). He took the form of Mohinī. When Patmācūraṇ saw Mohinī, he fell in love with her and wished to unite with her. Mohinī said: ‘You are unclean. First bathe, then we shall enjoy each other!’ Patmācūraṇ went in search of water, but could not find any. Mohinī caused a small spring (*cunai*) to appear. Patmācūraṇ saw this; however, there was only very little water in it, as much as fitted into the impression made by the hoof of a cow. ‘How can I take a bath in this?’ he asked Mohinī. The latter replied: ‘It’s enough if you just take a bit of water and put it on your head!’ Patmācūraṇ followed these instructions and when he touched his head with his hand, he burned to death. Perumāḷ asked Īśvaraṇ to come out of his hiding place. Īśvaraṇ asked: ‘Where is Patmācūraṇ?’ ‘He is not here. I burned him!’ ‘How did you do this?’ asked Īśvaraṇ. Perumāḷ replied: ‘I took the form of Mohinī (*Mōkini avatāram*)!’ Īśvaraṇ then said: ‘Show me this *avatāram*.’ When Īśvaraṇ saw the beautiful Mohinī, he fell in love with her and his semen spilled out. Perumāḷ caught the semen in his hands to prevent it from falling to the ground. The semen became Hariharaputra (*Mēṭṭupāḷaiyam*, Erode).

In other versions Perumāḷ is Mahāviṣṇu and in some versions Mohinī causes Patmācūraṇ to burn himself by having him imitate her dance in which, at one point, she places her hands on her head. Some priests finish the story by saying that Aiyāṇār is also called Kaiyāṇār, because he was born in the hand (*kai*). Curiously enough the myth of *Bhāsmāsura* is also known in Nepal, where it is told in connection with Śiva-*Paśupati*nātha. There it ends, however, with the destruction of the asura;<sup>5</sup> and it is known in the *Hijrā* tradition, where the demon is *Bhīṣma* and Mohinī *Manmatha*, the god of love, who causes the demon to turn himself into ash.<sup>6</sup> The creation of Aiyāṇār seems to be a purely South Indian addition.

Who are Aiyāṇār’s consorts? Some priests said they were his wives; others insisted that they were not his wives, only his helpers or servants (*vēlaikkāri*); other priests regarded them as companions or friends. This reluctance to make Aiyāṇār a married man can be attributed to the god’s ambiguous nature (that there are two consorts rather than one does not seem problematic). Generally he is considered a form (often the married form) of Aiyappaṇ, and Aiyappaṇ is a misogynist bachelor. Furthermore, when we look at Aiyāṇār’s iconography, we notice some ascetic traits like his matted locks and the *yoga-paṭṭa*, which is fastened around his drawn-up left leg. These traits contradict Aiyāṇār’s role as king, a role which his

<sup>5</sup> Michaels 1993: 184 f.

<sup>6</sup> Jaffrey 1996: 270 f.

vehicle, the elephant, supports. The elephant is Airāvata, Indra's very own vehicle, and it was Indra himself, the king of the pan-Hindu deities, who bestowed the elephant on the folk god. Indra has other connections with Aiyaṅār: Aiyaṅār in his Mahākālar form is supposed to have protected Indra's wife, Indrāṇi, when the demon Cūrapatman lusted after her;<sup>7</sup> but some priests think that Aiyaṅār protected Indra's two daughters (Pūraṇai and Puṭkalai). In gratitude Indra gave them to him as his wives.

Let us return to the temple of Kuṭakippaṭṭi. It is in the forest, away from the main road. Aiyaṅār's location in the forest is not unusual, but it is not typical. Aiyaṅār has two tasks to perform: 1. to guard the village and its surrounding area. He does this together with his general, Karuppar.<sup>8</sup> Aiyaṅār, on the white horse, and Karuppar, on the brown horse (sometimes he too has a white horse), are said to ride around at night. Some old priests claimed that they could hear the sound of their horses. As guardian of the village (ūrkkāval) Aiyaṅār's temple can be located anywhere. 2. to guard the irrigation tank. Indeed, we find Aiyaṅār most commonly near the large village tank or pond, and the god's association with water includes his responsibility over rain and crop fertility, a trait he has inherited from Indra.<sup>9</sup> The priest of the Kuṭakippaṭṭi temple offered us some peanut sweets to eat and then explained that Aiyaṅār is being worshipped at this place for at least 140 years, and he remembered that in his grandfather's time one of the surrounding guardians of Aiyaṅār, Karuppar, used to receive goat sacrifices. Now all the deities get only vegetarian offerings, including Muṇi (or pūtam – as the priest called the god), whose large statue stands to the side of the main shrine. Muṇi is one of the fiercer guardians of Aiyaṅār.<sup>10</sup> The priest said his caste was ampalam, which usually is a title for men of the Kaḷḷar caste. The priest's father, a very old man who died recently, told us that the god had actually been brought by his grandfather's grandfather from the house of a Nāyūtu caste person of a far away village where he had been working. The person who brought the statue was a Valaiyaṅ (one of the fisherman castes), he said, which would make the present priest a Valaiyaṅ too. It is possible that using the title ampalam in their name is a way to enhance their caste standing, since Valaiyaṅ is relatively low in the caste hierarchy. Using titles of other castes to 'hide' one's own caste is a relatively common stratagem.

If I mention the caste, it is for two important reasons: 1. Priests of folk deities can be of any caste, from Brahman to Dalit (formerly called 'Harijans', 'Scheduled Castes'), but the majority of priests belong to

<sup>7</sup> See Śrī Kantapurāṇam, 1988: vol. I, 284 ff.

<sup>8</sup> See below.

<sup>9</sup> See Chapter II.

<sup>10</sup> See below.

castes of middle standing (artisan castes, small landholding castes). 2. Although anyone can be the priest of Aiyānār, the god has a special connection to one particular caste, namely the potters (Vēḷār). The potter priests of Aiyānār are also called Kulālar, a name that according to one priest stems from Kulāla ṛṣi:

When the child (Aiyānār) was born, Īsvaraṅ and Mohinī did not know what to do with it. Not wanting to place Aiyānār on the ground because his touch would destroy the earth, they handed him to Indra as the only one fit to do pūjā to the god. Later, when Indra was no longer able to perform the pūjā duties, he created Kulāla ṛṣi and ordered him to do the pūjā. Since then Kulālas do the pūjā to Aiyānār (Ciṅkampuṇari, Sivaganga).

Thurston corroborates the potters' origin from Kulālan, but according to his source: '... Kulālan ... was the son of Brahma.<sup>11</sup> He prayed to Brahma to be allowed, like him, to create and destroy things daily; so Brahma made him a potter.' One priest said Kulālan (Kulālamuṇi) was Aiyānār's foster-father, which would give the potter priests a parental role. Setting a deity in a parental relation to a particular caste is another common trait of folk religion (e. g., Aṅkāḷammaṅ is the daughter of inland-fishermen, Cempaṭavar; Maturai Viraṅ the son of leather-workers, Cakkiliyar). Aiyānār's divine parentage is well known and scenes of his birth-myth are portrayed with much gusto (often showing a stark naked Mohinī) at the side of the pedestal that carries the large horse statue. Although son of both, Śiva and Perumāḷ, the ash lines on his forehead make Aiyānār śaivite. To balance this, Karuppar bears vaiṣṇava symbols.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. *Karuppar*

Karuppar's picture is complex. His name, usually spelled Karuppar rather than Karuppar, shows a number of variations: Karuppu, Karuppucāmi, Karuppaṅṅacāmi, Karuppaṅṅacāmi, and some of his names indicate minor or major distinctions in iconography: Periya Karuppu (large or big Karuppu), Cinna Karuppu (small Karuppu), Muttukkaruppu (Karuppu of pearls), Caṅkili Karuppar (Karuppar of the chain), Camaya Karuppar. What they have in common is a blue or black skin color, the vaiṣṇava marking on the forehead (nāmam) and the weapons: the curved machete (arivāḷ) and the club; what varies is their body posture (standing, kneeling) and their position within the temple.<sup>13</sup> Myths about Karuppar exist, but they are local myths tying the god to a particular place or

<sup>11</sup> Thurston 1987,IV: 188.

<sup>12</sup> For historical data on Aiyānār see Clothey 1982.

<sup>13</sup> See Chapter III.

temple. An overall known myth, as in the case of Aiyaṅār, we have not been able to find so far. What all informants agreed on was that Karuppar came from Kerala. Floating on the river, he was carried here and there to the places where there are temples to him now. One particular myth told to us by four different priests explains why the god traveled the watery route:

A Brahman used to be the priest of the god. The Brahman came daily to the temple to perform the pūjā and his son accompanied him and played in the temple. One day the priest's son was missing. The priest suspected that his son had remained in the temple, but he was reluctant to get him, as the doors of the temple should not be opened after the last pūjā at night. His wife insisted; she wanted her son back immediately. The priest returned to the temple, looked through the window and saw his son in there. The god said to the priest: "Leave your son here. I wish to play with him. Tomorrow, when you do the pūjā, I shall return your child to you." Anger overtook the priest. He demanded his son back immediately. He tried to force open the temple door, but could not. Then the priest hurled abuse at the god. "Alright," said the god, "I shall give you your son!" The god tore the child to pieces and handed the priest an arm, a leg, etc. through the window. Later, the priest, in great anger, did the same to the god. He broke the statue of the god, placed the pieces in a box (or basket), threw it in the river and said: "Go where you want to go, stay where you want to stay." (Māranāṭu, Peruṅkaḷūr, Kantarvakkōṭṭai, Cattiyamaṅkalam).

Three of the priests who related the myth are Dalits and in their version a significant sentence is added; the Brahman priest utters the curse: 'From now on, may a Harijan be your priest'! This does not mean that all priests of Karuppar are Dalits; as with Aiyaṅār, any caste person can perform the pūjā duties.

If there is a caste with special links to Karuppar, it is the Kaḷḷar caste. The Kaḷḷars were what used to be called 'robber castes' (the word kaḷḷan means 'robber, thief'), a type of caste that we find under different names all over India and whose occupation was cattle and highway robbery. The Kaḷḷar turned into village watchmen, later acquired land and are today important land owners in the Madurai, Sivaganga, Pudukkottai and Thanjavur districts.<sup>14</sup> Many Kaḷḷar families claim Karuppar as their clan deity and in Maturai, during the elaborate and famous cittirai festival, in which the marriage of the goddess Mīnākṣī with Śiva-Sundareśvara is celebrated,<sup>15</sup> crowds of Kaḷḷar dressed in patchwork design costumes and wearing crowns decorated with peacock feathers accompany the god Kaḷḷalakar from Aḷakarkōvil to Maturai.<sup>16</sup> Their function is to guard the god's treasure which follows the procession in large metal chests. This

<sup>14</sup> On the Kaḷḷar see Dirks 1989, Dumont 1957/1986, Shulman 1980c.

<sup>15</sup> See Harman 1989.

<sup>16</sup> On this festival see Hudson 1982.

role is akin to their god's role: *Paṭiṇeṭṭāmpaṭi* Karuppar (Karuppar of the '18 steps') is the treasurer of the god *Kaḷḷaḷakar*. Whitehead reports that the key to the room in which the temple treasures were kept used to be placed in front of Karuppar's image at night.<sup>17</sup> The eighteen steps, above which Karuppar's (now invisible) presence is located, are eighteen 'grave' stones under which eighteen magicians are buried. They had come to the temple 'with the intention of carrying away the essence of the sanctity of the shrine and transporting it elsewhere'.<sup>18</sup> The god *Kaḷḷaḷakar*, through a small boy, informed the king of the magicians' plan. The king, on the advice of his priest, had hot rice water thrown into the courtyard. This caused the black paste to melt, which the magicians had rubbed on their foreheads to render themselves invisible. They were caught, killed, and buried under the eighteen steps.

Two elements frequently seem to crop up in myths or stories about Karuppar: Kerala as his place of origin and his connection to robbers. In a book on the goddess *Kuḷumāyi Amman* we read a different version of why Karuppar floated from Kerala to Tamilnadu. *Kuḷumāyi* is a very fierce goddess situated at the outskirts of *Tiruccirāppaḷi*, and her guardian, Karuppar (represented by a hereditary *maruḷāḷi* – one possessed by the god), drinks the blood of hundreds of sacrificial goats during the festival:

In Kerala, at the river *Amarāvati* near the *Ānaimalai* hills, there lived a *Nambudiri* Brahman. He worshipped *Aiyappan* and seventeen other deities daily. All the statues had names, except one, namely a god lashing out with a whip and sitting on a horse. He was the guardian of the other gods. The Brahman was not married and being very old, he worried about his deities. One day, the nameless guardian deity appeared in his dream and said: "During the next rainy season the river will be swollen. Place us eighteen statues in a rattan basket, place the basket on your head and enter the river. The basket and you will be carried away by the water. This will end your cycle of rebirths. A *Kavuṇṭan* named *Nallatampi* will find us and worship us." The Brahman did as the god had told him, and the river carried the basket to a small village near *Karūr*, where a goatherd boy, *Nallatampi*, found it. He placed the basket in the cowshed. Thanks to the deities, the boy became rich quickly, and that aroused the jealousy of the landowners. They hired twelve robbers to steal the box and carry it away. This the robbers did, and after having carried the box all day long, they arrived at *Iraṭṭaimalai* just before night fell. They placed the box down to bathe in the river. At that moment they became blind. Through the intermediary of a priest the robbers found out that the gods had caused their blindness and that they would gain their eye sight if they established the deities at *Iraṭṭaimalai*. This they did and they named the nameless god *Karuppar*. One day, on his way to *Śrīraṅkam*, *Karuppar* heard someone crying in the temple of *Kuḷumāyi Amman*. It was the goddess herself. She had been bound

<sup>17</sup> Whitehead 1976: 114.

<sup>18</sup> Whitehead 1976: 114.

by the power of a magician and had to slave all day for him. Karuppar killed the magician that very day, and in gratitude the goddess told her priests to set up a statue of Karuppar in her temple, call it *Onṭikkaruppu*, and offer him the first sacrifice.<sup>19</sup>

*Onṭikkaruppu* is in the large temple at *Iraṭṭaimalai* (near *Tiruccirāppaḷli*). Apart from him, there are two other forms of Karuppu: *Nilamēkacuvāmi* and *Periyaṇṇacāmi*. Of all the deities in the temple *Onṭikkaruppu* is considered the most powerful. A person cheated in a land sale will write his grievance on a paper and place it on *Onṭikkaruppu* and so get justice done through him. There is a cave in one of the hills (*Iraṭṭaimalai* = two hills) believed to be used by robbers to store their goods. (The most feared crooks and goondas of the area apparently live in a nearby village!) *Onṭikkaruppu* is also present in the *Kuḷumāyi Amman* temple, both as a statue beside her and painted on the wall.<sup>20</sup>

Bands of robbers marauding the land, perhaps up to two hundred years ago, must have been a serious problem to villagers<sup>21</sup>:

The old name of Karuppūr was *Vaṇṭikkāraṇpēṭṭai*. The people of this village first lived in a place about a mile further down the river. At that time robbers caused a lot of trouble in the area. One day the wooden statue of Karuppar (*Karuppaṇṇacuvāmi*) floated down the river and was washed ashore at *Vaṇṭikkāraṇpēṭṭai*. He appeared in some people's dream and said: "If you establish a temple where I was washed ashore, settle down near me and worship me, I shall be your guardian deity (*kāval teyvam*) and protect you." The people did so and in honor of the god renamed the village *Karuppūr*. The next time the robbers came to the village, they lost their eyesight and their horses became paralyzed. The robber chief then made the following vow: "From now on, if in *Karuppūr* as much as an iron needle gets stolen, we shall replace it with a golden one!", upon which the robbers could see and the horses walk again. From then on the villagers have lived there peacefully.<sup>22</sup>

*Karuppūr* is a small village on one of the arms of the *Kāvēri* river. Karuppar's shrine is in the *Aiyanār* temple and although a Brahman (*Aiyar*) is priest, Karuppar receives animal sacrifices. On the day we visited the temple, a *Kaḷḷar* family had brought a goat to be sacrificed. Its head was placed on the platform in front of Karuppar's shrine in such a way that it faced the god's statue. Usually the priest receives the head of the sacrificial animal, but since the priest was a Brahman (and vegetarian) the donors gave him money. This particular Karuppar is the clan deity of a group of *Vaikhānasa Aiyēṅkar* Brahmans, and one of them, a former

<sup>19</sup> *Kuḷumāyi Amman vilā* (Irā. Karuppaiyā 1991): 102 ff. (I am summarizing from the Tamil).

<sup>20</sup> See plate.

<sup>21</sup> See also *Maturai Viraṇ*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ānanta Vikāṭaṇ*, 27.12.1981.



socialist and fighter for the landless, worships the god daily for three hours and, as he related in story after story, the god has saved his life and protected his family on a number of occasions.

We shall say more about Karuppar later.<sup>23</sup> Let us just emphasize here that this god is fierce (illustrated by his large curly moustache and his weapons), that he is vaiṣṇava (one informant made him the son of Kṛṣṇa), and that he is a bachelor.

#### 4. *Irāyar*

A god who resembles Aiyānār and Karuppar is Irāyar or Rāyar. We find him in the West of Tamilnadu, in the districts of Erode and Coimbatore, where he can be the main god of a temple. Sometimes he is called Karupparāyar or Karuvaṅṅarāyar. Who is he? One priest (of Nāyakkār caste) identified him with Aiyānār, saying he was Hariharaputra. In this particular temple in Kāṅkayampālaiyam śaiva and vaiṣṇava forms of religious expression are thoroughly mixed. Rāyar, the main god, is shown above the entrance of his shrine with a nāmam on his forehead and a club in his right hand. He is flanked on two sides by the wheel (Skt. cakra) and the conch, insignia of Viṣṇu, but the vehicle facing him, is Nandin, the bull; Śiva's vehicle. As in other larger temples, a great number of subdeities crowd the temple area: Gaṇapati, Tannāci, Karuppar, the seven maidens, deities we shall meet again later. Rāyar is a bachelor and a powerful god who receives only raw food offerings (e. g., raw rice instead of boiled rice). It is known in the area that he cures cows, and that on Mondays and Fridays he will 'tell fortune'. This works as follows: If the god causes a flower to fall from his right ear, the answer to the devotee's question is yes, if he causes the flower to fall from the left ear, the answer is no. If no flower falls or flowers fall from both ears, the case is undecided. Special about this temple is that Rāyar faces West.

Śaiva Brahman priests (Kurukkaḷṣ) of the Karupparāyar temple of Mākkiṅāmpaṭṭi at the outskirts of Poḷḷacci agreed that the god was Hariharaputra, but they added that Karupparāyar was Viṣṇu's incarnation while Aiyappaṅ was Śiva's. They then came up with an entirely different myth saying that Karupparāyar was born at Dakṣa's sacrifice. This is in agreement with other priests' perception of the god's ancestry, for instance with that of the Uṭaiyār priest of the Rāyar temple in Kaṇapati (Kōyamuttūr city), who said that Karupparāyar was born from Śiva's third eye like Vīrabhadra. We remember that Vīrabhadra had emerged from Śiva's forehead to cut off Dakṣa's head.<sup>24</sup> Iconographically the god

<sup>23</sup> See Chapter III.

<sup>24</sup> On the myth see O'Flaherty 1980: 118 ff. and below.

is represented with both śaiva and vaiṣṇava signs: e. g., with the śaiva ash lines on his body and Karuppar's club and arivāḷ in his hands. He is fierce and a bachelor. Being the main deity, he is predominantly vegetarian, but in some temples he receives meat offerings. Whereas Rāyar of Kāṅkaiyampālaiyam is a common or public deity, worshipped by all villagers, Karuvaṅṅarāyar of Pūlavāṭi (Coimbatore) is the clan deity of a particular caste, the Cērvaikkāra Nāyakkars. The priest told us the following story about this god:

The Muslim rulers asked the Cērvaikkārars to give them one of their daughters as a bride. The Cērvaikkārars refused and this angered the rulers. The Cērvaikkārars had to flee. Being chased by the Muslims, the Cērvaikkārars reached a river, crossed it successfully and then prayed to their god to cause a flood in the river so that their pursuers would not be able to cross it. They said: "If this god has power, let the water flow in the river". Water flowed abundantly and the Muslims turned back. The Cērvaikkārars then wished to offer their god a blood sacrifice, but they could not find a goat anywhere. They noticed a shepherd boy nearby. He belonged to a different village. They grabbed this boy, cut off his head, and offered it to the god. Soon the shepherd boy's family and relatives arrived and demanded justice. The Cērvaikkārars, however, denied having killed the boy and as proof, they lifted the basket under which the head of the boy was supposed to be. There was the head of a goat! Then the Cērvaikkārars called the shepherd boy's name and he appeared at the site, alive. To commemorate this event, a goat-head of stone was set up facing the sanctum.

Muslim rulers desiring a Hindu woman and thereby causing a caste group to flee the area rather than acquiesce is an often told story;<sup>25</sup> interesting in this account is the interchange between human and goat sacrifice and the fact that a goat head is at the place where the actual goat sacrifices must have taken place before the god became a vegetarian. It is also the place where we usually find the deity's vehicle. During the annual festival each of the hundred Cērvaikkārar families of the village offers a goat and these goats are sacrificed to the non-vegetarian Karuvaṅṅarāyar who is to the side of the main shrine behind the two large cement horses. The god of this temple has a companion called Pōm̄mi (like Maturai Vīraṅ's wife). It was the god himself who, appearing in the chieftain's dream, asked for a wife. Other deities were added later: inside the main shrine to the left and right of the door are Gaṅeśa and Murukaṅ, and outside there is Mākāḷi and, facing her, Makāmuṅiyappaṅ. Two more statues are in the temple area; they are an archer and, facing him, a tiger.

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<sup>25</sup> See also Thurston 1987, VII: 186; Meyer 1986: 61.

### 5. *Māṭaṇ* , *Cuṭalaimāṭaṇ*

Most folk temples are inhabited by more than one deity. The kind of deities grouped around the main deity and the deities' arrangement in the temple will be the topic of another chapter. Let us state here that Karuppar, when he stands at a particular place in the temple, is said to be Aiyaṇār's general or minister. In the Tirunelveli district a deity with a different name has that function: Māṭaṇ. His name is derived from 'māṭu' (bull) and describes his look: he has a bovine head. At times he has a companion called Māṭatti. Māṭaṇ carries a spear or club, Māṭatti only a club, and both are sometimes depicted with a child in their hands or mouths. In some temples Māṭaṇ becomes Taḷavāy Māṭaṇ, 'Commander Māṭaṇ', as in the temple of Teṅkaraimakarājēsvarar in Cittūr. We have seen above how the priests connect Rāyar to Virabhadra. The myth of Dakṣa's sacrifice seems well known in the Tirunelveli district,<sup>26</sup> and in this temple it serves to connect the local god, Māṭaṇ, to the pan-Hindu tradition<sup>27</sup>:

After Taṭṭaṇ (Skt. Dakṣa) had brought under control Śiva's mischievous behavior (koṭṭam) by giving him his daughter Pārvati in marriage, he prepared a magnificent sacrifice which was meant to prove that nobody could exceed him in greatness. The smoke of the sacrifice caused great trouble to the gods of the sky, and they complained to Śiva about it. Śiva sent out Gaṇapati and Murukaṇ, but they could not do anything about the problem. The smoke of the sacrifice caused sweat to appear on Śiva's body. In anger he shook it off and it fell to the earth and split it in two. At that spot appeared "Viyarvai puttiraṇ" (literally "son of sweat", a folk etymology for Virabhadra) decked out with weapons and ready to do Śiva's command. Śiva asked him to destroy Taṭṭaṇ's sacrifice. On the way to the sacrifice Viyarvai puttiraṇ met Gaṇapati and cut off his head. Next he cut off the head of Taṭṭaṇ and brought the sacrifice to a halt. When he returned, Pārvati said: 'Viyarvai puttiraṇ has unjustly killed my son and my father.' Śiva then sent Viyarvai puttiraṇ back to revive the two. But since Viyarvai puttiraṇ had thrown the heads of Gaṇapati and Taṭṭaṇ into the sacrificial fire, where they had burned, he cut off the head of a small elephant that he saw on the way and set it on Gaṇapati, and for Taṭṭaṇ he cut off a bull's head (kāḷaiyiṇ talai). Then he revived the two. God (īraivaṇ, i. e., Śiva) changed Taṭṭaṇ into a military commander (taḷavāyāka māṛri) and sent him to earth to serve people.<sup>28</sup>

Taḷavāy cāmi first went to Tiruvāṇantapuram to worship Patmaṇāpacāmi during the paṅkuṇi festival. This took place during the reign of Rāmavarma Kulacēkaraperumāl. The god Patmaṇāpacāmi settled Taḷavāy cāmi in a jack tree (palā; actually 'ōṭṭuppalā' or 'oṭṭuppalā'; Tiṇamalar) at the edge of a water tank near the entrance to the southern

<sup>26</sup> For Aṅkāḷamman's connection to Dakṣa see Meyer 1986: 231.

<sup>27</sup> On the theme of how local deities link with the pan-Hindu tradition see Chapter IV.

<sup>28</sup> Tiṇamalar, 22.3.1989.

fort. Devotees who went from Tiruvānantapuram to Tiruccentūr (to the famous Murukan temple) for the flag hoisting ceremony took a fruit from this jack tree with them to give to Murukan. On the way to Tiruccentūr, Taḷavāy cāmi came on one of the devotees and through him told the other pilgrims who he was. He made it known that he wanted to be the minister (mantiri) of Cittūr Makārājā and that he should be established in the 'kanni' (southwest) corner of the temple. The devotees then raised a sacrificial fire and out of it arose Taḷavāy cāmi with the head of a bull. Thus they established Taḷavāy Māṭaṅ in Cittūr.<sup>29</sup>

To serve its own need, the folk myth here has altered Dakṣa's substitute head from that of a ram to that of a bull; furthermore it has fused two separate myths: the myth of Dakṣa's sacrifice with the myth of Śiva's filicide.<sup>30</sup>

Another form of Māṭaṅ is Cuṭalaimāṭaṅ. His name is derived from 'cuṭalai', 'cremation ground', because, as soon as Cuṭalaimāṭaṅ was born, he ran to the cremation ground and feasted on the corpses.<sup>31</sup> Another etymology is from 'cuṭar', 'flame', because he was born from the sparks of a flame that his mother had collected.<sup>32</sup> His foster-mother is Brahmaśakti. (She was born from Pārvatī's sweat that Śiva had caused to fall into their wedding fire.) Śiva ordered Cuṭalaimāṭaṅ to go to earth. There he plundered, destroyed, killed, until he finally asked for a place in the temple of Corimuttu Aiyaṅār. Aiyaṅār refused and Cuṭalaimāṭaṅ therefore settled in the most beautiful tree in the forest, together with Brahmaśakti. This very tree was chosen to become the flagstaff at the Murukan temple of Tiruccentūr. Cuṭalai, angry that his tree was being cut down, caused the carpenters to hack into each other's legs and after much blood had flowed, the carpenters prayed to Corimuttu Aiyaṅār for help. Aiyaṅār explained the matter to the carpenters and told them to worship Cuṭalaimāṭaṅ. Cuṭalaimāṭaṅ then accompanied the tree to Tiruccentūr on a white horse and received many sacrifices.<sup>33</sup>

Before we go on to visit a few more gods, let us see what we can retain as some of the typical features of folk religion. Certain iconographic characteristics help us identify the deities, but these features are not rigid, they adapt themselves to local tastes and customs. They include śaiva and vaiṣṇava symbols (the ash stripes versus the vertical nāmam, red or pink coloring versus the blue/black of the vaiṣṇava deities, weapons that are

<sup>29</sup> Tinamalar 22.3.1989.

<sup>30</sup> On the myth of how Śiva cut off Gaṇeśa's head see Courtright 1985: 62 ff.

<sup>31</sup> Reiniche 1979: 202 ff.

<sup>32</sup> Arunachalam 1976: 191.

<sup>33</sup> The long and interesting story of Cuṭalaimāṭaṅ can be found in Reiniche 1979: 202; a slightly different and shorter version in Arunachalam 1976: 191 ff.; see also below, Chapter V.

carried either by Śiva or Viṣṇu). These are deliberately employed to integrate the two religious traditions in either one single deity or in different deities within one temple. Folk religion does not follow the strict separation between śaiva and vaiṣṇava cultic imagery and worship, as does the 'high' brahmanical religion. While the latter tradition, at least in Tamilnadu, expresses itself in large temple structures, regular pūjā times, specific modes of worship and regularly celebrated festivals and always needs Brahmans as officiants, priests of a folk deity can be of any caste, and the ways and times of worship in a folk temple are loosely structured. We have noticed that some temples are public, others private. A public temple (potu kōvil) is one at which everyone in the village can worship and to which all the villagers, regardless of caste, pay a festival contribution. Private temples (conta kōvil) belong to families or clans, and it is they who decide upon the type of worship, festival and access to the deity. Under certain circumstances a private temple can be treated as public, e. g., if the owners of the temple make up the majority of the village 's inhabitants or if they decide to open the temple to the public. What we have noticed as well is how local myths interweave with the more popular myths of Sanskrit tradition; we shall discuss this in detail in Chapter IV.

### 6. *Muṇi, Muṇiśvara, Muṇiyāṅṅi*

Mēṭṭūr is a village in the northwest corner of Salem district. Its fame stems from its dam, the Mēṭṭūr dam, built by the British between 1925 and 1934. The dam is 60 m high and almost two kilometers long and it regulates the outflow of the Kāvēri river water, water that farmers all through Tamilnadu down to the Bay of Bengal depend on. At the edge of the village, on a platform jutting out onto the river, sits Muṇi or Muṇiyappar. About five meters in height, he is an impressive god; his bare upper body, strong arms and face are a bright orange color, his thighs are covered with yellow pants, and in 1988 he wore a silver crown. His right leg is folded horizontally, his left leg hangs down and rests on the head of a demon (arakkar). The large sword in his left hand, his black moustache and protruding eyes mark him as a fierce deity (tuṣṭa teyvam) and, because he is fierce, said the priest, the British were unable to remove the god. When the dam was being built, the British engineer wanted to blow up the statue of Muṇi, but the god appeared in his dream and said: 'I do not wish to be taken away from this place. The waters of the Kāvēri have to flow around my feet. If you do what you have in mind, you will never be able to build this dam!' The next morning the engineer

gave orders not to blow up the statue.<sup>34</sup> At the feet of the huge god are seven stones representing the seven maidens (Kannimār); they are Muniyappar's companions and follow him on his nightly rounds some 50 kilometers down the river and back. Animals are sacrificed to the god a few meters away from the temple; other offerings the god likes are arrack, toddy, cigars and gañjā. The god's main function is to guard the dam, but he is also worshipped by women who wish children, and he cures those afflicted by malignant spirits and black magic.

Traveling by bus from Mēṭṭūr to Pavāni one notices the giant statues of Muṇi, who sit singly or in groups left and right of the road, sometimes clearly visible, sometimes partly hidden by trees. They are a typical feature of the landscape here in the Salem, Erode and Coimbatore districts. Often the Muṇi are main deities, as in the above case, with only the seven maidens as companions. These are usually vegetarian and get covered when the Muṇi receives his goat sacrifices. Sometimes the Muṇi are the watchful guardians of other deities, as e. g., in the case of Paṇṭāra Appicci, whose festival we shall attend in chapter five.

Muṇi is one of the most versatile gods: he sits, stands or kneels, each pose altering his character. Sitting, Muṇi appears singly or in groups; kneeling or standing, he is alone. His standing form resembles the giant, pot-bellied entrance guardian called Āḷi in the Tirunelveli district, or simply pūtam ('demon') in other areas. The three outstanding characteristics of Muṇi are his fierceness or wildness, his tremendous height and his love of cigars.

In the cantonment area of Tiruccirāppaḷi near the busstand there is a small shrine to Muṇicuvarar (Skt. Muṇiśvara). This used to be an area of wilderness (kāṭu) and the god was in form of a stone under a Margosa tree. The place was called 'reṭṭaippālam' ('two bridges') and the god was called 'reṭṭaippāla Muṇi'. People were afraid to come into this area after dark because they would see a strange man in a white turban smoking a cigar near the bridge. He would ask people for things and if they gave them to him, he would reveal his huge form, and they would recognize the god. The priest explained that the god had to be in his terrifying form for his nightly guardian duty, and for this purpose he needed the cigars and arrack (that devotees can offer to the god). He guards a territory which includes the Head Post Office, the busstand and railway station and reaches up to the Commissioner's office. The god tends to appear to people in a huge white form (some say the form reaches into the sky). In this form the Muṇi of the Mēṭṭūr dam once scared one of the policemen on guardian duty during the visit of the late Indian prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi. It was midnight when the policeman noticed a white figure and

<sup>34</sup> Tinamalar, 21.9.1988.

when he ran towards it, it dissolved. The villagers later explained to him that he had seen the god who usually makes his rounds at that time.

Just before the bus enters Kantarvakkōṭṭai coming from Tañcāvūr, one can catch glimpses of a large stone elephant. It faces Aṭaikkalañkāta Aiyānār (aṭaikkalam = ‘refuge’), the main god of the temple. One of the guardian deities (kāval teyvam) of this Aiyānār is Veḷḷaimuṇi, the ‘white’ Muṇi, a large, white standing figure holding a club and accompanied by a tiger.<sup>35</sup> There is no roof over his head because the god does not wish to be placed in a shrine; in fact, he used to grow in stature as well as in power and the gods of the sky, worried that he would become greater than they, placed a liṅga on his head. Apart from stopping the god’s growth, it protects him from heat and rain. Veḷḷaimuṇi’s power is believed to be in his eyes: Aiyānār once went to visit the goddess Minākṣī of Maturai and told her: ‘I need a meat-eating god.’ She sent Veḷḷaimuṇi with him. Having arrived in Kantarvakkōṭṭai, Muṇi looked back towards his home, Maturai, and everything that stood in the path of his look caught fire. Since then people are afraid to build houses in the range of his vision. It was Muṇi who asked the Dalits to do pūjā at the temple, and he promised to take care of any mistakes they might make (meaning probably any violations of purity rules).

As a last example, let us look at a rather curious form of Muṇi, a female one. Nāṭarāyacuvāmi of Mēṭṭuppalaiyam (Erode) is a form of Aiyānār. The temple stands alone in the wilderness and Nāṭarāyacuvāmi was described by the informant priest as ‘vaṇa teyvam’, ‘forest deity’. Facing him and facing Karuppaṇṇacuvāmi, who has a separate shrine behind the temple complex of Nāṭarāyacuvāmi, is Makāmuṇi, an impressive female figure kneeling on her right leg, showing fangs and a halo of fire, and surrounded by other Muṇis only partly sculpted into the rock. In her hands she carries the triśūla and the kapāla. Goats are sacrificed directly in front of Makāmuṇi, while a curtain shields Nāṭarāyacuvāmi. (The same female type of Makāmuṇi has a shrine in the Vīrakkumārācāmi temple of Veḷḷakkōvil. I have not come across the name Makāmuṇi or Muṇi for a female deity anywhere else.) One of the priests of the four hundred Paṇṭāram families, who share the pūjā duties at this temple, related the following story:

Long ago, in this area, there was a Muṇi who killed many people. The people came to Nāṭarāyacuvāmi and prayed for help. Nāṭarāyacuvāmi said to Makāmuṇi: ‘Sit here!’ (i. e., close to Nāṭarāyacuvāmi). Makāmuṇi agreed on condition that she be given a thousand goats (āṭṭukkaṭā) for each step she took (towards Nāṭarāyacuvāmi). The god consented. Then he told his guardian, Karuppaṇṇacuvāmi, to put chains around her feet and waist and drag her to the sanctum. When Karuppaṇṇacuvāmi had done so, Nāṭarāyacuvāmi placed his foot

<sup>35</sup> See plate.

on the chain to prevent Makāmuṇi from escaping. Makāmuṇi asked for her goats. Nātarāyacuvāmi offered her a thousand goats, but Makāmuṇi was not satisfied saying she had asked for a thousand goats per step (aṭi). The god replied: 'I didn't promise you a thousand goats per aṭi, but a thousand goats per āṭi. Thus you will receive a thousand goats in the month of āṭi.'

Muṇi is known to cure mental illness, spirit possession and nightmares, and the priests prepare small copper caskets containing mantras that can be worn as amulets and that are placed on the Muṇi's neck after the cure has been effected. The temple is famous for its exorcism rites, which take place at night during the festival time in the month of āṭi. We visited the temple in 1991, and there were a number of women being exorcised, not more than a dozen though, and very much less than when Elmore visited the temple.<sup>36</sup> The possessed shook their heads back and forth, loosening their hair – which is typical for this rite. A group of men, among them ascetics with matted hair, tried to get the possessing spirits to reveal their names and villages. Once both were known, the women were dragged to a particular tree where a strand of their hair was nailed into the tree trunk and cut. Spirits cannot jump over iron; the nail fixes them onto the tree. Various men performed 'possession feats', hitting themselves with bamboo sticks, swallowing lit campher, and walking on sandals with upward facing nails. It was hard to determine who was possessed by a malignant spirit and who by the deity. The ghostly ceremonies lasted until dawn, when many men lined up to sacrifice their goats to Muṇi, while the main deity's door was closed.

Muṇiyāṇṭi is Muṇi's name in the Madurai district area. Here he is also a large figure standing near the temple compound entrance. Because of his red skin color and the śaiva markings on his forehead, he is considered a form or aspect (amcam, Skt. amśa) of Śiva. He has lent his name to a chain of restaurants ('Muṇiyāṇṭi Vilās') specializing in non-vegetarian food.

### 7. *Maturai Vīraṇ*

Maturai Vīraṇ is a god known in the whole of Tamilnadu and made famous by a film in which M. G. Ramachandran, actor and longtime chiefminister of Tamilnadu, played the role of Maturai Vīraṇ. Cakkiliyars (a Dalit community who traditionally worked with leather) claim Maturai Vīraṇ as their clan or caste deity because the god was brought up by Cakkiliyars who found the child in the forest, where it had been abandoned by its royal parents. Maturai Vīraṇ is worshipped by many

<sup>36</sup> Elmore 1925: 51 ff.



caste people, and he is also loved by those who spend their money on alcohol. The picture of the god hangs in arrack and toddy shops, and the god is often depicted with bottles of liquor at his feet; in fact, such bottles constitute an important offering to Maturai Vīraṇ.<sup>37</sup> According to the myth, Maturai Vīraṇ once replaced his father (the Cakkiliyar who had brought him up) in guarding the princess who had reached puberty and was living secluded in a hut at the edge of town. This girl, Pommi, fell in love with Maturai Vīraṇ, and the two secretly married and eloped. The king sent his army to find his daughter, but Maturai Vīraṇ successfully did battle with the soldiers. He and Pommi went to Tiruccirāppaḷli. There, Vīraṇ defeated the robbers (kaḷḷar) who had made traveling in the kingdom a risk and, later, when he and Pommi were in Maturai, he similarly cleaned Maturai and its surroundings of the robbers. In Maturai, Vīraṇ fell in love with a dancer, Veḷḷaiyammāl. When he tried to abduct the maiden at night, he was caught, and not being recognized because of his disguise as a robber (kaḷḷar), was condemned to have his arms and legs cut off. The king arrived and, realizing too late that the robber was the hero who previously had done him a great service, he begged the goddess Mīnākṣī to restore Maturai Vīraṇ's life. This the goddess did; however, Maturai Vīraṇ decided it was his fate to die, and he cut off his own head with a small knife. With the permission of the king, Pommi and Veḷḷaiyammāl immolated themselves on Vīraṇ's funeral pile. Mīnākṣī granted Vīraṇ his wish to become her guardian and, after the dead hero had appeared in the dream of the king demanding to be worshipped, a cult was established for him. Maturai Vīraṇ's shrine is on the eastern side of the Mīnākṣī temple.<sup>38</sup> Maturai Vīraṇ is a god who appeals to many castes: The Teluṅku speaking Toṭṭiyar or Nāyakkar caste (Pommi's caste), Kaḷḷar and Maṟavar castes, who identify with the hero because of his courage, his 'qualities' as robber (he 'robbed' his two women) and conquerer of robbers.<sup>39</sup> Maturai Vīraṇ personifies the upstart who, despite his poor and low social background, achieves fame and who, flaunting the rules of society, pursues his goal despite the consequences this can entail. His courage in the end wins him a place as guardian deity.

We find Maturai Vīraṇ in the entourage of Aiyaṇār, and he is a favorite guardian of goddesses. He can also occupy the central position of a temple. As main deity in the Coimbatore district he is portrayed sitting on a white horse, accompanied by his wife (Pommi), his mistress (Veḷḷaiyammāl) and his dog. There he is worshipped mainly by Dalits as their clan deity. Though generally a meat-eating god, he tends to become

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<sup>37</sup> See plate

<sup>38</sup> For a good summary of the story of Maturai Vīraṇ see Shulman 1985: 355 ff.; Tamil texts: Maturai Vīracuvāmi Katai and Vīraiyaṇ Ammāṇai.

<sup>39</sup> Kaḷḷar and Maṟavar used to be 'robber' castes, see Shulman 1980c; Dirks 1989.

vegetarian when he occupies the central place in the temple, and then one of his guardians, in the Coimbatore district e. g., Makāmuṇi, the kneeling form of Muṇi, will receive the meat offerings. Iconographic variants of Maturai Viṛaṇ are his standing form, again with his two consorts and a dog, and his sitting figure (in which he resembles the sitting Muṇi), a form we find in the northeastern part of Tamilnadu. Here he often is simply called Viṛaṇ, 'hero' and may be single or with only one lady at his side.

### *8. General Remarks on the myths and priests*

The above six portraits give us an idea of the kind of deities and themes that shall be our concern in the following chapters. Let us now look at a few general points. We have already remarked on the variability of a deity's outer form. This should be kept in mind for the next chapters, meaning that wherever we can establish a rule, there is likely to be an exception. There are hundreds of different deities in Tamilnadu and to mention them all would be pointless and is not really necessary since, once we understand certain patterns, it becomes easy to assign a deity a character and place. One way to understand a deity is through his or her myths, especially when these myths explain where the local deity stands in relation to the great gods and goddesses of the pan-Hindu tradition. The linking of a local deity to a pan-Hindu deity is complex and we shall look at it in a separate chapter.<sup>40</sup> Many folk myths tell of the deities' interaction with humans; they tell us how the deities live on earth and how sometimes they have a difficult time getting humans to pay attention to them. There is a meeting point between folk deity and devotee, and this meeting point is on earth, but often in a mythic time. It is not really relevant at what point in time the caste or clan ancestor became connected to a god or goddess; genealogies at some point tend to cross the threshold that separates human time from mythic time. In fact, one could ask the question if for the devotees there is a difference between human time and mythic time. There is such a closeness between deities and devotees, so much communication and interaction between them that it becomes difficult to consign each to a different category or world.

The deities can be regarded as property, be it of a single person or a group, and as such they can change hands, even be sold. We shall see in the next chapter that once a deity has become established, 'rooted to a spot', he or she cannot be removed. If a clan or priest settles in a different village, he can transport his deity in the form of a mobile statue or some

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<sup>40</sup> See chapter IV.

earth from the temple, but the immobile icon will remain in the original place.<sup>41</sup>

The main deity of the village Aracañkuṭi (Trichy) is Tillaikkāḷi.<sup>42</sup> Some five generations ago, Veḷḷāḷars established the goddess near the river, where they had found her floating in the water. Then Veḷḷāḷars together with Mutaliyārs constituted the majority group in the village. Some time later Kaḷḷars settled in the village, and in the 1930ies these Kaḷḷars took some earth from the Tillaikkāḷi temple and established the goddess closer to the village, where she presently is. The goddess is now fully in the hands of Kaḷḷars, the other castes having by and by left the village. One informant said that the Veḷḷāḷars had accused the Kaḷḷars of stealing their goddess and that they had gone to court about the issue. The judge apparently had said: 'The Kaḷḷars' Kāḷi is Koḷḷaikkāḷi (stolen Kāḷi), the Veḷḷāḷars' Kāḷi is Tillaikkāḷi'.

A Veḷḷāḷar is priest of Paḷḷattūr Aiyaṇār whose shrine is located in a wilderness area outside the small town of Vallam (near Tañcāvūr). Previously the god was in Paḷḷattūr, where he was looked after by a Mutaliyār priest. One day the god had woken up the priest and told him that some people were planning to kill him and advised him to flee. The priest placed Aiyaṇār with his two wives in a basket and hurried away. Near Vallam he placed the basket on the ground in order to wash his hands and brush his teeth, and when he was ready to continue the journey he was unable to lift the basket. Aiyaṇār told him that he liked it here, but the Mutaliyār, afraid to stay, sold the god to a Veḷḷāḷar for a hundred rupees. The buyer was the present priest's grandfather.

Priests are particularly close to the deity. They are responsible for the well-being of the god or goddess and under certain circumstances, e. g., if the temple has no income, this can even mean that the priests have to pay from their own pockets for the pūjā items (oil for the lamp, incense, rice, etc). Temple income is generated from donations, leasing of temple lands or from funds by the Hindu Religious and Charities Endowment Board which, if a temple falls under its auspices, pays the salary of the priest and contributes to the festival expenses. The Board's task is to look after the finances of a temple. Practically this means that an officer appointed by the Board checks the accounts of the temple, while a group of trustees, chosen from the village, is responsible for the proper maintenance, festivals etc. of the temple. The Board, once it takes over a temple (this happens especially when a temple is rich), often appoints a Brahman priest. This can lead to considerable changes in the cult, e. g., stopping of non-vegetarian offerings, a rapprochement between folk and pan-Hindu

<sup>41</sup> See also Chapter V.

<sup>42</sup> Tillaikkāḷi is famous in Citamparam, where she is the fierce, dark goddess of the northern boundary, see Shulman 1980a: 218 f.

deities. A good example of this is the Aiyānār temple of Cūrakṅōṭṭai (Thanjavur). There are two Aiyānār temples side by side. One is rich because the god is said to protect the road and the passing vehicles, and therefore lorry drivers stop to worship and drop money into the hundial (collection box). The other temple is poor and in a dilapidated condition. The poor Aiyānār is the elder brother of the rich Aiyānār, and in the poor temple Dalits (Paraiyars) have been priests for many generations. Some of the deities (Aiyānār, Caṅṅāci and Vaṭuvāci) are vegetarian, but the guardians (Maturai Vīraṅ, Pēcci, Muṅiyāṅṭavar, Muttāl Rāvuttaṅ) receive goat and chicken sacrifices. None of the deities in the younger Aiyānār temple get animal offerings and the only concession that the Kurukkaḷ (Brahman), a government appointed priest, makes is allowing offerings of cigars and alcohol to Maturai Vīraṅ. Apart from these changes in food offerings, the Brahman priest has effected a shift of focus in one of the guardians: Muttāl Rāvuttaṅ has become Vāpar. Muttāl Rāvuttaṅ is one of Aiyānār's meat-eating and alcohol drinking guardians in the Thanjavur district, but his more prominent role is as guardian of Draupadi.<sup>43</sup> Vāpar, like Muttāl Rāvuttaṅ, is a Muslim, yet he is guardian of the famous Aiyappaṅ at Sabarimalai. By changing the name to Vāpar, the priest is successfully suggesting that this guardian of Aiyānār (who in any case is a form of Aiyappaṅ) has the same status as Vāpar, guardian of the famous Aiyappaṅ, and he thereby establishes a connection between the local Aiyānār temple and the pan Southindian Sabarimalai Aiyappaṅ.

We have already said that the majority of priests at folk temples are non-Brahmans. Brahman can be priests of folk temples, but are rarely so, and then, as the above example shows, are often appointed by the government and are not hereditary priests. Non-Brahman priests will call Brahman priests to act as ritual experts for special occasions, for instance, to help in the festival decoration of the deity or to assist in specific vegetarian pūjās. Most Tamil villages are divided into caste villages (villages in which no Dalits live) and Dalit villages. In the caste village non-Brahmans, non-Dalits, are priests of folk temples, while in the Dalit villages or quarters, Dalits will be priests. Generally, Dalits do worship at caste temples, but they do not enter them. In 99% of the temples visited for the present study, the priests of caste temples admitted that Dalits did not step beyond the temple entrance and when asked why, they simply explained that 'it was custom'. (This happens despite the fact that the deities of Dalits are part of certain public caste temples and that the Dalits themselves have important roles in the festival ceremonies of these temples.) Generally, when a Dalit worships at e. g., an Aiyānār caste temple, the priest will bring the plate with the sacred flame and the

<sup>43</sup> Hildebeitel 1989: 339 ff., see also in Hildebeitel 1991.

prasāda to the entrance and either place it on the ground, letting the Dalit take the sacred ash by himself, or hold the pūjā plate out to the Dalit, but then sprinkle water over himself in order to purify himself. This happens regardless of whether the priest is a vegetarian or not, regardless of whether the deity accepts blood sacrifices or not. A caste person will not accept prasāda consisting of food, especially cooked food, from a Dalit priest. In other words, while rules of who will accept food and water from whom also regulate the hierarchy within the castes, the gap is nowhere as pronounced as between persons of caste and Dalits. In this connection it should be mentioned that I, a white, non-Hindu woman, was allowed into all the temples, except those that did not grant access to women in general and those temples of Śiva and Perumāḷ that strictly forbid the entry to non-Hindus.

Priests are predominantly men. In the 300 temples visited for this study, only two had female priests. In one temple the priestess had taken over the duties from her brother-in-law's wife who had been priestess before her. In the other temple the woman had taken over the priestly duties from her mother-in-law, who had succeeded her son-in-law when he had become blind. One day, a strange old woman had appeared in front of the blind priest's wife and said: 'I am Karuppaṇaccāmi, come and do pūjā.' She did and for ten years she has been the priestess of this temple, despite opposition from her relatives (Vēlūr).

Usually the office of the priest is hereditary. It is a title owned by a family (perhaps granted to it long ago by a king or other ruling authority), and it is passed on from father to son. The title can be divided into shares (paṅku), and the various shareholders are called paṅkāḷi. Through this system of shares, one priest may have to take care of two or three temples (if for instance he inherits the shares of others) or, a number of paṅkāḷi may share the duties in one temple. The latter can lead to the extreme case of 400 priests working for one deity (thus 400 Paṅṭāram priests attend alternately for a few days to the god Nāṭarāyacuṁāmi in Mēṭṭuppalaiyam).

The office of the priest can be passed from one caste to another. This happens when 1. there is no heir and other members of the family cannot or do not want to take over the office; 2. the whole caste has left the village; 3. the government appoints a priest from a different caste; 4. the priest does not perform his duties properly; 5. the priest cannot afford to attend to his duties (because of lack of time or money) and other members of the family or caste refuse the office.

Informants regarded the office of priest with mixed feelings. The priest has to spend a certain amount of time for his duties and even if he does only one pūjā per day, it involves washing and decorating the deity, cooking rice (poṅkal) and worshipping the deity. Usually the deity will be

outside the village, and if the priest attends to two or three deities, it is well possible that he has to cover a distance of five to ten kilometers for his round. This leaves him little time to hold another job. Many small temples can barely be maintained, and their deities receive only weekly or twice weekly pūjās. Big festivals are the occasions when money flows into the temple, and they also help to spread the name and fame of the deity, which in turn brings more donations. Despite the various problems that his office can entail, the priest will not easily surrender it. For one, the priest tends to feel a certain attachment to his deity; for another, the office carries respect. All castes, including the high and/or powerful castes, worship the deity through the priest and receive the offerings (piracātam) of the deity through him.

Having gotten a feel for the gods and their attendants, we shall now look at how and where a deity is 'born' and where the folk deities are located within the village and its surrounding landscape.