

VI

Contextual Realities – Worship

1. Introduction

It is in worship that humans meet the divine – whichever way this divine power may be called or perceived. Worship too is manifold and can range from the quiet meditation to the loud and garish ceremonies in a temple or at a festival. Being able to see a deity on different levels and in different forms of manifestations, being able to understand a deity as something private as well as something public, and being able to worship different deities on the same or on different occasions, a Hindu can call any number of gods and goddesses his or her 'own'. If we ask a Hindu which deity he or she worships, we are likely to get one answer today, another answer tomorrow or instead of an answer, a puzzled look. It is well known that a Hindu can worship many deities as his/her 'own': an *iṣṭa* (chosen, personal) deity, a house deity, a clan/caste deity and the common deities of the village he/she inhabits.

Among educated Tamil Hindus there is the notion of interior and exterior worship, or *aka* and *puṛa valīpāṭu*. *Akam* and *puṛam* are terms relating to Sangam poetry and are very broad classifications: *akam* of love poetry, *puṛam* of war/heroic poetry.¹ *Akam* means inside, interior, heart; *puṛam* means outside, exterior. In the context of worship, *akam* generally is the personal, private worship, the worship of the chosen deity (*iṣṭa devatā*) as opposed to *puṛam*, the public worship, the worship of the clan/caste or village deity. A problem about a division along these lines is that the worship of the chosen deity (*iṣṭa devatā*) can very well coincide with the worship of a clan or village deity (which would fall under *puṛam*) – when these deities are the same. A different way of defining the two terms could be to separate the internal worship, the worship in the mind, from the external, the worship in action (ritual acts), but the problem here is that internal and external cannot be neatly divided because for every act there needs to be a mental impulse, at least a wish; every type of public or external worship involves an internal commitment on the part of the worshipper. However, what this division clearly shows is that worship functions on (at least) two levels: a private one that each individual shapes the way he/she wishes and that relates to the individ-

¹ See Marr 1985: 14 ff.; Ramanujan 1985: 231 ff.

ual's beliefs and perceptions of deity, and a public one that takes its form from external surroundings. For simplicity's sake we shall call public worship or external worship all those acts, activities and rituals that can be seen by the public and this includes personal worship (e. g., vows) performed as part of public worship. To speak about a person's internal worship is very difficult, not only because one would have to grapple with every individual's perceptions and understanding of deity and worship, but more so because few individuals are able to articulate their relationship to a god/goddess. Instead of speaking about internal or private worship, we shall try to relate worship to one of the more prominent models of the human self and show how in this context worship can fit the concepts of yoga.

2. *Public worship*

Introduction

In India the individual is embedded in a net of social and geographical components: he/she belongs to a family that in turn is part of a clan; the clan is part of the larger system of caste; he/she lives in a village or town that is protected by a number of public deities. Apart from his/her own chosen, personal deity, the individual worships regularly or occasionally a clan deity whom he inherits from his father and she from her husband, furthermore a caste deity; and he/she also participates (voluntarily or not) in the celebration of one or more deities of the village.

Clan deities are not regularly worshipped; some families visit the clan shrine only at the time of life cycle rites: after the birth of a child, for the first hair-cutting or the ear-boring ceremonies; others visit the clan deity at least once a year (usually in the month of *māci*), and for some clans this worship ends in a communal meal at which women are excluded. The frequency of worship depends much on how far the clan shrine is away from the family's home. While agricultural castes tend to be more settled, castes with other occupations (merchants, traders, craftsmen) tend to migrate easily.² When a family or clan leaves a village to settle elsewhere, it carries along some earth, stone or other symbol of the clan deity of their village and establishes the deity at the new place.

This happened about 250 years ago. *Pāṇṭi Rājān*, the king, demanded that we help build a dam. This kind of work was below our dignity and we refused. Thereupon the king made life very difficult for us and we finally left our village (Nattatti, Tirunelveli). We brought with us nine bricks, our clan deities. When we arrived in

² See e. g., Beck 1972: 5,14.

Kānkayam (Erode), our uncle removed three bricks from the basket, and at the place where he removed them, there stands a temple now. We continued and arrived here (in Veḷḷiyampati-Ātiyūr, Erode). The remaining six bricks were placed beneath a cactus (cappāṭṭukkaḷḷi – *Opuntia*) near a tree. The deities appeared in the dream of our grandfather and demanded to be established and worshipped. Very often the deities took possession of our grandfather, and finally he gave up his profession (toddy tapper) and became the priest of the deities. Later, due to a quarrel in the family, a part of the family took three of the bricks and moved to another village, where there is now a similar temple to the one that is here.

The temple is dedicated to Patrakāḷiyammaṅ (Bhadrakāli), and the three bricks from the original temple are beside the statue of this goddess in her shrine. The temple is famous enough to be listed in a pamphlet about important temples of the district published by the Religious Endowment Board. There are thirty Nāṭār families in Veḷḷiyampati-Ātiyūr, and four men (shareholders, paṅkāḷi) share the pūjā duties.³

Not all clans or families take along their clan deity, which means that some families have to travel long distances to visit their deity – this is one reason why worship is not very frequent. Very few informants knew how they got to have their particular clan deity; those who were ancestor deities were more easily remembered, but why e. g., one clan of the same caste worshipped Aiyaṅār as their clan deity, another Kāmākṣi and yet another Maturai Viṅār (all deities of different villages), none of the concerned knew. There are no evident patterns of a correspondence between high status clans and high status clan deities. Thus some Brahmans' clan deities are folk deities; e. g., one Aiyeṅkar Brahman clan worships Karuppar as clan deity; and the 'aṣṭasahasra' Aiyar Brahmans worship Aiyaṅār of Eṅṅāyiram (Viluppuram), a village they once lived in but since have left and which takes its name from them: Sanskrit 'aṣṭasahasra' is 'eṅṅāyiram' in Tamil and means eight-thousand.⁴

Castes tend to trace their ancestry to a myth involving a particular deity, e. g., the Cempaṭavars to the goddess Aṅkāḷammaṅ;⁵ the Mutaliyārs to Kāli;⁶ the Vaṅṅiyars to Draupadī;⁷ the Kaḷḷars to Karuppar;⁸ the Vēḷārs to Aiyaṅār,⁹ and often the clan deity of a family coincides with this 'caste deity'. 'Caste deity' was not a term generally used by informants, but the concept of a 'caste deity' seems to exist. For instance, even though different clans of one caste can have different clan deities, when

³ On the Nāṭār or Cāṅār see Samuel 1988; Hardgrave 1969; Thurston 1987, vol.6.

⁴ The 'aṣṭasahasram' are briefly mentioned in Thurston 1987.I: 338.

⁵ Meyer 1986: 98.

⁶ Reiniche 1987.

⁷ Hildebeitel 1988, 1991.

⁸ Dumont 1986.

⁹ See Chapter I.2.

problems need to be solved involving the whole caste, the different clans may meet under the auspices of the ‘caste deity’. The Kaḷḷar of Ara-caṅkuṭi (Trichy) e. g., resolve their clan disputes at the temple of Ālaṭi Karuppar in Vicalūr (Pudukkottai); the god apparently presides over the Kaḷḷar clans of some fifty villages.

Apart from worshipping his private (iṣṭa) deity and his clan and caste deities, an individual also participates in the festivals of the common (potu) deities of a village. These may be Māriyamman, Aiyanār, Celliyamman or others; there are no rules as to which and how many common deities there are in a village, and sometimes the entire village also participates in the festival of a private (conta) deity (e. g., when one clan dominates the village). Every god and goddess has distinctive rituals: those of Māriyamman differ from those of Aṅkāḷamman, etc., but these rituals are open to particular changes determined by the influences of caste and local customs and by geographical factors. Cults affect each other: a popular set of rituals of one deity can be adopted by another deity; thus e. g., Māriyamman's rituals may show considerable variations depending on the region and the caste composition of a region.

Each individual then worships any number of deities in any number of ways. Any theory that aims at trying to explain a Hindu's relationship with his/her deity/ies needs to take into consideration all the above components and furthermore the various levels on which deities are perceived externally (local, regional, pan-Hindu) and internally (without or with form and name) and be aware of the fact that neither an individual's preference of deity nor a deity's cult are stable. In other words, the factors that determine, surround and give form and meaning to a ritual are so complex that a theory fitting one ritual can prove useless for another ritual. At the basis of this problem of incongruity lies what Ramanujan called context.

Context

A. K. Ramanujan, in an essay entitled ‘Is there an Indian way of thinking’,¹⁰ stresses the importance of context in the Indian way of thinking. Borrowing the terms ‘context-free’ and ‘context-sensitive’ from grammatical rules,¹¹ he states: ‘In cultures like India's, the context-sensitive kind of rule is the preferred formulation.’¹² He illustrates this, for example, with the ancient Indian law-givers' sensitivity to context: they formulated different laws for the different varṇas and advised the

¹⁰ Ramanujan 1990.

¹¹ Lyons 1971: 235–241.

¹² Ramanujan 1990: 47.

king to consider and respect the local customs. If śruti and smṛti rules failed, recourse to ‘good custom’ (sadācāra, opinion of the learned) was acceptable. Kings had to be context-sensitive if they hoped to rule over tribal groups with customs much different from those on which the basically Aryan law-givers formulated their laws, and this context-sensitivity shows also in the rulers' ability to integrate local religious customs and beliefs into the royal cults.¹³ As another example of context-sensitivity Ramanujan mentions the phalaśruti verses: ‘... these verses tell the reader, reciter or listener all the good that will result from his act of reading, reciting or listening.¹⁴ They relate the text, of whatever antiquity, to the present reader – that is, they contextualise it.’ Rather than the history of a text, it is its use, its context and efficacy that are known, and these build on a system of encapsulation: frame and story, story within a story etc., each placing the other in context.¹⁵

Above we have tried to present some factors responsible for the complexity of Hindu worship. Rituals, myths and performances have to be seen in context; meaning, there needs to be an understanding of e. g., a deity's history and myths, the devotees' histories, myths, castes, the geography (surrounding cults) and the time. Some of the *terukkūttus* (‘street-plays’) in the Viluppuram district need to be understood in the context of the Draupadī cult and the Draupadī cult in the context of the local understanding of the Mahābhārata – Hildebeitel's study of the Draupadī and Kūttāṅṅavar cults are excellent examples of the importance of context. The short-hand enactment of the weaver's self-sacrifice to Kālī and the goddess's revival of them cannot be understood without the myth.¹⁶ Devotees who parade down the streets of *Tiṅṅiṅaṅam* (Viluppuram) dressed in red or black saris, wearing crowns and ‘swallowing’ plastic tubes (representing intestines) make sense only in the context of the *Aṅkālamman* festival and the myth of *Pēcci*.¹⁷

Context is one way in which to understand worship, but apart from context there are ritual acts that we can read without having to understand the context; they are acts that take their meaning from a shared Hindu code or Hindu language. Showing a camphor flame in front of a deity has the same meaning regardless of context, a meaning shared by Hindus but not necessarily by supporters of other religions.

¹³ See e. g., Kulke 1993; Mallebrein 1996.

¹⁴ Ramanujan 1990: 48.

¹⁵ Ramanujan 1990: 48f.

¹⁶ See below.

¹⁷ Meyer 1986: 127 ff.

Meanings – what we see, what they say

When a researcher asks the priest why he does a particular ritual and why he does it this way, how often is the answer not *paramparā'* (Ta. *paramparai*) – 'because it is our tradition, because our forefathers have been doing it (like this)'. The person answering need not be a Brahman priest involved in a Vedic ritual that has been transmitted through countless generations;¹⁸ any village priest performing a public ritual can offer the same frustrating answer. It is up to the researcher to travel to the next village, ask the priest there and perhaps get a useful answer; but there is no trusting this answer because the priest from the third village may have a different answer for the same ritual. What do we do when each priest of *Aṅkāḷamman* offers a different name for the figure in the cremation ground; or what are we to believe when *Māriyamman* is 'married' to a tree trunk and one priest identifies the tree trunk with her husband, another with a demon and yet another denies the marriage of the goddess altogether? The researcher can dig in books, can conjecture and come up with a coherent theory that will satisfy the scholar but will hardly impress the village priest. What counts for him is what *he* does and believes and not what happens in the next village. Clearly the ritual can be called meaningless (Staal) when there is no obvious meaning on the level of performance; but that there is an underlying meaning, one that once, generations ago, connected the ritual to a set of beliefs or to an event or myth now lost, cannot be discounted. To attribute a meaning to a ritual purely from the performance level, from the visible act, is extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Let us take an example: At the time of the festival of *Vīramākāḷiyamman* of *Pāpanācam* (Thanjavur), the priest (a *Ceṅkunta Mutaliyār*) becomes the goddess by wearing her wooden figure, including her head. He comes out of the temple and with the accompaniment of music proceeds to a field (*paṭukaḷam* – battlefield) in the middle of which a long pole has been set up. A small platform at the top of the pole is sheltered by an umbrella. On this platform, high above ground, sit two people dressed in costumes; they represent a king and a queen. At the bottom of the pole there is a square hut made of large pieces of sack cloth. A (forbidden) look inside reveals banana leaves smeared with a red liquid and above them three heads realistically detached from the three bodies that lie behind the heads (i. e., three men are buried up to their necks while another three have their heads hidden in the earth). Outside the hut a man stands guard. He is dressed in a female costume, wears a crown and holds a *triṣūla*. He represents the goddess *Durgā*. *Vīramākāḷiyam-*

¹⁸ See Staal 1989: 116.

man, who has reached the field, walks once around the hut, then sits for a while on a chair facing it. Suddenly, she rushes towards the hut; the cloth is quickly lifted and she throws some sacred ash inside. A man is dragged out of the hut and brought in front of Kālī. Again the goddess rushes towards the hut, and the same scene is repeated. This happens three times. Two weavers then mount the pole and bring down the king and queen who worship the goddess. The hut is dismantled and Vīramākāliyamman goes slowly through the village, stopping at each door to receive worship from the devotees and to offer them in return prasāda.

Reiniche describes the same ritual as she observed it in a village in the Trichy district (here too Kālī belongs to weavers): ‘Kāliyamman (the disguised pūjāri) goes to the paṭukaḷam kuḷi.¹⁹ In an open space in the north of the temple, six holes (kuḷi) are dug. In each of them, a weaver facing south is sitting or lying down as if he was dead. Beside the holes are offerings (coconut, betel, bananas and a 50p. coin). Around the six holes is spread a kind of screen provided by the washerman. When goddess Kālī reaches the kaḷam, a pumpkin is cut (earlier a he-goat was sacrificed). The goddess throws margosa leaves on each hole, and she is worshipped. The ‘dead men’ come back to life and go for a bath. This ritual is part of a local myth (which Reiniche gives further on). The next four days, the living goddess Kālī goes out in a procession’.

What is obvious about the ritual is that the goddess revives the dead bodies of weavers – in one case we can see three, in the other six men. In Reiniche's description the pole with the king and queen are missing. Without any explanation from the priest or without the myth we could say that what is enacted is a human sacrifice of a kind, and Kālī of course is the perfect goddess to receive such a sacrifice. But what then do the pole and the royal couple signify? Are the two people on the pole doing tapas like Arjuna who climbs a pole in the Draupadī ritual cycles? Or are they being punished like Kāttavarāyaṇ who is meant to die on the stake? Suppose the myth is lost – a very likely event – how will the priest explain the ritual? And how are we, the researchers, supposed to interpret the ritual, especially when the performances of it vary? The underlying meaning of the ritual is a sacrifice, a death and revival, and any Hindu will be able to read the pumpkin as substitute for some animal, the margosa leaves or sacred ash as healing (making whole); the direction the bodies face (South) as that of death and ancestors; in other words, we would not necessarily need a myth in order to comprehend the basic message: if we offer ourselves to Kālī, she will revive us; and this can be interpreted within a great range of possibilities from an actual sacrifice of life, animal or human, to a vegetable offering, to the offering of the ego.²⁰

¹⁹ Reiniche 1987: 90–91.

²⁰ On sacrifice see below.

With this I am trying to show that the Hindu can very well understand the code (a sacrifice/revival; a sacrificial pole) but that he/she does not necessarily get the ‘right’ meaning, namely that supplied by the myth.

The myth that the weaver of Pāpanācam told me and the myth that Reiniche recorded are more or less the same.²¹ It tells how twelve heroic weavers sacrificed themselves in their endeavor to capture a villain (the king) and his wife (the queen) who lived in the middle of a lake in a palace built on a slippery pillar. (The three kings – Cēra, Cōla and Pāṇṭiya – had already given up the fight against the villain.) Only a human boat could cross the lake and for this, four weavers sacrificed themselves (the boat was fashioned from their limbs and intestines); two weavers offered themselves in sacrifice to Pūtaki, the goddess guarding the outer edge of the lake, one weaver offered his head to Durgā who guarded the pillar; another man sacrificed himself so that his blood mixed with sand and smeared onto the pillar could help the others ascend the otherwise slippery pillar, another offered his head to Vīramākāḷiyammaṅṅ who guarded the palace, and so on. The last weaver managed to conquer the villain. He reported the victory to the king, but the king did not believe his story. Therefore the hero cut off his own head. In the end Kāḷi revived all the heroes. When the king asked the weavers what gift they wished, they asked for a throne and torches that would burn day and night (both signs of great status). The king misled the weavers: as throne he gave them the loom at which they could work day and night in the light of the torches. (In Reiniche's version the weavers receive ‘palanquins, torches and every kind of honor’, i. e., there is no reference to the loom.) There are other variations, e. g., in the manner in which the heroes are sacrificed, but they are minor.

The questions we can ask are: why is the myth enacted; or, are the rituals we see actually an enactment of the myth? Are the acts we see rituals? What benefit is this enactment to the performers and to the onlookers?

Why is the myth enacted? The least reason seems to be to give meaning to the rituals; if the rituals gathered their meaning from the myth, there would have to be a much more precise correlation between the two; or at least the rituals would have to be enacted in such a way as to purport the story of the myth. There is a relationship between ritual and myth, but one can easily separate them: the rituals can be performed without the myth and the same rituals could basically serve different myths (above we have mentioned the pole; reviving the dead is a ritual performed also in the Draupadī cult, and the hole in the ground – kuḷi – is part of a ritual with sacrificial implications in an entirely different context elsewhere,

²¹ Reiniche 1987: 94 ff.

namely in Aracaṅkuṭi, as part of the enactment of an inter-village fight). What makes the interpretation of rituals through myths so difficult is that for some rituals any number of myths could fit and that any number of myths seem portrayable with one single ritual (see e. g., the rituals for Aṅkāḷamman). What we could say perhaps is that when myths are translated into rituals they are reduced to certain stock images or symbols that inhere in the tradition, and these images or symbols mainly seem to concern sacrifice (as e. g., when the entire story of Kāttavarāyaṇ is reduced to the final scene when the god mounts the stake). Where the professional story or myth teller works together with the priest who enacts or is in charge of the ritual, or, where story/myth teller and priest are combined in one person, myth and ritual inform each other; the more they are separate, the more the ritual is apt to change. The ritual does not disappear when the myth is lost because it has meanings beyond being a representation of a story, myth or any actual event. It survives, perhaps draws to itself a new myth (as e. g., Mācāṇiyamman of Ānaimalai has attached to herself a myth involving Rāma).

The myth of Vīramākāḷiyamman of Pāpanācam is known to the weaver priest and more or less to other weavers who worship the goddess as their clan deity, but it is not necessarily known to other inhabitants of the village, who nevertheless participate in the festival and may ask the goddess for advice when she goes through the village in procession. There is no recital of the myth, there is no publication of the myth, and even in the priest's telling of the story there were variations. As part of another celebration for the goddess, the priest will invite professional story-tellers, but what they told and sang the two times I got to know of it was not the story of Vīramākāḷiyamman but the story of Kāttavarāyaṇ. The story-telling performance was purely entertainment then and had nothing to do with the goddess except that Kāḷi does have a minor role in the Kāttavarāyaṇ story.

What we have said so far shows that the goddess' myth is important to the weavers as part of their clan-deity tradition, but is secondary to the festival and its rituals. The myth's function depends on the context: it may be entertainment, part of a cult (e. g., Draupadī), more or less loosely attached to a ritual, etc., or a piece of knowledge guarded by priests. In other folk traditions too myth and ritual function independently from each other.²²

When the myths are enacted, are the acts seen as rituals or simply as play? I do not wish to enter here on a discussion on ritual and its meanings which has been aptly done;²³ what I wish to do is make certain

²² See e. g., Claus 1993: 339.

²³ See e. g., Staal 1989; Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994; Bell 1987 and 1992; Michaels 1998.

observations that can help us understand the problems of definitions and interpretations of rituals. The Tamil word for ritual is *caṭaṅku* and it is a word used purely in the context of life-cycle rites (birth, marriage, death) or for stereotype, mechanical acts without content (similarly to the kind of ritual acts that Staal calls meaningless?). For the rituals that are part of a festival, Tamils use the term *nikaḷcci*, which means ‘incident, event, happening’, or *pūcai* (*pūjā*). This suggests that a ‘ritual’, *caṭaṅku*, is something much more structured, something that involves the knowledge of a specialist priest and of acts that a lay person does not necessarily understand, while the rituals within a festival are events open to all and are performed by specially designated people who need not be priests. Anyone who has seen or participated in a Hindu festival knows how difficult or impossible it is to try to parcel the events into neat categories of ‘ritual’, ‘performance’, ‘traditional practice’, ‘sacred’, ‘profane’ etc.. If I call certain acts within the festival ‘rituals’, it is for simplicity’s sake and, within the context of public worship, I would like to distinguish them from other acts by the following criteria²⁴:

1. They have a frame: a. time: the time of the festival (yearly, every second year etc.); a particular time within the festival (a special day, hour etc.); b. place (temple, village square, ‘battle field’) – this place is prescribed and prepared for the ritual (e. g., by purifying it).

2. There is the intention to make the act a ritual, – both on the part of those who decide to include the ritual in the festival and those who participate in it –, a ‘ritual commitment’²⁵ that distinguishes the ritual act from an everyday act; but it is non-intentional in the sense Humphrey and Laidlaw use the word, i. e.²⁶: ‘Ritualized action is non-intentional, in the sense that while people performing ritual acts do have intentions (thus the actions are not unintentional), the *identity* of a ritualized act does not depend, as is the case with normal action, on the agent’s intention in acting’; (e. g., the pit of hot coals is part of the festival, and those walking over it need to prepare for it and observe certain purity rules, but each person has his/her own reason for walking over the coals: fulfillment of a vow, proving the presiding deity’s power etc., – these vows could be fulfilled also in a different way, e. g., offering a goat; in the *Vīramākāḷiyammaṇ* ritual of reviving the dead weavers one can argue that for the priest the ritual is not non-intentional, but it is so for the others who do not know the myth).

3. They have a form, or we could say, they follow ‘constitutive rules’; in other words, they are recognized as a particular event within a particular festival; e. g., the pit of hot coals can be long or short, in front

²⁴ I follow loosely Michaels 1998.

²⁵ Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994.

²⁶ Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 89 ff.

of a temple or in a field, only men may walk over it or both men and women or only one designated person etc., but it will be recognized as a fire pit for a religious purpose.

4. They have to do with the belief in a supernatural being or element (deity, ancestor, spirit) and the belief in an exchange of power with that being or element. (Simply killing a goat for a meal without offering it first to the deity would not be considered a sacrifice, even if the killing happened during the festival.)

(The fifth component that Michaels mentions, a transformation of state or status, need not necessarily occur in the rituals considered here.)

Why are festivals celebrated, why do priests and laymen/women (the devotees) participate in the rituals even though they might not be aware of the meanings of the ritual actions: why does Iraṇiyaṇ (Māranāṭu) wear the goat intestines when the explanation he offers is rather tenuous and not at all evident? Why do hundreds of families visit the Paṇṭāra Appicci festival bringing sacrificial goats and chickens with them, but do not follow the procession of the pūṅkarakam to the river? Why do the cāmiyāṭi in Māranāṭu dance around a pole? In the following we shall offer some reasons that are applicable to all festivals; they are answers based on my observations of many different festivals, on the comments of priests, festival participants, devotees and my field assistants; they are a selection of answers; other researchers will find other answers.

At the root of many festival celebrations is power, power of the deity and power of the festival participants: the priests, cāmiyāṭis and devotees. The festival empowers the deity in a number of ways: a. the deity's power (śakti) is heightened by being called to be present in a fuller measure than normally (e. g., through the power in the pot, the karakam; through the power in the cāmiyāṭis).²⁷ b. the festival offers devotees the opportunity to strengthen their belief in the deity (through cures, solutions to problems etc.), and this enhances the deity's fame; c. a well-organized festival with many events (rituals and entertainments) attracts a large crowd, this brings income and fame and these in turn empower the deity.

Following the deity, the next ritual element to be empowered is the villager who gets 'first respect' (mutal mariyātai); this person can be the landowner, the head of the predominant caste (predominant in terms of wealth, political power and caste hierarchy), the head of the lineage that the temple belongs to, etc. First respect is shown by the act of offering prasāda to the most important person first. The person who receives the first honor stands closest to the deity, can worship the deity first and receives the blessing of the deity first, this means that the access to the deity reflects the power of a person. If this power is bound up with caste

²⁷ How the divine power is tied to the outward forms and acts we shall look at below.

hierarchy and landownership (e. g., if there are two castes of equal standing or two rivaling clans owning the village land) the fight for first respect can lead to a physical fight; many festivals are cancelled because of the rivalry for first respect. Receiving first respect translates into a blessing or acknowledgement from the deity of that person's power. The struggle or wish to be shown respect during a festival permeates the entire village population and is expressed in many subtle ways, e. g., who is allowed to carry the idol, who is the first to sacrifice his goat, who is allowed to sponsor which events, who is allowed to participate in which events. A festival is often full of tension because for every small action the village hierarchy has to be considered, and furthermore, because the festival is public, castes use it to legitimize their power. (The same struggles for honor and prestige marked the early Christian converts in South India.)²⁸

Priests and *cāmiyāṭis* too get some empowerment from the festival, but usually it lasts only as long as the festival. The priest is respected in his function as servant of the deity, but this does not endow him with any political power. His power is based on his role as priest, on his special ritual status (which e. g., allows him to touch the deity and perform certain rituals); and if the deity is his clan deity, the priest can derive power from his 'familiarity' with (or ownership of) the deity. In some temples the priest can earn much money during the festival, and if he invests it e. g., in land, it can lead to political power. Some priests will perform their duties in a purely professional way without much attachment to the deity, other priests will have a very close relationship with their deity, and the festival can be an occasion to strengthen that bond. The *cāmiyāṭis* (by performing at the festival) can consolidate their status within the clan hierarchy, they are respected as deities when they dance the deity and are possessed by him/her. They empower their own deities – both in the sense of filling the deity with *śakti* and raising or consolidating the status of their deity within the temple hierarchy (e. g., the clan deities at the *Māranātu* festival), and, like the priest, if they are attached to their deities, they can reinforce this bond.

Why do the devotees participate in the festival? Many will attend the festival ceremonies and some of the *pūjās* simply because it is a chance to show respect to and pray to the deity, a chance also to be part of the village community, a chance to break out of the daily routines. All village households contribute to the festival of a common deity and this gives them a right to take part in the festival and to receive food blessed by the deity (the amount of food and the way food *prasāda* is distributed varies from festival to festival). The festival offers the villagers (and people

²⁸ See Bayly 1992: 420 ff., and her reference to honors disputes in the big *śaiva* and *vaiṣṇava* temples at 1992: 42, note 49.

from outside the village) the chance to fulfill their vows, either in participating in one of the rituals such as walking over the hot coals (kuṇṭam irāṅkutaḷ, tī miti), carrying pots filled with milk for the washing of the deity (pāl kuṭam), carrying kāvāṭi, piercing their skin with silver spears (alaku kuttutaḷ), or in making a food (vegetarian or animal) or other offering (clay animal), or in any other way that is customary, e. g., dressing as deity (cāmi vēsam). For the ordinary devotee the festival is a time of showing bhakti and receiving the grace of the deity; the easy accessibility and the heightened power of the deity invite the devotee to enter in contact with the deity (through worship, through those possessed by the deity) and to profit from the god(dess)'s presence. Festivals tend to have rituals during which certain substances are filled with the deity's grace and power (the garlands on the pole in Māranāṭu, the ash and earth from which the cremation ground figure is made in the Aṅkāḷammaṅ festival; garlands worn by the deity; or simply the sacred ash and kuṅkumam of the pūjā) and these substances, taken home by the devotees, are believed to have healing and protective powers.

The festival is also a time to celebrate, to have 'fun': there will be musical performances (classical concerts or 'light orchestra' music), sometimes dances, theatrical plays, there will be market stalls, and – and this is important – food. Those who have vowed to offer a chicken or goat prepare a meal from the sacrificed animal, a meal that will be shared by the family members and their relations and friends (for poor families this may well be the only time they eat meat).

For the village as a whole the festival will mean a (re)establishment of social structures, a reinforcement of community cohesion, a strengthening of the deity and the deity's renewed protection of the village (of its people, cattle, fields, surrounding hills), and, perhaps even fame for the deity which in turn can lead to income for the temple and the village. Celebrating the deity also means perpetrating a cult, a tradition; for some priests and devotees this is a serious concern, but for the majority (unfortunately for the researcher) it matters little if a ritual is performed exactly the way it was performed generations ago, innovations seem welcomed by many devotees (especially if they lift the cult towards the pan-Hindu 'norms').

At the center of the festival, of the worship, is the deity, the deity's power. How is this power, which is invisible, understood in relation to its visible manifestations and forms, forms that, as we have seen, range from very strict patterns and formats to rather arbitrary shapes and configurations? This is what we shall look at now.

3. *Behind forms*

Calling the power into the mūrti

Stone, pot, anthropomorphic mūrti are gross, visible forms or containers of the all-encompassing deity power. The questions that this raises are: how does the power get into these objects and is it always present therein? In both the high or Brahmanical tradition and the folk tradition a particular rite is performed that either calls the power of the deity into the mūrti or activates the power that is dormant in it. In Tamil folk religion it is called: inviting or calling the śakti (cakti ālaippital); the Brahmanical term is (Skt.) āvāhana. This rite basically connects the all-encompassing and inner deity power with the outer form, and it ranges from a complex set of steps as prescribed in the texts to a simple devotional act as performed by non-Brahmanical priests. The complex rite, described e. g., by Brunner, Woodroffe, and Zimmer,²⁹ encompasses the following basic steps by the priest or devotee: he/she first changes him/herself into a specific deity or the deity to be worshipped, worships within him/herself the god or goddess to whom the external rite is addressed and then calls or invites into the material form of the deity (e. g., by means of mantras) the power of the deity or activates the power that already is in the mūrti. This rite is also called (Skt.) prāṇapraṭiṣṭhā, ‘life giving’³⁰, ‘consignment of the vital breath’³¹; the emphasis here is not on calling but on awakening the power of the deity (in the mūrti). There are two ways of looking at this rite of empowering an image: if the deity is believed to be ever present and in all things, then it cannot be called into something – in that case it would mean activating an already present power; if the divine power is not believed to be already present in the mūrti, then it has to be called into the object of worship and fastened therein (as was e. g., done in the Viṣṇu temple in Pittsburgh)³². (The first installation of a mūrti is a complex procedure in which the yantra of the deity and a pot containing specific gems, herbs, metals etc., are fixed in the earth upon which the actual figure of the deity is fastened.) Self-born (svayambhū) deities (e. g., deities manifesting in stones) contain the divine power from the beginning. According to Pfaffenberger the Tamil Hindus of the Jaffna Peninsula distinguish between ‘invited deities’ (Ta. ‘kūppiṭu teyvaṅkaḷ’) and ‘self-born deities’ (‘tāntōṅri teyvaṅkaḷ’); while the former are those deities who are ‘invoked by a ritual (kumpapicēkam) done by a Brahman

²⁹ Brunner 1990; Woodroffe 1973: 74, 1978: 473; Zimmer 1974: 586 f.

³⁰ Woodroffe 1978: 473, 1973: 74.

³¹ Zimmer 1974: 582.

³² See Clothey 1983: 186 ff.

priest', the latter correspond to the svayambhū deities in Tamilnadu (where the Skt. term is more commonly used).³³

Once an object of worship has been established and the divine power activated, that power resides within it until it is dismissed (Skt. *visarjana*, 'sending forth'). The availability of the power is not always the same. When a deity is not worshipped, for instance, the power lays dormant and needs to be awakened,³⁴ and this is the reason for calling or inviting the deity again and again. For the festival a pot (*karakam*, *kalacam*) filled with water and other ingredients is prepared (ideally at the river) and the deity called into it. This power can then be transferred to the deity in the temple, or it acts as support of the power of the permanent deity during the time of the festival. Usually the power is transferred from one object to the other via a connecting string (Tibetan Buddhists use the same method).

Woodroffe offers a different explanation for the *āvāhanam* and *prāṇapratīṣṭhā* ceremonies, namely that they do not serve to call and establish a deity ('How can God be made to come and go?'), but they serve to open the mind of the devotee to the deity's presence.³⁵ Similarly, according to him, the *visarjana* ceremony means that the devotee has ceased to worship the deity.

In Tamil folk religion the consecration of a new statue or of a renovated or freshly painted old one (e. g., a clay or cement statue) involves 'opening the eyes' of the statue (by painting in the pupils of the eyes – or, in metal statues by piercing the eyes with a needle); only then is the statue inhabited by the divine power. Often the eye-opening is accompanied by a blood sacrifice (usually a goat). Clay statues serving as permanent seats in a temple are left to disintegrate (in or around the temple) after they have been replaced by new statues; statues that serve only a temporary purpose (e. g., during the festival) are surrendered to a river or water tank at the end of the ceremonies. The actual seat of power remains, regardless of what happens to the statues because, as we have remarked, the divine power is rooted to a particular spot or place and basically is independent of any exterior form. How the divine power is encased, presented or represented, what covering it receives, has meaning only in terms of what personality the devotees assign it, under what name and form (*nāmarūpa*) they wish to worship it. Behind the form the formless is recognized and that is why the Hindu has no problem assimilating expressions of divine power from other religions:

About half way between Poḷḷācci and Vālapārai (Coimbatore), east of the road that leads into the mountains and hidden away on one of the

³³ Pfaffenberger 1979: 259.

³⁴ Brunner 1990: 15.

³⁵ Woodroffe 1978: 473.

rocky slopes, is the goddess Āttāliyamman. Below her is a large lake, created by a dam. The goddess, clothed in a sari, looks towards a cave. It is the cave that the goddess had pointed out as refuge when some Veḷḷāḷars and some Nāyakkars had come running towards her, pursued by Muslims. The Muslims, unable to catch their enemies, had chopped off the face of the goddess and blood had flowed from the statue. Later, the face of the goddess was replaced. Veḷḷāḷars and Nāyakkars now worship the goddess as their clan deity. A few feet from the goddess is a tamarind tree; below it are some snake stones and other stones representing her guardians. Carved into the rocky slope near the goddess are numbers. Drivers of cars and lorries thank the goddess for her protection on the road with a pūjā and in gratitude some engrave the numbers of their number-plates on the rock. On Tuesdays and Sundays the guardians of the goddess (Māyilappar and Kumpamuni) receive the sacrifice of goats and chickens. They are killed some distance away from the goddess and a special priest performs the non-vegetarian pūjā. When we lift the sari of the goddess we discover, not a female figure, but a male one, a Jaina monk sitting in meditation!

In the central part of the city of Cēlam (Salem) there is a small temple to Talaiveṭṭi Muṇiyappan ('Muṇiyappan whose head had been cut off'). On the walls of Muṇiyappan's shrine are pictures of various deities, among them Maturai Viran. In front of the shrine are spears (vēl) and tridents, and a short distance away, a tree-couple (pipal and neem) with seven stones representing the seven maidens (Kannimār). Muṇiyappan sits in the full lotus pose (Skt. padmāsana), but his head looks as if it did not fit properly. The priest (a Nāyūṭu) admitted that the statue actually represented a Buddha and that the head had been damaged. He related the following story: Once there was a man who used to sleep near the statue. One day he dreamt that he should steal the treasure hidden in the statue. He cut off the statue's head and carried away the treasure. The head was placed back on the body of the statue, but was very much lopsided until the god himself demanded (in the dream of another person) to have his head set right. This was done and the priest later placed silver eyes on the god and repaired his nose. For three generations Nāyūṭu priests perform pūjā for Muṇiyappan. Despite being in the form of a Buddha statue, the god receives animal sacrifices. Special is that the priest can hear the god take a nightly bath at the well.

The deity's territory

Since we are talking about an invisible power, we have to ask how this power can be contained within boundaries. Some temples have walls that

circumscribe the power, but for many temples there are no clear boundary markers; the border is wherever the priest or devotee believes the deity's power to have decreased to a minimum, where it is safe to leave one's impurities without angering the deity. During a festival the deity's power is present in full force and perhaps one can compare the state of the village at that time to states of liminality, states in which normal order is suspended or broken open to let in the vivifying forces of wilderness space, states that have to be carefully guarded and bounded. Women in their liminal states (when they are pregnant or menstruating) are especially open to the attacks of malignant spirits (this is an often cited reason by men for not allowing women near wilderness temples), and the same vulnerability seems to prevail for the state of the village at the time of the festival. First the village is cleared from negative and polluting elements (*pāvam*) (for instance, by carrying a straw doll through the streets that absorbs all the pollution and that is then burned); all men and women who are likely to pollute the village during the festival time are sent outside (this does not happen in all villages anymore). The activity of malignant spirits (*pēy picācu*) appears to increase during the festival, perhaps because the blood offerings to the deity attract them, perhaps too because the liminal state of the village allows the spirits an easy entry into the village and the bodies of the festival participants. To keep the spirits happy and at the boundary, rice mixed with blood is thrown to them at night. This can be done any time but ends in the *pūjā* to the boundary stone.³⁶ Another precaution at the festival time is directed against the 'evil eye' (*Ta. kaṇ tiruṣṭi*): to prevent any beings from jealously eyeing the happenings at the festival, a small goat called 'śakti goat' (*catti kuṭṭi*) is sacrificed at the beginning of the festival. We have already mentioned that the inhabitants of the festival village need to remain in the village or, if they leave it for any amount of time, they are required to return at night and to worship the deity upon their return. All these measures serve to create, maintain and bound a space within which the amplified divine power can unfold, be present at the various rituals, take possession of the *cāmiyāṭis*, transform negative into positive (heal, fertilize), etc.

Deity power is volatile and when it is intensified, the danger of its unpredictability increases. Therefore, satisfying (with blood offerings) the negative beings (spirits etc.) who like to do mischief, on the one hand, and keeping strictly to purity rules, on the other hand, are ways to keep the power in check. Different types of offerings might serve as well to keep the power of the deity separate from the power of the malignant spirits (although distinguishing between the power of these two may not

³⁶ See Chapter II.8; and see Oppert 1893: 462.

be altogether easy!). Boundaries, we can say then, are established around the village but also around the divine power itself, defining it against the malignant powers. (Where invisible beings are more differentiated and stratified, the rituals marking their boundaries are more diversified.)³⁷

Boundaries relate also to the various functions of the deities in the village. In Chapter II we have looked at the places deities occupy and at the various tasks of the deities. Boundary deities (*ellaikkāval*) are fixed, but the village guardian (*ūrkkāval*) is mobile because he protects not a point in space but a territory with very loosely defined (vertical and horizontal) boundaries. When the god or goddess goes in procession through the streets and to the various caste quarters, he/she marks or claims his/her territory against that of other gods and goddesses of neighboring villages, like a king who protects his land from his enemies. (Sending diseases or other negative influences across the village boundary by means of a deity's offerings or image is also a sign of a deity's territorial claims.)³⁸ There are other rituals in which deity and king are equated, e. g., in the arrow-shooting (*Ta. ampu pōta*) ritual. It is performed in the great Śiva temples and in some folk temples on the *vijayadaśamī* day of the *navarātri* festival. The deities assemble at a particular place where a banana stalk has been set up representing the buffalo demon, *Mahiṣa*. Like *Durgā*, who killed the demon, the priest shoots arrows in the four directions and with one arrow 'kills' the banana stalk demon (in some villages the demon is in the form of a *vaṇṇi* tree, *Skt. śamī*, *Prosopis spicigera*). The ritual used to be performed in the presence of the king (nowadays it is the village officer), and in some areas of India it involved the ritual crossing of a boundary by the king, his shooting of an arrow into his imaginary enemy and a *pūjā* to *Durgā*.³⁹ Rulers always had a very close relationship with the guardian god or goddess of their territory or state; e. g., the *Pāṇṭiyaṇ* kings with Śiva and *Mīnākṣī* of *Maturai*.⁴⁰ This was true to some extent in folk religion as well – in *Māranāṭu* it was the king of *Civakaṅkai* who used to receive through the *cāmiyāṭi* the god's prediction regarding the village's agriculture;⁴¹ it often was the king who was called to verify the manifestation of a deity, and so on. Through the custom of 'first respect' (*mutal mariyātai*) the presiding deity of the village acknowledges the hierarchic stratification of the village population and thereby the ruling power of certain clans. The deity's territorial power is tied to the leading clan's political power, and each caste group, including the Dalits, defines

³⁷ See e. g., the Magar communities of Nepal in Oppitz 1994: 374 ff.

³⁸ See e. g., Whitehead 1976: 54, 88.

³⁹ On these rituals see Biardeau 1981; Appadurai Breckenridge 1978.

⁴⁰ See Dessigane et al. 1960.

⁴¹ Now it is the village officer; see above Chapter V.5.

its power and power-alliances in the village – at least partially – through their deities' standings to each other.⁴² A deity's jurisdiction can include any number of villages; Aiyaṅār is often the guardian of more than one village. How such villages relate to each other in terms of religious and political power structures would need to be examined in a separate study.

The deity's invisible presence is gathered in a vessel or mūrti; it spreads its protection over a clan or caste and over the entire village; but how does it present itself to the individual? Is it always recognized?

Recognizing the deity's invisible presence

When the devotee stands in front of a deity's statue or other material form, he or she easily relates this form to the inherent invisible deity, but manifestation does not necessarily translate directly into a gross material form. The unmanifest (Skt. *avyakta*) deity form is beyond the senses, beyond time; it is that which is without cause, eternal, all pervading, inactive, independent, one, and when this unmanifest form manifests (becomes *vyakta*), it does so in delicate and complex stages called 'tattvas' in Hindu philosophies (the number of tattvas varies from 24 in Sāṅkhya to 36 in Śaiva Siddhānta and Kashmiri Śaivism) and in a densifying process that only at its end leads to the five elements (earth, water, fire, air and space) and from those to the gross material world. Behind the visible then hides a whole range of invisible states (the tattvas), the closer these are to the source (the one, unmanifest) the more 'real' or true they are. While the devotee perceives a deity's material form with his/her five senses; he/she should be able to recognize the deity's more subtle forms through other means (be they intuition, direct knowledge, inner sight – whatever these terms may mean – an experience not imparted through the five senses). But this happens of course only rarely. Like the pan-Hindu deities, folk deities like to point this out to their devotees again and again by staging scenes that are meant to awaken the devotee to the presence behind the form.

In Kārkuṭal (Cuddalore) Aiyaṅār's full name is 'Karumpāyiram koṅṭa Aiyaṅār'. The name has its origin in the following story:

Once Aiyaṅār took the form of a child. He went down to the field where the villagers were cutting sugarcane (*karumpu*) and begged them for some of it. The villagers refused saying that it was only "pēykarumpu" (a wild, useless type of sugarcane). At that instant all the good sugarcane turned into "pēykarumpu". Realizing that the child had been Aiyaṅār, they brought a thousand (*āyiram*) stalks

⁴² This is an interesting topic we cannot expand on here; but see e. g., Herrenschmidt 1981, and Dirks 1989.

of real cane to the temple's door and prayed to the god, and the god reverted the useless cane in the field back to good cane.

The same story is told of the goddess Karumpāyi of Iruṅkaḷūr (Trichy): when the villagers were cutting sugarcane, the goddess, who was playing with her sisters nearby, asked for some cane. She was refused under the pretext that it was juiceless cane, and soon the villagers found their cane all dried up. They consulted a fortune-teller (Kōṭaṅki) and having found out the cause, they vowed to offer yearly the first cut cane to the goddess.

The miserliness of the villagers blinds them to the truth. They cannot (or do not want to) recognize the deity in the child, and the falsehood they tell is a way of avoiding to share. The deity reacts by making the villagers' words come true, changing the real sugarcane into a false sugarcane. Both the (true) substance or content of the cane and the true nature of the child are related here: just as the sugar juice is invisible in the cane (this the villagers acknowledge), divine power is invisible within the human form (this the villagers do not acknowledge). Another type of story that informants told at countless temples throughout Tamilnadu involves the same elements: blindness to the deity and selfishness:

A pepper merchant was on his way to the market. When he was close to the Nāṭarāyacuvāmi temple of Mēṭṭuppāliyam,⁴³ an old man (the god in disguise) suddenly appeared and asked him what he was carrying in his bag. The merchant lied that it was only pācippayaru (a green type of pulse, of much less value than pepper). Having arrived at the market, he opened his bag and to his astonishment saw that it contained only pācippayaru. Realizing that this was due to his lie, he returned to the temple, asked the god for forgiveness and promised to help finance the temple buildings. The god then changed the pulse back into pepper and the merchant had the temple tower built.

Often the reason for the god's punishment is the merchant's refusal to make an offering at the temple,⁴⁴ or it is some other gesture of disrespect. Aiyanār in Vattarāyantettu (Cuddalore) is called Kiḷāvaṭiyappar because he had turned the spices of some merchants who had made fun of him into kiḷā fruits. They are simple stories with a simple moral: do not tell lies; but, they also point to the power of words – the god does not simply punish, he makes the merchants' words come true.

Not seeing or not wanting to see the deity, or, disbelieving despite seeing, often results in the person's literal blindness. Seeing has to do with knowing, seeing is knowing; it is an inner sight, the sight through the knowledge eye (ñāna kaṇ); it is a perception of the divine through a faculty beyond the regular five senses.⁴⁵ Seeing the deity with the outer,

⁴³ Erode; see Chapter I.6.

⁴⁴ Meyer 1986: 91.

⁴⁵ For story examples see Masilamani-Meyer 1996: 468 ff.

material eyes is only the first step, so to speak, of an internalizing process. The second step is to have the deity in the mind, and to those who keep thinking of the deity in their minds, the deity appears in dreams (this is very common in folk religion,⁴⁶ and in the pan-Hindu tradition,⁴⁷ where Śiva constantly appears in the king's and other persons' dreams). To those who internalize the deity even further – in a third step, outer and inner deity become one.⁴⁸

Hindu gods and goddesses actually are not much interested in punishing their devotees. When they involve themselves in a direct contact with humans, it is to help them, help them physically and help them spiritually in the sense of drawing them closer to the divine. At least three priests related how Aiyaṅār came to the rescue of pregnant women who were stranded at his temple because of floods or domestic reasons: because there was nobody nearby, Aiyaṅār himself assisted in the delivery of the children (Kottāram, Ecaṅūr, Cuntarapāṅṅiyappuram – in Cuntarapāṅṅiyappuram it was Mahālakṣmī who came to the rescue). There is a famous model for these stories: Śiva-Tāyumaṅavar of Tiruccirāpaḷḷi changed himself into the mother (tāy) of a pregnant girl and assisted in the delivery when the real mother was prevented from crossing the swollen Kāvēri river.⁴⁹ The choice of content of these folk stories is surprising from two different angles: 1. childbirth is considered polluting, and we have seen that wilderness deities try to avoid the pollution resulting from the activities of the village and 2. usually highly pregnant women are advised not to visit wilderness temples. The priest of the Kottāram temple even mentioned that women beyond the third month of pregnancy should not come to his temple. Birth is a polluting event; why would the god(ess) get involved? Clearly the stories illustrate that concepts of purity and pollution are formalities that are necessary on a gross, material level, but that behind the reality of forms and norms, the deity is free and unencumbered to act in any way he or she wishes.

If deities interact with humans, if it is in their interest that humans recognize them and worship them, why do they not reveal themselves fully, why do they appear in masked forms, in the form of a child, or a snake,⁵⁰ or in a dream? Or why do they show only a part of themselves, as in the following story?

Bangle-sellers (Ceṅṅiyār) used to come this way (on the nearby road). Once, when they passed here, a woman (the goddess Ellaippiṅṅāri) called out to them: “Give me some bangles. In that and that house in the village you will find a till and from

⁴⁶ See Meyer 1986: 256.

⁴⁷ See e. g., Tiruviḷaiyāṅṅapurāṅam, Dessigane et al. 1960.

⁴⁸ See below.

⁴⁹ See Shulman 1980a: 314 ff.

⁵⁰ See e. g., Meyer 1986: 254 ff.

that people will pay you for the bangles.” At first they did not react. Perhaps they were afraid. The goddess then said: “I shall only show you my arms. Place the bangles on them.” The bangle-sellers then placed the bangles on the goddess's arms. Later they went to the house indicated by the goddess and got duly paid for the bangles.

The priest of Ellaippiṭāri (Nāraciṅkaṅūr, Viluppuram) thought that the bangle-sellers did not react to the goddess's command because they were frightened, frightened of her appearance, and the goddess obviously realized this because she offered to show them only her arms. The story expresses a fundamental problem: how is one to conceive of divine power? How does one know what kind of power one deals with when this power is invisible? How can one distinguish between malignant and benevolent beings when they do not have a recognizable form? How is one to react to a deity's appearance; does one even survive when faced with the full power of a deity? Even Arjuna, the great hero who was well prepared for the vision of the divine, was not able to sustain Kṛṣṇa's all-encompassing form for very long. For the devotee to recognize and understand divinity, the unmanifest deity power needs to manifest in stages and in identifiable forms, and these forms are prescribed by the codes of Hindu tradition(s) (e. g., iconography, implements, articles and forms of worship, symbols). The bangle-sellers did not at first recognize the goddess – she was just a voice out of nowhere (had she appeared in their dream, they would not have hesitated) – and one reason for their inability to identify the goddess could have been that they were unaware of her temple – and therefore of the custom of offering the goddess bangles when she grants a wish, although this custom is said to originate from this story! (She is in the form of a stone and is surrounded by triśūlas covered with glass bangles). Like the other stories, the bangle-seller story demonstrates the deity's freedom to appear outside the conventional forms and surprise the devotee. The stories teach that the divine can manifest in any form, any time and that ideally the devotee should be ready to see the divine at all times and in all forms.

Above we have said that once a mūrti is properly established, the deity's power in it is taken for granted; it may be dormant, but it can be re-activated any time. During the festival the deity's presence is vital, not only in the temple but also at those places where special rituals take place, e. g., the bed of hot coals. How do the priest and devotees know that the deity is fully there? One function of the cāmiyāṭi is to show the deity's presence by being possessed by him or her; other people too may get possessed.⁵¹ Apart from these more obvious demonstrations, there are a number of ‘tests’ that the priest can perform to verify the deity's

⁵¹ See below.

presence. One such test is rolling a flower ball over the glowing coals; if it does not show burns, it signifies the deity's presence and approval of the ritual; another example of ascertaining the deity's presence we have already described in Chapter II.8: in Aracañkuṭi the blood of a sacrificed goat is kept in a pot suspended in the temple. After a week, when another goat is sacrificed, the blood in the pot still has to be fresh, if it is not, it is considered a bad sign, a sign that the deity is displeased and not ready to participate in the rituals. There are a number of other tests,⁵² some of them coupled with features from which the future of the village or priest's family can be predicted. Thus, if the seedlings that are planted at the beginning of the festival do not properly grow, it is interpreted as a sign of misfortune.⁵³ Through the tests the deity is also given a chance to communicate, to express his or her pleasure or anger, but other signs are looked for as well. Accidents occurring during a festival or a deity's festival chariot getting stuck are seen as expressions of the deity's anger. A number of the festival rituals are aimed at managing the deity's power, increasing and decreasing it as needed and preventing it from getting out of control. The concepts of heating and cooling have been suggested by e. g., Beck and Moreno and Marriott.⁵⁴ It seems, however, that generally the cooling rituals predominate or are more common, the various washings (apiṣkam), throwing of turmeric water (mañcaḷ nīr – mostly done at the end of the festival). Whether non-vegetarian food offerings are heating or cooling is not entirely clear: the substances (certain meats, alcohol) are heating, but offered to the deity they are said to appease (cool) the deity's anger and at the same time to strengthen (heat) the deity.

Possession

At the three festivals we have described in the last chapter, possession was an integral part of the ritual activities. The *cāmiyāṭis* are expected to get possessed; drumming, dancing, or the sight of the deity can induce the possession. It is a temporary possession that can open a channel for communication between the ordinary devotees and the deity impersonated; in other words, the possessed person acts as transmitter of messages from the deity,⁵⁵ and these messages can be for individuals or for the whole village (as in the case of *Māranāṭu* when the deity conveyed agricultural advice through the god). Possession does not seem to be

⁵² See Meyer 1986: 237 ff.

⁵³ On the *muḷaippāri* or 'gardens of Adonis' and other interpretations of it see Hildebeitel 1991: 54 ff.

⁵⁴ Beck 1969; Moreno and Marriott 1990.

⁵⁵ See Chapter V.4.

something that can always be induced at will – the deity's grace (aruḷ) is needed. If that grace is missing, the 'spectators', the devotees, are ready to accept a certain amount of play-acting if this can lead to real possession. There are signs that signal possession: shaking of the body, unusual eye-movement, stiffness of arms and legs, a certain loss of control over the body movements etc., but these seem more pronounced in the possession of non-professionals. For the cāmiyāṭi dancing the deity is a way of showing the presence of the deity regardless of whether the dancing is a 'true' possession or not; it is therefore rather difficult to distinguish between simple dancing or playing a deity and actual possession. Dancing the deity is not a wild, frantic running about, even though the word used in the old Tamil (Saṅgam) literature, *veri/veriyāṭṭam* ('drunkenness, fury'), does have such connotations. Much of the dancing is ritualized (e. g., *Māranāṭu*), yet enough room is given to the cāmiyāṭi to break out of the frame temporarily and, in a state of possession, to brandish his weapon and jump about wildly. If this state continues for too long and looks like going out of control, the priest brings the dancer back by e. g., applying sacred ash on his forehead. The reason why possession has to be within a frame and controlled has to do with a certain apprehension towards the deity's power, its unpredictability and the impossibility of fully knowing and understanding it. (See also other South Indian traditions where dancing is much more prominent.)⁵⁶

Claus distinguishes between the possession of a 'ritual specialist', possession that has a ritual frame and is induced and controlled, on the one hand, and possession that is basically unwanted, uncontrolled and is by a malevolent entity, on the other hand.⁵⁷ For the former, Claus uses the term 'spirit mediumship', for the latter 'spirit possession'. Although these two categories cannot always be strictly separated,⁵⁸ and at times flow into each other as e. g., when a first possession by a deity happens spontaneously and is unwanted but through its repeated happening gets converted into a wanted and controlled possession,⁵⁹ they are useful if we wish to distinguish between 'professional' possession, a possession or mediumship that has as one of its purposes to mediate between deity and devotee on a regular basis and an irregular and spontaneous possession that can happen to anyone and that does not have as one of its aims the transmission of messages from deity to devotee and vice-versa. Under the 'professionals' or those who serve as medium we can classify – apart from the cāmiyāṭi-dancers – those men and women who tell fortune under the influence of a deity even if there are no signs of possession, for

⁵⁶ Brückner 1995: 80 ff.; Freeman 1993: 133.

⁵⁷ Claus 1979: 29; and see Schoembucher 1993: 242.

⁵⁸ See Schoembucher 1993: 243.

⁵⁹ See e. g., Hancock 1995; Erndl 1996; Claus 1993.

instance the *Kōṭaṅki*⁶⁰ and the women at *Pāṅṭi kōvil* near Maturai who induce ‘possession’ by taking some drags from a *curuṭṭu*, a kind of cigarillo. There are two types of non-professional possessions during the festival: one is induced and wanted, the other is spontaneous. The former we can observe when the devotees who fulfill their vows by carrying e. g., pots with milk (*pāl kuṭam*) to the deity need to get possessed by the deity before they can enter the temple. Listening to the drums and watching the dancing of friends and relatives helps induce the possession, a possession that so fully overtakes the person that he/she sometimes needs to be carried inside the temple. If possession does not occur, the person is not allowed to bring the offering inside the temple (observed at the *Ceṅkamalanācciyammaṅ* temple in *Taiṅcāvūr*). Spontaneous possession (whether wanted or not) happens often during the festival to the spectator devotees. These possessions can be quite violent, and usually the priest will immediately stop the possession by applying sacred ash on such a person's forehead. It is difficult to say how these possessions are interpreted by the priest, whether he believes the possessing entity is the deity or a malignant spirit. To what extent such spontaneous possession is tolerated and what is done about it, depends entirely on the context. If the possessed person is a relative of the priest or of an important person in the village, some tolerance is shown, but if the person is an ‘outsider’ or someone from a lower caste, the possession is stopped immediately. This has less to do with caste discrimination than with the belief that fierce, dangerous deities tend to take possession of lower caste persons; or seen the other way, the belief that lower caste persons are more able to bear the possession of dangerous deities; and possession by deities other than the ones participating in the festival is not desired. Spontaneous possession of the spectators during the festival is something that happens often when the *cāmiyāṭi* or designated person gets possessed, and it is not the same as what Claus calls ‘spirit possession’.

‘Spirit possession’ or the possession by a basically malevolent spirit (*pēy picācu* – usually the spirit of a dead person who causes the possessed person considerable mental agony) occurs more often outside the festival frame. It can last for a short while; for instance, when a crossroad spirit takes hold of a person. Then a simple ritual usually can remedy the possession. Or it can last for years, and then exorcisms are performed at specific times and at specific temples, e. g., the *Aṅkāḷammaṅ* temple at *Mēl Malaiyanūr*, *Viluppuram*⁶¹ and the *Nāṭarāyacuvāmi* temple at *Mēṭṭuppāḷaiyam*, *Erode*.⁶² In 1991 the crowd of possessed at the *Nāṭarāyacuvāmi* temple was only about a dozen, and

⁶⁰ See below.

⁶¹ See Nabokov 1997, 2000.

⁶² See Chapter I.6.

the decrease of possessed was related by one of the priests to a decrease in the belief of spirits. Spirit possession is not desired during the festival and we have seen that the boundary pūjā's function is to keep the spirits satisfied so that they do not interfere with the deity possessions.

Before we discuss the sacrifice and to end our excursion into the invisible side of the deities, we shall look at a story about a fortune-teller (Kōṭaṅki) from Māranāṭu, a Paḷḷar:

The king of Civakaṅkai had a daughter but no son. There was something wrong with the daughter; she refused to wear saris. One day the king's falcon (vayiri) flew away. When it landed on a distant tree, the rope attached to it became entangled in the branches in such a way that the bird could not free itself to hunt for food. At about the same time the king lost his ring. Not able to find the ring, the king called a Kōṭaṅki. Wanting to test the Kōṭaṅki's power, he prepared a seat for him consisting of a sari smeared with menstrual blood which he covered with a blanket (a blanket of "villūtippaṭṭu" cloth). Forty-one Kōṭaṅkis, one after the other, were invited, but none of them could say where the ring was because they sat on a cloth that was polluted. The king locked the forty-one diviners into a room with the intention to pluck out one of their eyes in punishment later on. When the king heard of Lālā Kōṭaṅki of Māranāṭu, the Kōṭaṅki of Karuppaṇacuvāmi, he asked his subordinates to fetch him. This Kōṭaṅki, much afraid, prayed to Karuppaṇacuvāmi. The god said to him: "Tell the king that his own horse, the pañcakalyāṇi ('a horse whose feet and forehead are white', Winslow) has to fetch you, otherwise you will not go." The king was a Maṛavar and when he heard the message he replied: "What, a Paḷḷar asks for my horse!?" The minister then advised the king to agree, but to punish the Kōṭaṅki by plucking out both his eyes if he failed to find the ring. The king's horse was brought and after the Kōṭaṅki had prayed to Karuppaṇacuvāmi, touched the god's sword and thrown some sacred ash, the horse ran off in a mad dash, arrived at the palace frothing and fell down dead. The king angrily asked if the Kōṭaṅki had come. He was told that the horse had come alone. In the meantime the Kōṭaṅki had arrived on foot. "Take away these blankets and bring some fresh straw, I have to sit on straw," ordered the Kōṭaṅki, and sat down. When they brought him betel preparation, he refused and demanded a cigar (curuṭṭu). They brought the cigar and when he smoked it, Karuppaṇacuvāmi (who had come to the palace on the horse) took possession of the Kōṭaṅki and through him said: "What! Karuppar is at the bottom and a Maṛavar on top (Karuppar kiḷē, Maṛavar mēlē)!" upon which the king's throne broke apart and the king fell down on the floor. Then the Kōṭaṅki asked the king to release the forty-one other Kōṭaṅkis. The king, surprised at the diviner's knowledge, did so. Then the Kōṭaṅki said: "North of N. there is a banyan tree, in it hangs a falcon that cannot eat." The king's men went there and found the bird. Next the Kōṭaṅki said to the king: "Your signet ring has disappeared. It was washed away when you were bathing. You will find it where the water flows out." The ring was found there. The Kōṭaṅki then told the king that his daughter henceforth would wear a sari and continued: "You don't have a son. If you dedicate an oil lamp (kuttuvīlakku) the size of your person at the Rājeśvarī temple near Civakaṅkai, you will get a son." The king then asked the

Kōṭaṅki what he wanted for his services, and the god (Karuppaṇacuvāmi) answered through the Kōṭaṅki: “If I ask for too much, you will not be able to give it to me. Therefore, just give me seven and a half ‘cey’ (a ‘cey’ is two acres) of fertile land so that I can raise crops for poṅkal.” The king granted his wish and, furthermore, ordered that each year in the month of māci (Feb.–Mar.) Karuppaṇacuvāmi’s festival should be celebrated.

The story has many facets: it illustrates the Kōṭaṅki’s cleverness or skill in detecting the polluted seat (being a Dalit may have something to do with this), his courage in facing the king who is a Maravar (the historical king of Civakaṅkai was a Maravar)⁶³, a caste that – especially today – is much in conflict with the Dalits, and it shows the Kōṭaṅki’s closeness to his god. His forty-one predecessors were unable to get enough help from their deities to see through the king’s trick (the menstrual blood no doubt kept the deities away). Lālā Kōṭaṅki smokes a cigar to bring on the possession of the god, a possession that here has nothing to do with dancing. Interesting is the number: together with Lālā Kōṭaṅki there are forty-two fortune-tellers, a number often quoted in relation to the guardians of Aiyaṇār: he has an entourage of either twenty-one or forty-two or sixty-three deities. The god behaves like a king: he asks for the king’s horse, and his power is so great that the poor beast is not able to bear it. At first the Kōṭaṅki is reluctant to go, he is afraid that he will suffer the same fate as the other Kōṭaṅkis, and it is only with the god’s encouragement that he confidently follows the king’s summons. There are two important points to note: one, the Kōṭaṅki is in the service of the god; it is the god’s power that works here, not the fortune-teller’s and two, the god is more powerful than the king even though he is a ‘Dalit god’. He literally shows the king that he, the god, is above him. This does not say anything about the god’s place in the hierarchy of the deities and one can guess that Rajeśvari, a deity favored by Maravar kings is the king’s family deity.⁶⁴ But Karuppaṇacuvāmi is a god who understands magic and he is the proper deity to deal with tricks, theft, and the disappearance of things. The temple fell under the jurisdiction of the king, and it was he who could grant land to the temple and, as we have mentioned, it used to be the king who received the predictions (literally ‘words of grace’, aruḷ vāḱku) from the god during the festival.

⁶³ See Dirks 1987.

⁶⁴ See e. g., Appadurai Breckenridge 1978: 82 ff.

4. Sacrifice

General Remarks

When we look at the dictionary meaning of sacrifice, there are four Tamil words that qualify: *tiyākam*, *pali*, *kāvu* and *kāṇikkai*. The first word, *tiyākam*, means ‘gift, donation’ but mainly in terms of renunciation; giving something for the good of something or someone else; a ‘self-sacrifice’; (a *tiyāki* is an ascetic renouncer) – this term we do not find in festival notices, and I have not heard it used in the sense of festival sacrifices and offerings. Tamil *pali*, from Skt. *bali*, was used by informants to denote an animal sacrifice (sometimes also called *uyir pali* – sacrifice of life) or even a human sacrifice (*narapali*)⁶⁵. In festival notices this term does occur, but only rarely (because strictly speaking animal sacrifices are forbidden in temples) and sometimes is replaced by a word implying animal sacrifices, such as ‘subsequent *pūjā*’ (i. e., the *pūjā* that happens at the end of the festival and at which the non-vegetarian deities receive their offerings). The word *kāvu* was sometimes used instead of *pali*, as in *mukkāvu* (triple animal sacrifice). For all other offerings by devotees to the temple (especially money offerings) and offerings that had to do with the fulfillment of a vow, the word *kāṇikkai* (‘offering, gift’) was used.

A typical festival notice will announce the year, day and time of the festival, list the daily events: *pūjā* times, vehicle on which the deity will sit in state or be transported, other special festival items (flag hoisting and lowering, fixing of power in pot, *abhiṣeka* and *kumbhābhiṣeka*, walking over hot coals etc.), and the sponsors. The many animal sacrifices that are part and parcel of many festivals and mandatory, are not mentioned at all; nor do we find those events listed that happen in the side shrines and are the responsibility of private persons (e. g., rituals for clan deities performed by clans). In terms of the festival procedure and worship, what does sacrifice mean and how do we define it?

Priests of folk temples distinguish between ‘*cutta pūcai*’ and ‘*acutta pūcai*’ (from Skt. *śuddha* and *aśuddha*, which mean pure and impure respectively); the former refers to vegetarian offerings, the latter to meat offerings and alcohol (*gañjā* is considered vegetarian while cigars are non-vegetarian). It is a useful distinction. In most folk temples both types of offerings exist, and the vegetarian deity’s sight will be blocked by a screen or by the shrine doors when the non-vegetarian offering takes place. Both types of offerings (vegetarian and non-vegetarian) are made by both the temple authorities (a common offering) and the devotees (a

⁶⁵ See below.

private offering). While the priest or the temple board is in charge of buying all the necessary things for the festival, including the offerings to be made to the deities (e. g., garlands, rice, fruits, coconuts, betel, incense and sacrificial animals), the devotees have to make their own arrangements for their offerings. They buy the animals, have the potter sculpt a horse or other votive animal, rent a *kāvaṭi* or *kuṭam* (which they themselves decorate and carry to the temple) and so on. In most temples (especially those that fall under the HRCE board) the devotee has to buy a ticket if he/she wishes to make such an offering, and the money from these tickets helps pay for the festival. Not all devotees follow this rule. Although there is a law forbidding animal sacrifices within a temple, there seems to be no objection to sacrifices just beyond the temple wall or boundary.

The private offerings are gifts to the deity. The intentions behind them vary. They can be out of gratitude for or in the hope of a wish fulfillment (vow, *pirārttaṇai*), and such offerings are intimately linked with the vow and have to be carried out. (If the deity has not received the promised offering, he or she may appear in the devotee's dream or remind the offerer in some other way of his/her promise.) They can be simply offerings of devotion (*bhakti*) or of thanks or supplication without the specific intention of a vow. They can be 'traditional' offerings (going back to a hereditary right or a vow made by an ancestor). An example of *bhakti* offerings that are 'traditional' and set are the goat sacrifices that follow the boundary *pūjā* at Aracaṅkuṭi described in Chapter II.8.: each of the four Kaḷḷar lineages is allowed to offer a goat according to a strict hierarchical order.

Public offerings too have different objectives: they 'feed' the deity or spirits in order to satisfy them, make them happy, and they control the deity's power.⁶⁶ While private offerings are for the welfare of oneself and/or one's family/clan, the public offerings are for the entire village. The public offerings can be compared to what Das⁶⁷ calls sacrifices for their own sake, i. e., sacrifices that have as their aim the sacrificial act rather than the fulfillment of a desire, sacrifices in which the act of sacrificing and not the agent's desire at gaining something is of primary concern. The public sacrifices and offerings are attempts at (re)establishing a harmony between the divine (and invisible) powers and the village space; or, one could say, the aim is an alignment of the village *dharma* (moral, religious and universal laws) with the cosmic *dharma*, an alignment that allows the proper flow of energies and powers and thereby helps maintain the dharmic order which then results in the village's welfare. Yet, since the village population participates in the public

⁶⁶ See below.

⁶⁷ Das 1983: 448 f.

offerings and each individual's personal desires are transported with it, the public offerings are also carriers of personal desires.

The kind of food offerings the deities receive depends on a variety of factors: the deities' specific personal likes (e. g., some goddesses receive eggs, some gods garlands of vaṭai, Saturn likes sesame seeds), their position in the temple, their character (fierce or benign) and so on.⁶⁸ In Chapter III we have tried to show how the food offerings are correlated with the deity's position in the temple and for that purpose we have distinguished four categories: vegetarian food, gañjā, non-vegetarian food (goats and chickens) and alcohol. Animal offerings have their vegetarian substitutes: the gourd or pumpkin (pūcaṅkikāy) and the lime (both cut into halves that are then smeared with the red kunḅumam powder to simulate blood) – these offerings, like the animal offerings, are called pali. Limes have a cooling quality and we see garlands of them decorating especially fierce (hot) gods like Veṅṅaṅkuṭi-Muniyappan, Cēlam, and goddesses like Pattirakāḷi of Maṭappuram.⁶⁹

Blood sacrifices

In Tamil folk religion the animals sacrificed are: buffaloes (erumai), goats (āṭu), sheep (cemmariyāṭu), chickens/roosters (kōḷi/cēval), pigs (paṅri); in other words, they are domestic animals that can be opposed to wild animals, a distinction that was made in the Vedic sacrifice.⁷⁰ However, there are in folk religion certain sacrifices that involve semi-wild animals. These sacrifices are part of a hunting ritual that seems to be known in Andhra Pradesh in which two rabbits (or hares?) are set loose and have to be caught before they cross the village boundary. The person who catches one of the rabbits, kills it on the spot and eats it. The purpose of the hunt is to bring peace to the village. If a rabbit escapes, it portends trouble for the village.⁷¹ A great number of festivals in Tamilnadu list as one of their items a hunt (vēṭṭai or pārivēṭṭai), but not enough information on the procedure and significance of this hunt is available to comment on it here.⁷² Generally speaking the sacrifice of goats and chickens/roosters outnumbers the sacrifices of buffaloes and pigs. A triple sacrifice

⁶⁸ Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1977 discusses the vegetarian offerings to South Indian deities in detail.

⁶⁹ On hot and cold foods see Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1977: 539; Beck 1969; Moreno and Marriott 1990.

⁷⁰ See Das 1983: 456 who, citing Biardeau and Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, maintains that only domestic animals could be killed in sacrifice; and Malamoud 1996: 79 who points out the inconsistency in the texts.

⁷¹ Ankalammagudur, Cuddapah; and see Murty and Sontheimer 1980: 173 f.

⁷² See also Meyer 1986: 244 ff.

consisting of a goat, a pig and a chicken, called *mukkāvu* (triple sacrifice) is common as well. Not all animals that are offered are killed; in many temples they are left alive and sold, the money going into the temple fund.

There are different ways of performing the animal sacrifice. While in most cases the animal is killed very quickly (with one stroke of the knife the head is severed), there are instances in which the animal is made to suffer e. g., through impaling – when a chick or chicken or rooster is thrust on one of the spears standing in front of the temple entrance and left to die. In Andhra Pradesh impaling took the form of pulling a cart through the streets. The cart was fitted with stakes on which various animals were impaled. In most animal sacrifices at least three different persons are involved: the priest (who, as representative of the deity, receives the head of the animal – if he is a Brahman he will sell it), the person offering the animal (he receives the body) and the person who kills it, usually a person of low caste (if the offering is common, he may receive the body or some other part of the animal).

Reading Whitehead one gets the impression that buffalo sacrifices were very common.⁷³ This is not so today. Buffalo sacrifices do happen, but they are not advertised and are often performed in the middle of the night, when the general public has left the temple premises. In the roughly half a dozen cases of buffalo sacrifices known to me, the buffalo is dedicated to a goddess. The animal is beheaded and then buried together with its head in front or on the side of the temple. A female priest at one of the goddess temples around Tañcāvūr related the quaint story that once a buffalo that had been sacrificed and buried had become alive again and had walked around, and the goddess then had advised the priest to bury the head of the buffalo behind its tail (the story implies that the buffalo was able to join the head to its body and thereby regain life). Pigs are sacrificed either by beheading or by spearing.⁷⁴ Pig sacrifices are more common than buffalo sacrifices but not as frequent as goat and chicken offerings. Goats are beheaded while chickens/roosters are either beheaded or have their necks twisted and broken. Instruments that help in the sacrifice are e. g., stones that are rounded out so the neck of the animal fits into them tightly (such stones are e. g., in front of the Karuppar temple of Virappūr, Trichy, and show a human head below the rounding) or a forked strong branch that serves the same purpose.

The head of the animal is placed before the deity. In Karuppur the goat head was placed on the sacrificial stone in front of the god Karuppar and the priest told the devotees standing on the steps leading to the shrine entrance to leave a space in the middle so that the god could see the head.

⁷³ Whitehead 1976.

⁷⁴ For the latter see Chapter V.5.

Sometimes the animal is sacrificed in the line of the deity's vision and then removed, or, if this is not possible, the animal will at least be shown to the deity and then killed outside the temple. Contrary to the Vedic procedure where the animal is killed without spilling blood and where the body of the animal is carved up and offered into the fire, sacrifices to folk deities require the spilling of blood and with some exceptions (e. g., roasting of the liver for some deities) the body of the animal is turned into a meal. In some temples there are some interesting restrictions regarding the food cooked from a sacrificed animal: it has to be eaten inside the temple area and if some of it is left over, it has to be buried.⁷⁵ Various punishments await the person who breaks this rule: blindness (Pañcamīśvari temple, Cēlam), weakness and swelling of the limbs, even the appearance of the god (Muṇi) in the offender's dream in order to choke him (Naṭukkāvēri, Thanjavur), the children get ill (Aiyānār temple, Māriyammaṅkōvil, Thanjavur) and so on. There is a particular type of sacrificial meal (often eaten at night) which a Teluṅku Ceṭṭiyār called vana bhojana (feast in the wilderness). He pointed out that no women are allowed to participate in this offering. Other informants mentioned this rule too. It seems that this type of communal meal, at which the women are excluded, is part of a ritual done by the clan for the clan deity, but more information is needed. Not all the sacrificial meat has to be eaten within the temple limits. To prevent the spilling of blood in the temple area, cooked meat can be offered as well. In some temples the fierce guardian deity feasts on the blood, while the deity opposite him receives cooked meat. We see this pattern in Mēṭṭuppālayam, Erode: About a hundred meters away from the temple of Nāṭarāyar is Karuppar's shrine. Facing him is a female Muṇi similar to the one facing Nāṭarāyar. While goats are sacrificed in front of the Muṇi facing Karuppar, Karuppar receives only cooked meat. As a general rule we can say that blood offerings are for the fiercest deities. Other non-vegetarian offerings are eggs and rarely, the fetus of a goat – these are mostly for goddesses.

Why does the deity receive the head rather than the body of the animal? From the Brahmanical point of view the head is the purest⁷⁶ and Vedic ritual texts speak of the 'head of the sacrifice'.⁷⁷ The head is also important in the iconography of non-vedic, wild goddesses like Kālī who wears a garland of heads and holds a head in her hand, or Durgā who

⁷⁵ See also Mayer 1965: 186 who, with regard to the clan worship of the goddess in Central India mentions that left-overs from the offering and ashes from the fire of worship were buried 'lest they fall into the hands of outsiders'; and Hubert and Mauss 1964: 40 f. who mention the same practice from ancient Hebrew and Greek sources.

⁷⁶ See Chapter III.

⁷⁷ Heesterman 1985: 45 ff. – 'The Case of the Severed Head'.

beheads the buffalo demon.⁷⁸ In Tamilnadu *Māriyamman* and *Aṅkāḷamman* are portrayed as sitting on top of a throne consisting of three heads, and *Māriyamman/Reṇukā* is worshipped in the form of a head in many temples. There are also references on cutting the throat of goats in the Tamil Sangam Literature.⁷⁹ We hear of head offerings in connection with the fierce followers of Śiva-Bhairava;⁸⁰ and the head plays a role in other local folk traditions.⁸¹ All this lets us presume that the offering of the head takes its meaning from many different Vedic and non-Vedic/Sanskritic traditions. The head contains the essence of the victim. The head stands for the entire animal; it is the purest part. It is the part without which the rest of the body cannot survive, where most of the sense organs are located. It is also the part of the body by which a person can be identified and therefore the hero has to bring back the head of the enemy as proof of his death. Thus the epic of *Pābūji* ends with *Rūpnāth's* 'capture' of *Khīci's* head. He wraps it into a silk cloth, plays ball with, and with his bat hurls it to his father's sister who then can become *satī*.⁸²

Whitehead, reporting on a buffalo sacrifice in Karnataka, remarks that the right foreleg was placed in the mouth of the buffalo's severed head and an earthen lamp lit on top of the head.⁸³ The custom of placing a light on the head of the victim is also mentioned in the *Kālikāpurāṇa*,⁸⁴ and placing one of the legs of the goat into its severed head is done in some parts of Tamilnadu. Elmore interprets the procedure of placing the cut-off 'hands' in the mouth of the head, spreading the fat of the victim over its eyes and feeding with the fat the light on its head as a sign of utter humiliation and submission of the buffalo-victim.⁸⁵ Other interpretations are possible: the light can represent the goddess who, standing on her victim, grants it (him) release, *mokṣa*, as for example *Durgā* who is portrayed standing on the buffalo head.⁸⁶ The light on the buffalo head can signify life and, together with the leg in the victim's mouth, symbolize the wholeness of the animal, the restoration of its life (the way in the Vedic sacrifice the victim had to be made whole again)⁸⁷; or it

⁷⁸ And see the various references to garlands of heads and head offerings in the *Kālikāpurāṇa*, van Kooij 1972: 54, 164 etc.

⁷⁹ Hart 1975: 30.

⁸⁰ See e. g., Lorenzen 1972.

⁸¹ See e. g., Zoller 1993: 201 ff. who reports on 'Himalayan ball games' that involve the capture of 'heads' that contain the sacred power of and for the goddess.

⁸² Smith 1991: 476.

⁸³ Whitehead 1976: 78.

⁸⁴ Van Kooij 1972: 54.

⁸⁵ Elmore 1925: 129, 133 ff.

⁸⁶ See Hildebeutel 1982: 87 ff.; he offers an interesting variant of the '*Māriyamman*' myth that suggests a castration theme in the fight between the Brahman/goddess and the 'outcaste'/buffalo demon.

⁸⁷ See e. g., Malamoud 1988: 6 f.

could signify the light that lights the path that leads the victim to the deity and, by analogy, lights the way of the sacrificer (offerer) to the deity after his death.⁸⁸ One informant (Rākalpāvi, Coimbatore) identified the leg in the goat's mouth as a sacrifice (kāvu), perhaps implying that the animal offered itself, that it voluntarily let itself be sacrificed. As said above, the legs together with the head could be a substitute for the entire animal and that could explain why in some instances not only the head but also the four legs of the animal go to the priest.⁸⁹ In other words, making the head and legs represent the whole animal solves the dilemma of wanting to offer a whole animal but needing to cut it up so that the deity can share it with the offerer (prasāda).

Now what is the purpose of all this killing? Offering an animal to a deity is not simply killing. In the Kālikāpurāṇa we read⁹⁰: 'For the sake of the sacrifice the animals have been created by Brahmā himself; I shall put thee to death now; because of this, murder is no-murder in sacrifice'. The sacrificial animal is specially chosen for its perfection (most of the goats offered in Tamilnadu have to be entirely black and without blemish) and the deity has to accept the animal by making it shake when water is sprinkled on it. If it does not shake itself another animal is offered, but some devotees are rather practical and sprinkle water on the same animal until it shakes itself. The sacrificial animal is garlanded, receives the sacred marks on its forehead; it is dedicated to the deity. Why does the deity need the sacrifice? Informants offer various answers: 'the deity will bring rain', 'a good harvest', 'the deity will ward off evil', 'will be fed, satisfied', 'the deity gains strength and power'. One aspect certainly is feeding the deity (the pan-Hindu gods too grow 'weak from a lack of sacrifices')⁹¹. This is clear when we see the priest daub some blood onto the bowl in the hands of Makāmuṇi depicted on a stone relief (Venacappaṭṭi, Coimbatore), when the cāmiyāṭis drink the blood directly from the neck of the goat (Māranāṭu – we remember that the cāmiyāṭi of Karuppar called the blood milk); when in Tiruccirāppaḷli the person representing Karuppar, the guardian of Kuḷumāyi, drinks the blood of hundreds of goats; when the rice mixed with blood is thrown into the four directions to the malignant spirits; when the cooked meat is spread together with the other offerings (rice, alcohol) in front of the deity. The food appeases the deity, and being satisfied the god or goddess will grant the devotees' wishes, will look after them and bring prosperity to the village. But basically this applies to deities who receive vegetarian offerings as well. The deities who drink blood are fierce deities: the pan-

⁸⁸ See Malamoud 1988: 3.

⁸⁹ Kapp 1996: 213 and informant from Ankalammagudur, A. P.

⁹⁰ Van Kooij 1972: 53.

⁹¹ Shulman 1980a: 133.

Hindu Kālī swallows Raktabīja's blood,⁹² and various other goddesses who delight in the drinking of blood are mentioned in the Kālikāpurāṇa.⁹³ The skull bowl that the goddesses carry, the kapāla, serves, among other things, as vessel to be filled with blood.⁹⁴ What the fierce folk goddesses of Tamilnadu carry in their hands is a diminutive version of the kapāla (Ta. kapālam), even if the priests identify it as a kuṅkumam box and its red content as kuṅkumam powder rather than blood. The larger bowl that Makāmūṇi holds in both hands is still clearly understood as a vessel for the sacrificial blood.

Why do the fierce deities need blood when it is obviously not only to satisfy their culinary appetites? Blood confers power on the deity, physical power and wilderness power; the kind of power wilderness deities need. One informant insisted that the blood sacrifice to the giant Muṇi was not actually for him but for the arakkar (rākṣasa) under his foot. The arakkar is a demon who takes possession of women (Mēṭṭūr, Salem); he is akin to the malignant spirits (pēy picācu). In other words, the more ferocious, the more dangerous a deity or spirit is, the greater the necessity for a blood sacrifice; but the informant's statement also implies that the Muṇi is so powerful that he can subdue any demon or arakkar without the need for a blood sacrifice and that he has moved up in the hierarchy of deities, leaving the non-vegetarian offerings to those below him. As a general statement we can say that it is the tuṣṭa deities, the fierce, angry deities who need the blood because they are the deities who do battle with the demons.

Durgā, who shares Aṅkāḷamman's temple in Ankalammagudur in Andhra Pradesh, is a very fierce deity. During the festival she is immersed in the well to cool her, and when she is brought back to the temple, she has to walk on blood. Usually goat blood is sprinkled on the ground but once, when there was no goat available, a man bit into his own arm and made blood flow onto the ground. Without this blood the goddess would not have moved. Here then is another reason for blood sacrifices: they induce the otherwise immobile deity to leave his/her place. Shulman mentions a number of folk myths in which a temple chariot can only be moved by means of a human sacrifice,⁹⁵ and a similar myth the informants of Shantakovvur (Andhra Pradesh) told about the goddess Aṅkāḷamman: The goddess was fished out of the river and the inhabitants of the village wanted her to move to a place on a hill. For every step she needed to take they offered her a lime, a coconut and a goat, thus she walked until she came to the bottom of the hill where she

⁹² Devīmāhātmyam 8.53 ff.

⁹³ Van Kooij 1972: 113,161,164.

⁹⁴ Lorenzen 1972: 81,fn. 33.

⁹⁵ Shulman 1980a: 53.

stood still. No number of goat sacrifices could induce her to move. Finally a woman from the Yadava community offered herself in sacrifice saying to the goddess: ‘After you have taken me, sit in your place on the hill.’ In Tamilnadu, before a deity goes on procession, a goat or a lime is sacrificed in front of the vehicle. The priest of *Muttālamman* of *Maṇakkāṭṭūr* called the goat that is sacrificed when the goddess journeys to the river to be released into the water *payaṇam kuṭṭi* (small goat for the journey).

With the above examples we come into the vicinity of human sacrifices. A goat offered to make a deity move cannot be explained by saying it is to satisfy the deity's anger or hunger. The reason for this goat sacrifice is similar to the reason for ‘human sacrifice’ and ultimately for all sacrifices: the force released through a blood offering contains within itself the violence and sin of the killing, a dangerous and powerful force, and because the sacrifice is done for the deity and accepted by the deity, the deity has to deal with that force, has to act. The deity, so to speak, is responsible for the redemption of the sacrifice. Or, seen in another way, through the taking of life an imbalance is created which the deity has to balance by offering life (by fulfilling the devotee's wish, by settling among humans, by making the divine power available to humans).

‘Human’ sacrifices

On various occasions priests referred to the animal sacrifices as *narapali* (Skt. *narabali*), as ‘human sacrifice’. A different type of symbolic *narapali*, in which the ‘victim’ is a human, is enacted as part of *Tillaikkāḷi*'s festival in *Aracaṅkuṭi*. On the last day of the festival the goddess returns to her temple. That night the priest of the goddess, who is the *cāmiyāṭi* (here called *maruḷāḷi*) of the goddess's guardian *Periyaṅnacāmi* or *Periyāṅṭavar*, gets possessed at the shrine of *Periyaṅnacāmi*. The shrine is within the compound of the goddess temple and faces her. A small incision is made on the priest's throat (or some other male person from the priest's family) and some blood is extracted, which is then daubed on to the forehead of the goddess. Informants called the sacrifice *narapali* and explained that the goddess wanted some human blood. One of the village elders offered the following story as explanation:

Long ago, some five-hundred or a thousand years ago, a section of the *Kaḷḷar* (the *Nāṭṭār*) had to give a man in sacrifice (*narapali*) to the goddess every year. Once the turn came to a lady who had only one son. Not wanting to lose him, she hid him somewhere outside the village and then prayed to the goddess: ‘I have only one child. I cannot give him to you. What shall I do?’ *Tillaikkāḷi* appeared to her

and told her that it was not necessary to give a narapali, the offering of a small amount of blood was enough.

Rather than proving that the goddess received an actual human sacrifice (the goddess only recently came into the hands of the Kaḷḷar), the story illustrates the belief that the goddess's power depends on or is amplified by human sacrifice. Throughout India myths and stories of human sacrifices abound, often the intention suffices and the deity either forgoes the actual sacrifice or the victim is revived: Kāmākhya, for instance, demanded but then renounced a human offering; but the same text says that offerings to the goddess Śivā should be 'besprinkled with the blood of one's own limbs'.⁹⁶ Kāṭamarāju promises the goddess Gaṅgā human sacrifices, and Sontheimer mentions 'ritual suicides' for Mailāra and Khaṇḍobā.⁹⁷ The goddess Shikotar in Gujarat demands human sacrifices, and according to one myth she used to sit atop a mountain and used to cause all the ships to sink that she sighted, until a merchant begged her to come down from the mountain. She agreed on condition that for each step she be offered a buffalo. When the merchant ran out of buffaloes he sacrificed his wife and children and finally himself and the goddess, pleased, revived him and his family and granted him the wish that his lineage should blossom.⁹⁸ Enthoven mentions human sacrifices.⁹⁹ Kulke discusses sacrifices of tribal persons as part of a cultic integration of the tribe's culture and territory into the king's reign,¹⁰⁰ and in the same area of eastern India the well-known Meriah sacrifice involved a human victim.¹⁰¹ Closer to home, there are Tamil myths of human sacrifices, for example, the sacrifice of a thousand goldsmiths to Kaṇṇaki.¹⁰²

In Tamil folk religion references to human sacrifices are frequent, but most of the time the sacrifice is only implied.¹⁰³ We have seen in Chapter I.4. how the Cērvaikkārars 'sacrificed' a shepherd boy to their god Karuvaṇṇarāyar. The goddess Celliyammaṅ of Mutanai (Cuddalore) demanded the king's eldest son as sacrifice in return for making it rain. After the king had offered his son and it had rained, he became proud and promised to sacrifice his own wife if the goddess consented to become his lover. Celliyammaṅ, angry, told her son, Uttāṇṭa Virāṅ, about the offer and he killed the king.

⁹⁶ Van Kooij 1972: 27, 100.

⁹⁷ Narayana Rao 1989: 107; Sontheimer 1989a: 309, 318.

⁹⁸ Fischer et al. 1982.

⁹⁹ Enthoven 1924.

¹⁰⁰ Kulke 1993.

¹⁰¹ Boal 1979; 1980; Jayakar 1989: 68 ff.

¹⁰² Shulman 1980a: 202.

¹⁰³ See e. g., Nishimura 1987: 44.

Another interesting story tells how Cinnattampi Vanniyan and his brothers and one sister became the guardians of Tenkarai Makarājēsvarar in Cittūr (Tirunelveli):

Tenkarai Makarājēsvarar and his minister, Taḷavāy Māṭaṇ, decided that they needed someone to guard their treasure. In Vannikkarantai there was a Maravar who had no child. His wife prayed to Śiva in Caṅkaranayinār. Taḷavāy Māṭaṇ appeared to her in Śiva's form and told her to pray to Pēcciyammaṇ in the Cittūr Tenkarai Makarājēsvarar temple. She would get children, but she would have to promise to make them guardians of the temple. She promised and bore six sons: Cinnattampi Vanniyan, Citampara Vanniyan, Āṇṭukoṇṭa Vanniyan, Aḷakuvilaṅkaṭi Vanniyan, Tenkarai Vanniyan, Vaṭakarai Vanniyan, and one daughter, Vannicci. When the children were grown up, the mother decided to marry her eldest son, Cinnattampi, to the daughter of her brother (the traditional proper alliance). Her brother consented on condition that the young man follow the old Maravar tradition and do a “theft” (kaḷavu). Hence the mother sent the young man together with his brothers to abduct a maiden (kannikkaḷavu). Taḷavāy Māṭaṇ remembered that he wanted to turn the six young men into guardians. He took the form of a fortune teller (Kōṭaṅki) and aroused a desire in them to steal the temple jewels. As soon as the young men were about to rob the jewels, Taḷavāy Māṭaṇ struck them blind and locked them into the treasure room. Then he appeared in the dream of the temple treasurer and told him about the theft and how the culprits had to be punished. Accordingly, the six robbers were placed on the northern side of the temple and made to face north. Then they were beheaded. In the meantime the mother had rushed to Cittūr with six bundles of presents hoping to release her sons. When she saw her sons dead, she cut out her tongue and died. Her husband and her daughter, who had also arrived in Cittūr, performed the last rites for the dead, and then the daughter pronounced the following curse: “There shall be neither cackle of hens nor barking of dogs; there shall never be more than seven houses here; any additional house shall burn down. For twenty-one generations this earth shall not be fertile.” Then she destroyed Cittūr. Later the god appeared to her and told her about the promise her mother had made and added that now all had become deities (Tiṇamalar, 22.3.1989).

According to another version Taḷavāy Māṭaṇ had promised the Maravar woman children on condition that she make a sacrifice (kāvu) of her eldest son. She neglected to do this because she had understood kāval (guardian) instead of kāvu. Here it is Aiyanār (i. e., Tenkarai Makarājēsvarar) who in the form of a child tempts the six brothers to rob the temple jewels and betrays them to the priest. Father and mother of the six young men die and the sister arranges the cremation of her brothers and parents and then, after having cursed Cittūr, mounts the funeral pyre.

Cinnattampi Vanniyan is the guardian of Tenkarai Makarājēsvarar and has his own shrine next to the main building of the temple. On the seventh day of the yearly festival in the month of paṅkuni (March–April) a group of Piḷḷaimār come to this Vanniyan shrine (Piḷḷaimār is usually a title of Veḷḷāḷars). They are said to be the descendants of the Vanniyan

boys (marriage between Maravars and Veļļāļars is not uncommon; the name Vanniyan in the story does not seem to refer to the Vanniyar caste but to the village, Vannikkarantai). While the singer of the bow (vilpāṭṭu) sings the story, the Piļļaimār dance in the shrine of the Vanniyan. About ten men first dance in their normal dress; then they change into black pants held together with belts on which there are small bells. Red kerchiefs cover their hair, flower garlands their chests. Around their shoulders and their backs there are ropes to signify their arrest. They dance for an hour or more and then all fall to the ground (showing that they have died). Later, water is sprinkled on them and they get up. This ends the enactment of the story.

Many of the human sacrifice stories or myths have a theme in common: the person who dies is revived (we remember here also the myth of Vīramākāļiyammaṅ and the weavers) or is made into a guardian deity (as the above Vanniyan or Maturai Viraṅ and Kāttavarāyaṅ). Death is rewarded with rebirth and a favor granted by the deity, or with deification. The idea of rebirth – not on earth but in a heaven reserved for heroes, for courageous warriors – lies behind the readiness with which warriors let themselves be ‘sacrificed’ in battle. In fact some of the sacrificial images have their parallels in war. In the Devīmāhātmyam 7.23f. Kāli, holding the heads of the asuras Caṅḍa and Muṅḍa, says to Caṅḍikā: ‘Here have I brought you the heads of Caṅḍa and Muṅḍa as two great animal offerings in this sacrifice of battle’. The words paṭukaļam and kaļari (scene of battle, arena) were used by informants to designate the place where specific rituals take place, rituals that have to do with battle or with death and revival.¹⁰⁴ Much has been written on the connection between battle and ritual,¹⁰⁵ and this short reference must suffice here. Death in war, like death in a heroic fight with a tiger or other violent deaths, led to the erection of a memorial or ancestor stone and sometimes to deification.¹⁰⁶ The ancient Tamil hero who returned victorious from battle offered his head to the goddess Korravai/Durgā.¹⁰⁷ The tradition of offering one’s head must have continued in Tamilnadu for a long time judging from the many memorial stones that show a hero in the act of severing his head (e. g., at the Arapaliśvarar temple in the

¹⁰⁴ Māranāṭu, see V.5.c.; Pāpanācam, see above; Vīrappūr where Poṅnar and Caṅkar died, Beck 1982: 47; Maṅakkāṭṭūr, where a death and revival myth is enacted and Aracaṅkuṭi, where the men of the village, armed with sticks, celebrate a victory over a neighboring village; in the Draupadī cult it is the place of Aravāṅ’s sacrifice, Hildebeitel 1991: 283.

¹⁰⁵ See e. g., Hildebeitel 1976/1990, 1991: 166 ff.

¹⁰⁶ See *Ceṅkam Naṭukarkaļ*; Settar and Sontheimer 1982.

¹⁰⁷ See e. g., Mahalingam 1967: 27, Richman 1988: 65 f. and fn. 37 and the reliefs of Durgā on the northern wall of some Chola temples, e. g., the Pīramapurīśvarar temple at Puļļamaṅkai, Thanjavur.

Kolli hills and the Pattirakāliyamman temple in Antiyūr). Sacrifices of animals and men in connection with the vijayadaśamī celebration of the navarātri festival had to do with war, with the king's marching into battle,¹⁰⁸ and the heroic battle for the enemy's head in the 'Himalayan ball games' is in essence a sacrifice to the goddess.¹⁰⁹

Whether one excuses a killing with the label of war or of sacrifice, it is the taking of life and just as Arjuna questioned the rightness of killing his kin, the priests and devotees questioned the rightness of offering a human to a deity. Tactfully the impulse of wishing to stop the killing is placed upon the deity, and it is she (goddesses rather than gods seem to have enjoyed human offerings) who proposes to accept a coconut instead of a human head. Erndl reports many myths that explain this substitution,¹¹⁰ and the following myth makes it clear why it is the coconut:

'According to legend, the sage Visvamitra attempted to create another world containing in it all that this world contains. While his new world was in process of manufacture, Indra and other deities requested him to refrain. He acceded to their wishes, but the things already begun by him were allowed to remain side by side with the creations of God. In place of man he is said to have created the cocoanut, the upper portion of the shell of which resembles the head of a man, with two holes in it, to represent man's eyes and a longer hole to represent the human nose, the fibre answering to the hair of a man's head. The breaking of cocoanut is considered to be a substitute for the sacrifice of a man and is largely resorted to by all the votaries'.¹¹¹

The coconuts are always broken and then offered, and apparently placing unbroken coconuts before a deity is a sign of disrespect; (for this very reason – to show disrespect –, Vaṭavīraṇ, a guardian with much magic power and situated outside the Āṅṭavarkōvil, Meyyāttūr, receives unbroken coconuts). This implies that the act of breaking the coconut is symbolic of the cutting of the head; for it to be a sacrifice the coconut needs to be 'killed'.

Meanings of sacrifice

The reason for our long excursion into the world of sacrifices is to show the diversity and complexity of what sacrifice can mean. Doing so, we have touched on a number of issues: Some sacrifices are seen by the informants as ways to satisfy, appease and strengthen the deity; blood offerings induce deities to move from one place to another; human

¹⁰⁸ See Silva 1955; Biardeau 1981.

¹⁰⁹ Zoller 1993.

¹¹⁰ Erndl 1989: 247; 1993: 46, 91 f., 130 f.

¹¹¹ Richards 1920: 117.

sacrifices had to do with ideas of fertility (the Meriah), war, deification, or a place in a warrior heaven. Sacrifices, both vegetarian and non-vegetarian, serve a number of purposes: they feed the deity; they create a debt that the deity has to redeem; they are an offering of the self. Samanta, looking at the goat sacrifices to Kālī in Calcutta, was able to distill from the many interpretations of her informants a common motif.¹¹² She writes: ‘The concept of a gift as an offering of the self (jīva), the nature of this self as animal-like (paśu), and its transformation by divine ingestion/digestion appeared as a pervasive trope in the ‘voices’ which relate to *bali*’.¹¹³ She criticizes a number of theories on sacrifice for being based on the premise that god and man are distinct and separate entities and, although she seems to agree partly with Öestör (who ‘notes the association of *bali* with “victory”’) ¹¹⁴, Preston (who sees the animal sacrifice as a substitute of one’s self, and the sacrifice as a means to resolve a crisis)¹¹⁵ and Kinsley (who ‘suggests that blood-offerings to the Śakti goddess is an act whereby she is replenished as she continuously gives birth’)¹¹⁶, she finds their interpretations lacking in an inquiry into the ‘wider symbolic patterns that underlie the cultural meaning of *bali* and would place these issues within a richer perspective’. Samanta basically sees in the animal offering an offering of self, the intention of the offerer to sacrifice his own ‘animal qualities’. The goddess, by eating and digesting the animal, releases the animal from its animal existence to be born again as man and releases the animal bonds (the ‘sins’, pāp) of the offerer and brings him to a realization of his own true nature (unity with the Śakti) and an eventual release (mokṣa). The sacrificial sword, given into Kālī’s hands, is also the sword that cuts ignorance. There is a transformation from the uncooked (the ‘animal’, paśu) to the cooked (the liberated being), a process that happens in stages, a gradual awakening effected by the grace of the goddess who, the way she transforms the sacrificial food into prasāda, transforms through time (Kālī i s time) the offerer – who offers himself. Identifying the victim with the offerer, Samanta has to reject Hubert and Mauss’s understanding of the victim as intermediary and the act of sacrifice as ‘a ‘transaction’ or ‘communion’ (her quotations) between human and superhuman powers’¹¹⁷. For Hubert and Mauss the victim needs to be distinct from the sacrificer (offerer): ‘Because the victim is distinct from the sacrificer and the god, it separates them while uniting them: they draw close to each other, without giving

¹¹² Samanta 1994.

¹¹³ Samanta 1994: 786 f.

¹¹⁴ Samanta 1994: 784, quoting Öestör 1980: 18, 60.

¹¹⁵ Samanta 1994: 784, quoting Preston 1980: 78.

¹¹⁶ Samanta 1994: 784, quoting Kinsley 1986: 146.

¹¹⁷ Samanta 1994: 798.

themselves to each other entirely'.¹¹⁸ Now one of Hubert and Mauss's arguments for a separate victim is that the sacrificer can only contact the religious forces with utmost caution and that therefore an intermediary is necessary. ('If the religious forces are the very principle of the forces of life, they are in themselves of such a nature that contact with them is a fearful thing for the ordinary man'.)¹¹⁹ Part of the problem between the two stances is that Hubert and Mauss's analysis of the sacrifice is based on Vedic concepts that are not advaitic, while Samanta argues from a purely advaitic (non-dualistic) point of view.¹²⁰

Looking at our data from the folk religion of Tamilnadu, we can see that neither interpretation suits all cases of sacrifice, but that both views can serve to explain the sacrifices. On the one hand it is doubtful whether the devotee who is going to sacrifice a goat consciously connects his own 'animal nature' with it and actually wishes to sacrifice that animal nature. On the other hand some of the 'self-tortures' that devotees impose on themselves must grow out of a deep feeling of bhakti. The position of the devotee vis-à-vis the deity is one of fearful respect; yet, that same devotee may understand the deity as within him/herself. Let us first look at the various goat sacrifices. There are the private sacrifices: they can be done anytime and very generally speaking serve to balance the 'dharmic forces' (by these I mean the forces that hold everything together, that constitute destiny, that uphold the order of the worlds; the cosmic laws). Illness, bad luck, barrenness etc., are signs that the cosmic harmony is out of order, either due to one's own 'sin' (pāpa, pāvam), due to somebody else's sin (e. g., jealousy resulting in the 'evil eye' or black magic), due to negative planetary influences (especially Saturn's influence) or due to some other unknown entities' workings (like those of spirits). We do not know with what intent a person offers the goat and he may not know himself, beyond wishing that the deity effect a change from the present negative to a positive, or beyond meaning to show his gratitude to the deity for having effected this change – if the sacrifice is a thanks-giving offering (which in many cases it is). Buying or rearing the goat and then offering it up is making a sacrifice; it is renunciation. If the person gives up something that is dear, and if it is done with much bhakti, the ultimate intent of the devotee can range from simple submission to the deity to a full surrender, an offering of the 'self' for the deity. But this surrender, this wish for giving oneself into a union with the deity, this wish to be 'eaten' by the deity is much more clearly expressed in the 'self-tortures'.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Hubert and Mauss 1964: 100.

¹¹⁹ Hubert and Mauss 1964: 98.

¹²⁰ Samanta 1994: 795.

¹²¹ See below.

There are public goat sacrifices that are part of the festival procedure: in Aracañkuṭi some of the goat sacrifices serve to acquire the blood that will hang in the temple and that later is offered to the boundary spirits. The goat sacrifices are a collective offering by the village for the general benefit of the village. The goat sacrificed for the eye-opening ceremony at the Paṅṅāra Appicci festival was to awaken the power in the deities – it had nothing to do with personal bhakti.

Sacrifices have to be seen within their context, and a further argument for this are the types of food offerings. Samanta suggests that the goddess's 'consumption'¹²² of the cooked goat food through her glance (dṛṣṭi) and the partaking of the thus charged prasāda by the devotee is indicative of a slow cooking process wrought both by goddess and devotee by which the uncooked crude animal-soul of the devotee is refined and turned into its true divine self. Here too it is useful to distinguish various food offerings: there is a food offering that is independent of a devotee's presence, for instance the daily food that the priest offers as part of the general worship (upacāra) – there is not necessarily always someone present to receive prasāda; or the blood offerings that are thrown to the fierce deities and spirits (these are not returned as prasāda), and there are offerings that do not result in the cooking of the animal meat: chickens that are impaled on spears, buffaloes that are buried. For the latter there still is the return of the deity's grace, but it is not transferred through food.

The notion of an identification between devotee and deity is difficult to maintain when one considers those rituals and sacrifices that have as their aim to ward off a deity's power (e. g., when the pox or cholera goddess is consigned to the boundary or the next village). Deity power is two-sided, contains the creative and the destructive, and if devotees do not visit wilderness deities at night, it is because they fear their destructive side. The relationship between deity (or some deities) and devotee is ambivalent: there is fear, awe, but also love; mothers are not only gracious and kind. There is the punishing deity who brings disease, barrenness, who eats life (Icakki or Pēcci, who eat children), and there is the deity who heals, grants children, eats the devotees' sins.¹²³

There is the sacrifice of the devotee and there is the sacrifice of the deity. Samanta, following late Bengali tantric texts observes that before the animal is killed,¹²⁴ it is invoked as puruṣa and as Brahmāṇḍa. Puruṣa refers to the cosmic man who sacrificed himself for creation (see the famous puruṣa sūkta hymn); Brahmāṇḍa is the cosmic egg that contains all creation. Severing the goat's head from the trunk is likened to the

¹²² Her quotation marks p. 791.

¹²³ On the deity eating sins see Samanta 1994: 793; also Meyer 1986: 11.

¹²⁴ Samanta 1994: 788.

separation of the cosmic egg into two.¹²⁵ Samanta does not expand on this part of the text, but I think its implication adds another dimension to the sacrifice (which she briefly notes)¹²⁶. The whole, the one, cannot be creative. In order for creative energy to flow, the one has to become two; the Śakti needs to separate from Śiva. The deity, in order to enter into any relationship with the individual soul, needs to sacrifice itself; the one becomes two in order to experience the other. The way back into the one for the devotee is to offer him/herself in turn, but it is not in splitting him/herself, it can only be effected by giving the whole, by offering the entire being, the self. The sacrificial animal then is the cosmic deity and it is the offering to that deity; in typical Hindu logic, it is recipient and victim; and in the identification of the victim with the offerer/devotee, victim and deity are ultimately one.

Animal sacrifices are not the only sacrifices. We have seen that devotees offer their blood, or even their head. In folk religion there are a number of sacrifices that involve piercing and maiming of body parts: in Tamilnadu devotees will pierce their cheeks and other parts of the body with small silver spears or with thick iron rods ending in tridents; they will have their backs hooked up with silver hooks thick enough to hold their body weight (*ceṭil*) and let themselves be suspended.¹²⁷ (In Tamilnadu the person swinging on the hook is safeguarded by bands around his chest, abdomen and legs.) Some, with the hooks in their backs, pull small wooden carts with representations of a deity inside through the streets; some will walk on nail sandals, sew limes on their chests and backs and so on. These and similar ways of inflicting trials of strength on body and mind are known in other parts of India as well.¹²⁸ In Tamilnadu these sacrifices (and we can add walking over hot coals) are done in fulfillment of a vow (*pirārttanai*); they are private offerings. (When hook-swinging still was actively practiced – in Cōlavantān, Madurai, there was hook-swinging up to the end of last century – another person could substitute for the actual offerer of the sacrifice.)¹²⁹ The idea behind these offerings is the offering of self (*ātmabali*)¹³⁰, a surrender of oneself, of one's ego to the deity, and carried to the literal extreme, it is a human sacrifice. Oddie mentions an interesting myth that makes a direct connection between hook-swinging and human sacrifice¹³¹: Viśvāmitra cursed Vasiṣṭha and as a consequence the latter's sons became 'Pariahs'

¹²⁵ Samanta 1994: 789.

¹²⁶ Samanta 1994: 798.

¹²⁷ On which see e. g., Oddie 1995; Powell 1914.

¹²⁸ See e. g., Sontheimer 1984: 13; Östör 1980: 127 ff.

¹²⁹ See Oddie 1995.

¹³⁰ Samanta 1994: 783.

¹³¹ Oddie 1995: 56.

who fulfilled their vows by offering human sacrifices to the deities. Vasiṣṭha asked Viśvāmitra for a remedy, and the latter proposed hook-swinging saying ‘that it answered as well as human sacrifice, as it involved human torture’.

In terms of medieval Tamil śaiva and vaiṣṇava bhakti literature the self-offering means closeness, unity with god, but also humility and subservience. The devotee is a slave (aṭiyār) of the god, even his ‘dog’ (nāy) (words used e. g., by Māṇikkavācakar). The devotee is the ‘demon’ at the feet of the dancing Śiva: Kāraikkālammaiṅkār calls herself ‘pēy’, ‘demon’, and in her skeletal form she has become immortalized at Śiva’s feet.¹³² The notion of subservience is also contained in the eating of prasāda, which is the ‘left-over’ of the deity’s food, the deity already having taken the essence from it. But the devotee’s body is also a temple for the deity, a sacred vessel into which the god enters.¹³³ The devotee can experience union with the deity: Āṅṅāḷ disappears in the arms of Viṣṇu in Śrīraṅgam, Tiruccirāppaḷḷi.¹³⁴ Devotees who undergo self-tortures are said to feel no pain because of their bhakti, a bhakti that can lead to a temporary union with the deity. The devotee is consumed by the deity just as the vaiṣṇava poet-saint Nammālvār was consumed by Viṣṇu about whom he says: ‘... he consumed me life and limb, and filled me, made me over into himself’,¹³⁵ or the way Kālī consumes the ‘self-animal’ until, after ‘many lifetimes ... union with divinity and liberation’ is achieved.¹³⁶

5. *Worship as Yoga*

In the Indian alphabets the simple, unmarked consonant contains within itself a vowel, short – ‘a’. Śaiva Siddhānta uses this analogy to explain the highest deity-power: the ‘a’ stands at the beginning of the alphabet, it can exist by itself or in combination with a consonant; when it carries the consonant it is itself invisible. Without the ‘a’, god, the world and the souls cannot exist (the way a consonant without vowel does not have sound); however, the same way that the vowel ‘a’ and the consonant are not the same, so are god and the soul not the same but exist in union (Śivajñānabodha of Meykaṅṅadeva II.1.)¹³⁷. This is called advaita in Śaiva

¹³² On Kāraikkālammaiṅkār see Karavelane 1982; Sasivalli 1984.

¹³³ Mowry 1974: 210, citing Appar; Yocum 1982: 148 and Vanmikanathan 1980: 112 ff. and 326 ff., citing Māṇikkavācakar.

¹³⁴ On Āṅṅāḷ see Filliozat 1972; Hardy 1983: 414 ff.

¹³⁵ Ramanujan 1981: 76.

¹³⁶ Samanta 1994: 782.

¹³⁷ See e. g., Berger et al. 1981.

Siddhānta and contrasts Śaṅkarācārya's concept of advaita in which god and individual soul, Brahman and Ātman are the same. The different concepts of advaita are not our concern here, important is the idea that the two, consonant and vowel, can be apprehended as either a material, visible form (the character of the consonant in its written form, soundless) or as a form with content (in which the vowel is known to exist behind the form, the sounding consonant). Stated differently: there is a subtle world behind the gross world, or, taken further: there is a gross, material world corresponding to the gross body in man (sthūla śarīra); there is the subtle body (śūkṣma śarīra – consisting of buddhi, ahaṅkāra, manas and the five tanmātras, the potentials of sense perception: sound potential, touch potential etc.)¹³⁸; and there is a body beyond that, the causal body, containing the Ātman (how exactly the different bodies are composed varies from one philosophical system to another). We have already discussed how deities exist on different levels, how they can be pure power without name and form and how they manifest in concrete shapes in tangible places, and we have seen how the invisible power is called into the visible representation of the deity. From the gross, material form we can 'read' the deity, determine its name; we can see it, touch it, tend it, but the subtle forms of the deity are elusive. We do not know what the spirits look like who receive the blood offerings at the boundary; we do not know what form the baleful presence of Saturn has and yet we feel it; we cannot name the cause that brought on an illness nor the one that healed us, yet we believe there is some form of divine power involved. There is a whole range of experiences and communications between the devotee and the deity that is beyond the five senses, that happens in the antaḥkaraṇa (buddhi, ahaṅkāra, manas) and that the devotee might be hard put to explain. Yet, much of the worship – or an important part of it – takes place on that internal level, but not necessarily correlated with the external worship.

When we look at the performance of a pūjā in a temple we note (and are perhaps surprised) that it consists of regulated actions that attract or speak to our five senses – and appeal to the senses of the deity: there is sound: the priest recites mantras, there is the playing of drums and nadasvaram; there is the washing of the deity – (a procedure that can be very sensuous to the onlooker) – and the dressing of the mūrti; there is light: the priest circles a camphor flame or an oil lamp in front of the deity, lights up the deity so that the devotees can see her/him; there is the smell of incense, of flowers, of perfume; and there is the food offered to the deity and which the devotees receive as prasāda. The worship of the mūrti, the upacāras, are acts done with the body; the priest can perform

¹³⁸ See Dasgupta 1975: 251 ff.

them mechanically and thinking of something that has nothing to do with the deity or his work (even though this is not the way he is supposed to do the worship). The devotee will not know what the priest thinks, but this does not matter because as long as the actions are correctly done, the *pūjā* is valid. The action itself has an effect; it is the ritual devoid of ‘intent’ or ‘meaning’. There is a wonderful myth that illustrates this; it is the myth told in connection with Śivarātri and narrates the story of a hunter who, forced to spend the night on a tree, accidentally throws bilva leaves down on a *liṅga* that happens to be there and who, shedding tears when thinking of his hungry family, bathes the *liṅga* thereby performing an act of worship. Because the night happens to be Śivarātri and because he has stayed awake, fasted and worshipped the *liṅga* (even if unknowingly), the hunter has gained great merit and is taken to Śiva's heaven, Śivaloka.¹³⁹

There is worship on the physical plane, worship of action, worship pertaining to the gross body, worship that in terms of yoga roughly can be assigned to the waking state, the state in which subject and object are separate. It's the kind of worship that may be done out of duty, out of a sense of tradition: karma yoga, reading karma/n first of all as a ritual act that effects something and only secondarily in the enlarged sense of implying action without attachment the way karma yoga is defined in the Vedāntic literature.

When the devotee or priest puts his/her mind to the action, the worship takes on an added dimension. Action is filled with something: there is a reason, an intention, a wish that accompanies the action and that is addressed to the power behind the *mūrti*, or there is simply *bhakti*. A relationship is established between devotee and deity; the deity is in the mind of the one worshipping. The *bhakti*, the devotion, the wish or intention gives the ritual action a personal meaning, a meaning that can be entirely independent of the action and that cannot be explained through the action.¹⁴⁰ Most of the worship in Tamil folk religion is a combination of ritualized actions and personal mental worship: the frame, the rituals, are given and performed independently of what the devotees fill them with: a hundred people under the guidance of a priest can each carry on his/her head a pot filled with milk to the deity, each one enacts the same ritual steps, but each person has a different motif for and a different inner stance while carrying the pot. We can call this *bhakti* yoga, where worship takes its meaning from the love towards the deity.

A next step in the worship takes place on the level of the subtle body and is a further internalization. It is worship without actions, a purely mental worship, meditation. The deity is drawn inside; the body becomes

¹³⁹ For the different versions of the myth see Long 1972: 24 f.)

¹⁴⁰ See Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 95 f.

the temple; the relationship between devotee and deity becomes more familiar, more personal, leading to the ‘that I am’ realization. This worship can be assigned to the dream state.

The next step, that of deep sleep, is a further internalization; it eliminates the I-ness (ahamkāra) that separates the devotee from the deity; and there is a direct experience of the deity. This state may happen to the devotee at some moments during his worship. Bhakti may be so strong that it can carry the devotee into the arms of the deity (we remember Āṅṅā), or, the continuous worship can lead to insights, to the knowledge/wisdom (jñāna) of self and deity and their relationship; it would correspond to jñāna yoga. Concentrated and continuous worship on this level will lead to the eventual union with the deity, when all duality is erased, when there is neither I nor Thou. This state would correspond to the fourth state, turīya, the state beyond deep sleep.

Worship then could be seen as functioning on three different levels simultaneously: there is the visible act of worship; there is an intention, a wish to please the deity, to establish a relationship with the deity, to be guided by the deity and receive the deity's grace; there is a desire to realize the deity within, to become one with the deity, the way the goddess wishes to return to the left side of Śiva and become integrated into the One.

Most devotees will not be schooled in the philosophies of yoga; they will not consciously think in terms of gross and subtle bodies; they will not plan a conscious step by step internalization, but because they can conceive of deity in many different forms and on many different levels, from the most gross to the most subtle, the idea or the knowledge of a unity between deity and devotee potentially swings in every act of worship, like the vowel ‘a’ in the consonant.