Did Pandialy Walk on Fire?
The Refutation of an Ancestral Mythological Genesis as a Quest for Knowledge and Acknowledgment

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Abstract: In La Réunion, the fire-walking festival is an annual ritual cycle wherein, after eighteen days of preparation, abstinence and fasting, some Réunionese Hindus walk barefoot across a pit filled with hot embers. For a long time, practitioners claimed that Draupadī, best known as Pandialy, had walked on fire as mentioned in the *Mahābhārata*, locally named *Barldon.* The epic provides a dramaturgical backbone to the festival. However, some devotees now refute the ancestral mythological explanation of Pandialy walking on fire as the genesis of the fire-walking ritual cycle. They attribute this to a misunderstanding made by their ancestors, who came from India to La Réunion during the nineteenth century, and allegedly conflated two different epics: the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Historical sources and scholarly research attest that the confusion cannot have been made by Réunionese, since a cult of Draupadī/Pandialy also exists in India. This refutation of previous interpretations is also based on the premises that there is such a thing as the original, pure version of a myth and a hierarchy between text and orality. Examining the ritual, the epic and the myth, this article shows *that* the refutation of the myth of Pandialy walking on fire in La Réunion reflects a quest for knowledge and acknowledgment.

Also called the 'fifth Veda', the *Mahābhārata* epic has travelled beyond Indian borders to reach a variety of places, universes, and imaginary worlds in multiple, complex ways. This paper addresses the story's circulation in the Indian Ocean, where it has become a major reference on the island of La Réunion. A story with deep historical, economic and human echoes, closely tied to a ritual, to faith and to claim-making, the *Mahābhārata* is the dramaturgical backbone of the fire-walking festival in La Réunion. Fire-walking is a ritual cycle organised annually wherein, after eighteen days of preparation, abstinence and fasting, some Réunionese Hindus walk bare-

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[1] This article received support from the Maison Interuniversitaire des Sciences de l'Homme d'Alsace (MISHA) and the Excellence Initiative of the University of Strasbourg. I would like to thank Jean-Yves Bart and Natalie Lang for language revisions.

foot across a pit filled with hot embers. The festival is dedicated to Draupadī, more often called Pandialy or Dolvédé on the island. For a long time, practitioners have claimed that Pandialy walked on fire on the basis of the *Mahābhārata*, which is locally called *Barldon*. For this reason, penitents[2] commemorate the goddess by taking on this ordeal. But lately, some worshippers have rejected this explanation and claimed that Pandialy never walked on fire. This belief, they say, stems from a misunderstanding by their ancestors, who came from India to La Réunion during the nineteenth century, when colonialists dreamed of building a sugarcane 'empire'. The ancestors are said to have mixed up the episode of Sītā walking through fire from the *Rāmāyaṇa* with Draupadī's life, conflating the two epics. This assertion inherently questions the ancestors' role, who, in the Hindu Réunionese worldview, play a pivotal role as they are represented as an *axis mundi* enabling communication between humans and the gods and their relationship with India. But also it depicts how some Réunionese Hindus are looking for knowledge and acknowledgement to fulfil the idea of a 'good worshipper'. This desire is linked to the idea of an existing Orthodox Hinduism and the implicit desire to invalidate claims that Réunionese Hindus do not know the 'good way' of practising religion.

This article is structured in three sections. The first presents contextual information on La Réunion, its inhabitants and Hindu religion over time and space. The second section describes the fire-walking ritual, its mythological frame and the challenge to the traditional genesis of this ritual practice. The third section explains why the first Indian labourers did not conflate the two epics and reflects on the epic, the myth, and the ritual, to point out the impossibility of reducing a myth to a single reality. The paper concludes with an analysis of the refutation of the myth in relation to the larger question of Sanskritization, suggesting that this refutation is a negotiation between the traditional heritage of the ancestors and a quest for knowledge and acknowledgment.

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[2] I use this word in the emic sense, meaning practitioner or fire-walker, as this is what the believers call those who make a sacrifice in a ritual setting.

Image 1: Barldon, La Réunion, December 2014 ©Loreley Franchina

THE RÉUNIONESE CONTEXT

In the beginning…

… was an uninhabited island (Scherer 1965; Gerbeau 1992). Located 800 kilometres east of Madagascar, and forming the Archipelago of Mascarene with the nearby islands of Mauritius and Rodrigues, La Réunion has been known to explorers since at least the fifteenth century (Gerbeau 1992: 15), but its settlement began only in the second half of the seventeenth century. It is now a French overseas department and a territory of the European Union, where French and Creole are spoken and the Euro is the currency. While it is more wealthy than its neighbours in the Indian Ocean, its history has been built on violence and struggle. For the French government, the 'overseas department' status was the best means to achieve the emancipation of the colony during the mid-twentieth century period of decolonization, even if some scholars consider it as a new form of colonization (Bertile 2006). Once the French established the colony in the late seventeenth century, they soon launched an economy based on the exploitation of the land. To do so, they started a slave trade, especially with the African coast. The trade intensified in the early nineteenth century when the government, after having tried to cultivate coffee and spices with meagre results, decided to turn the island into a sugarcane monoculture. The 1848 abolition of slavery was a blow to the plantation system, whose business model requires a massive workforce. The indentured labour trade followed slavery. The government looked for labourers in many places and found the biggest harbour to cast out its nets for workers in India. Many Indians, from different parts of the country, especially the South, left their homeland with a fixed-term 5 or 10-year contract to work in the sugarcane sector. First-hand accounts and historical sources show the hard life indentured labourers were often forced to lead, and not only in the case of La Réunion. These difficult conditions made Hugh Tinker refer to indenture as *A New System of Slavery* (1974).

Many workers from different backgrounds, origins and religions met on the island. The formation of mixed couples launched a long process, which developed into a Creole culture (Pourchez 2002) and led to the foundation of a Creole universe. A new understanding of the world, informed by multiple sources, emerged and the *invention* of a *tradition* began (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), building on the beliefs brought to the island. This was favoured by the geographical distance between La Réunion and other countries – in this case, India. This process has not been characterized by a *disculturation*, in the sense of loss of meaning, but by the emergence of new meanings (Pourchez 2002: 372).

Hinduism in La Réunion

According to the working contracts, labourers were free to continue practising their religions in La Réunion, which does not mean it was easy, and they were entitled to use a piece of land for religious purposes (Fuma 1999: 13). Catholic representatives saw Hinduism as a pagan and demonic religion. Priests forced many conversions and unsuccessfully tried to cure Hindus of their beliefs. It must however be noted that many Hindus, when they realized they would not go back to India, chose to be baptised to facilitate their social integration. To them, baptism did not mean giving up Hinduism, but introducing themselves into Catholic society while continuing to follow Hindu rituals. Despite great struggles, Hindus managed to keep their religion alive.

The geographical distance between India and La Réunion made it difficult for Indians to maintain ties to their homeland. While during the indenture, some new labourers came to the island and others returned to India, in an exchange of sorts, after that period there was practically no more communication. Moreover, the lack of female immigration did not allow endogamy. More generally, under the colonial system, the leading factor in partner choice was indeed geographical and social proximity more than ethnicity (Gérard 1997). As a result, Réunionese have ancestors with multiple origins. Since then, individuals – often guided by an ancestor's spirit – have chosen how and when to affiliate themselves with one or more origins. Practising several faiths is not a rare occurrence. A Réunionese can be seen in church, in a Hindu temple, and in a ceremony for his Malagasy ancestors, without this being odd. When a Réunionese is anchored to a specific *milieu* and even if he says he wants to *gard la ras* – save the race – this has a cultural rather than a biological meaning (Gérard 1997: 344). As Christian Ghasarian (2008: 110) suggests, I use *milieu* to define an undetermined ensemble of persons and places displaying cultural specificities, in order to respect the complexity of Creole society and to avoid the terms *group* or *community*, which are too reductive and associated with closure. One can go into the *milieu*, exit, or take a break and each practitioner gives it a particular meaning, which may vary according to their situation and personal history. Also, cultural variations are not incompatible with the Creole culture – they are actually a core component of that culture (Pourchez 2014: 61). In La Réunion, the idea of cultural identity has admittedly been the subject of various claims, but from an etic point of view, it is important not to read these claims solely in terms of ethnic groups: in a Creole society like La Réunion, the cultural system is not built on divisions between culturally uniform groups partitions where a group has a uniform culture (Barat 1989; Benoist 1998; Nicaise 1999; Ghasarian 2008; Pourchez 2002). Instead, culture should be seen as an intersystem – a continuum of multiple variations and transformations (Drummond 1980: 372). Therefore, Hinduism in La Réunion is experienced in a particular way. To define the way of practicing Hinduism in the Creole islands, Jean Benoist (1998) coined the phrase *hindouismes créoles* – creole hinduisms.

From 'Malbarization' to 'Tamilization': the Tamil revival

Despite the population's intricate melting pot and the French policy of assimilation (Ghasarian 1991: 11) Réunionese make ethnic references – which do not systematically match a phenotype – to define themselves and others. Designations change depending on who defines who.

During plantation society times, the Indian migrants and slaves were indistinctly called *Malabar*/*Malabard*/*Malbar* by the non-Indians. These words were at the time loaded with stereotypes, often linked to witchcraft and sorcery (Barat 1980: 52–53). A Malbarization process began then, in the sense that all Indians were classified as *Malbar*. Among themselves, some of their descendants may refer to more specific origins – *moi lé Kalkita, moi lé Madras*[3] – (Barat 1980: 47). In that context, an 'Indian' is someone who has recently come from India and does not have a Réunionese culture – the term applies for instance to newcomers from Pondicherry (Ghasarian 1991: 17).

From the beginning of the Tamil Revival, Hindus came together in religious and cultural associations. Those who had the means to do so travelled to Mauritius[4] and to India. 'Great temples', as the Réunionese call them, with vegetarian practices were founded or expanded. It was as if Hindu descendants wanted to revive an imagined diaspora.

The Indian gaze on Réunionese Hinduism: a deformed religion

Religious representatives from India were employed to look after some temples and ceremonies in the wake of the Tamil revival. These gurukkals in the 'great temples' and the swamis in the ashrams have often represented the Réunionese Hinduism as a deformed religion, as if there was a good and a bad way to practice one's faith.

As Jean-Claude Carpanin Marimoutou noted, 'The Malbars are, generally speaking, assumed to be degenerate compared to the great Ārya culture and the supposed Indian wisdom' (Marimoutou 2008b: 132, my translation). The following account reflects the climate of the revival period. Here,

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[3] "I am Kolkatan, I am Madrassi".

[4] Réunionese believe Hindu Mauritians have kept the religion more intact.

Ayèr Védaya[5], a well-linked officiant and teacher in La Réunion, recalls on his arrival on the island in 1976 from Karikal:

> I was a Tamil teacher in high schools. Somebody asked me if I wanted to come here [to La Réunion] […] it was […] a Pondicherrian [who asked]. When he came to La Réunion, he saw the situation here and he told me: in La Réunion, there are not enough people to explain the religion in French and they have no knowledge. They drink, they have no clue about how to pray. If you come, you can redress the situation of the Tamils here. […] I did not come here to only ring the bell in the temple but also to ring the bell in people's heads! (in Callandre-Barat 2013: 4, my translation).

What is at stake here is clearly teaching 'the *real* religion' to the Hindu inhabitants of La Réunion, perceived as the bearers of a *degenerate* religion. This can happen even today. For example, Momo, a fairly young fire-walking officiant or *pousari*[6], has been monitored by an Indian family friend, who helps him improve his knowledge in many ways. Momo genuinely appreciates his help and is happy to improve himself, but admits that being reprimanded constantly is difficult, and occasionally expresses his frustration at failing to meet the Indian's expectations: 'I'm fed up with it'[7]. While Momo recognizes the Indian guide's considerable knowledge, he learned what he knows from his *goulou*, an uncle who was a very well-known *pousari* on the island, and embodies his officiating style – he is secretly hurt by the Indian friend's admonishments.

Indian religious leaders who came to La Réunion convey a certain way of seeing religion. Those exchanges with India have enriched knowledge, but they also have wounded the honour of some Hindu Réunionese, who felt they were not up to the expectations of Indians, and not up to the standards of what a Hindu should be. They were seen as not cultivated enough, not respectful enough – in a nutshell, not good enough. It should be noted that the Réunionese do not systematically passively accept transformations from India. This was the beginning of a process of constant negotiation between what came from India, which is often idealized and dreamed, and the knowledge of ancestors, the oral tradition passed from father to son.

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[5] Ayèr Védaya, who passed away in 2014, was only one of a number of prominent religious personalities in Réunionese history. He is quoted repeatedly here because a collaboration with an anthropologist resulted in the publication of interviews and lectures.

[6] *Prèt malbar* – Malbar priest – is another term used to refer to officiants.

[7] Private conversation, August 25, 2014.

FIRE-WALKING AND ITS GENESIS

Performing a ritual cycle

Intrinsically linked to the settlement of the island, the fire-walking festival is an eighteen-day ritual cycle performed every year in many temples all over La Réunion. It is locally called *mars dann fé*, *fèt Pandialy* or *timidi*, from the recently retrieved Tamil word *tīmiti*. The first written historical source to mention the ritual in La Réunion is a short text (Le Court 1860) describing an 1858 lithograph. Since then, this practice has increased in popularity and it is today one of the most popular, if not the most popular Hindu ritual, attracting not only practitioners, but also curious people and tourists who are impressed by the devotional act and by fire immunity. For the devotee, fire-walking, which is the climax of the ritual cycle, takes the form of a ‵supreme commitment’ (Pourchez 2002, 302), as the believer himself and his body are given as a sacrifice. Penitents who walk on fire generally make an oath to a goddess – *fé promès* – to have a wish come true, to redeem sins or to express thankfulness for the mercy they have received.

Even if differences exist between the temples, the structure of the festival is quite homogeneous and, in many respects, reflects the Tamil Nadu Cult of Draupadi described by Alf Hiltebeitel (1991). It is in fact likely that Indian indentured labourers who came from that specific part of India used to practice it. The ritual has inevitably changed over two centuries, but has taken a distinct identifiable local form, which could be seen as a Réunionese tradition. This form, however, does not suggest closure and immobility. Indeed, fire-walking, like any other ritual, is constantly evolving.

Every year, at specific times in the ritual cycle, passages taken from the *Barldon*, which gives textual and dramaturgical structure to the rite, are staged. Unlike in the Tamil Nadu Cult of Draupadī, which involves professionals called Pārata-piracaṅkis, literally ‘the ones who recite the (Mahā)-bhārata’ (Hiltebeitel 1982: 73), some of the devotees try their hand at acting. They are dressed in more or less elaborate costumes to embody a variety of characters: kings, princesses, warriors, sages, gods and demons. Beginners and seasoned players receive minimal instructions as to their appearance. In fact, the worshippers have seen these scenes staged every year since childhood and know the roles quite well. These moments are both educational and recreational. They may be preceded by a reading of the text in Tamil, then explained in Creole. Those scenes set the pace of the daily ceremonies and prayers until the fated day when penitents undergo their trial. Performances are embodied knowledge. Indeed, cultural learning is based on body, feelings and imagination (Wulf 2013: 20), and it is through the body and mimesis that knowledge is acquired and embodied in a specific frame context (Wulf 2009: 143). It is not only a question of embodying, but also one of seeing and receiving. Performances are thus also a system of conservation, appropriation, transmission and creation of knowledge and memory (Taylor 2003: 21; Wulf 2009: 142–43). Through the body, performative practices constitute what Diana Taylor (Taylor 2003) calls a '*repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge*', considered ephemeral because of its immaterial character. The repertoire allows embodied memory to develop through gestures, movements, and orality (Taylor 2003: 20). The embodied repertoire is updated with the new inputs from India, by Réunionese who travel there and come back with new worship tools or habits. However, the gestures and structure of the fire-walking are not often put in doubt by practitioners. Some simply perform rituals, especially these who come to the temple to make a *promès* to the divinity. Others, especially those who are quite sensitive to the identity question and are trying to redefine an imagined diaspora, are on a more intellectual and philosophical quest. They use their trips to India to ponder the 'real' meaning of religion and look for information in books, videos, and online, unlike others who they percive as only interested in getting ahead in life. One of these quests consists in looking for 'reality' about the fire-walking, which involves researching the foundation of the mythological genesis: Pandialy walking across the fire pit.

Actualizing the myth – Emic explanations

During the ritual cycle, the penitents perform theatrical representations of the myth. However, they also actually walk on fire, and in that sense, they are doing more than merely actualizing the myth. Indeed, participants relate the ritual genesis to a mythological episode in which Pandialy[8], the heroine of the *Barldon*, accomplishes the act walking across fire.

Many emic versions of her story are narrated. The most popular recounts that Pandialy walked on fire to reject accusations of having sexual relations with the five Pandévèl[9] brothers, as Gustave, a 62-year-old officiant in small and family-run temples, states[10]. He situates the fire-walking episode after the nuptials of Pandialy and Aldjounin[11], a scene which is also re-enacted during the ritual cycle and is called *mariaz bondié*.

Gustave says that Aldjounin was in exile with his family when he decided to participate in a contest[12]. The competition was organized by Pandialèn[13], king of Pandialéndesson[14] and the prize was the hand of his daughter Pandialy. Only Aldjounin fulfilled the challenge and deserved the rewards. When he went back to his mother Goundamandévi[15], he told her that he had won a prize. Ignoring the nature of the prize, the mother told him to share it with his four brothers – and the word of a mother can never be contradicted. Aldjounin, who did not like keeping still, left his family and his wife and went into the forest to hunt and fight. It should be noted that the marriage was never consummated, which is why it is said that Pandialy was

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[8] She is associated with Draupadī in the *Mahābhārata.* If not specified otherwise here, Creole names are used whenever La Réunion is discussed. Sanskrit – Skt. – equivalents are indicated in footnotes to allow the reader to connect them with the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, which is usually the version that Réunionese can access in French translation.

[9] Skt. Pāṇḍava.

[10] The following accounts are taken from interviews conducted during my fieldwork in La Réunion. Those stories were generally told in Réunionese Creole; this particular one was recorded on September 29, 2015. Except when quotation marks are present, I condensed their accounts for readability reasons, but I tried to stay true to the phrases and images used by interviewees.

[11] Skt. Arjuna.

[12] A *svayaṃvara*, a traditional Indian marriage where the future bride chooses her husband by giving a garland to one of the many candidates, who are often submitted to a variety of trials (Dumézil 1995: 101–2 [1968]).

[13] Skt. Drupada.

[14] Skt. Pañcāla.

[15] Skt. Kuntī.

pattini, which means ‘still a virgin’[16]. But as usual, in the village there was a lot of *ladilafé*[17]. One fine day, Aldjounin came back and discovered all the rumours about him and his family. The hearsay was that his wife slept with all his brothers. Pandialy was blamed although she was actually respectful of her husband and had never done what people accused her of doing. Aldjounin was angry, but not with his brothers. Rather, he began to be suspicious and distrustful of Pandialy; he did not trust her anymore. Everyone accused her of having sexual relations with her brothers-in-law. She could not bear the shame of the accusations levelled against her. Eventually, she decided: ‛well, if it’s going to be like this, there is only one way to prove my virginity!’ For several days, Pandialy fasted. She did not eat, she did not drink, or sleep. Nothing! She prayed to Akini[18], the god of fire, and she asked him to let her prove her purity by fire, by immolating herself. By dint of praying, Akini appeared. She made a vow to walk on fire: ‛if I really deserve it, the fire will burn me, and I will never come out, but if I am innocent … only God can judge me!’ She started to collect logs and took them to the yard where she made a ‘pretty pile of wood’. She sat in the middle of the pyre, in a lotus position. At that very moment, the fire blazed up. Everyone was present: her husband, her brothers-in-law, her mother-in-law and all the villagers. She remained seated in the flame for at least three hours, and when the fire was extinguished, she came out walking normally. Akini granted Pandialy her vow. She had demonstrated that she was *pattini* through the fire. Everyone came to bow at her feet. She said: ‛it is not worth bowing at my feet, because you criticized me, claiming I have sinned, but I didn’t. And today I proved it!’ According to Gustave, this is why devotees walk on fire today.

Brian[19] says the suspicion of Pandialy’s adultery was reinforced by the birth of a child while Aldjounin had left seeking adventure. Pandialy, who felt lonely and desired to have a child, had chosen to make one out of wood, leaves and vegetables. When her husband came back, he thought his wife had cheated on him. Pandialy told him this was not true and that she would prove her fidelity to him. She walked on hot embers carrying her son in her arms and came out unharmed. But the child, who was made of fibres, not adultery, burned. Pandialy thus demonstrated her chastity.

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[16] *Pattini*, in Tamil, refers to a virtuous and ideal wife (Madavane 2008: 60) and it is evident that this term undergoes a semantic shift in La Réunion.

[17] Gossip.

[18] Skt. Agni.

[19] Private conversation, January 5, 2017.

In other versions, Pandialy has to restore her honour after having been stained by Kaoulévèl[20] who tried to dishonour her. According to the version recounted by Frédéric[21], fire-walking is connected to the famous episode of the dice game in the *Mahābhārata*. He says the 99 Kaoulévèl were jealous of their cousins Pandévèl, because they had a castle. Among the Kaoulévèl, there was somebody who knew magic and organized a dice game against their cousins. During the game, the Pandévèl gambled everything away: the castle, the horses, the tanks – everything, really! They had nothing left; they lost everything but Pandialy. The Kaoulévèl then told them: ‛now you have to bet Pandialy!' They gambled their wife and lost her. Then the Kaoulévèl took Pandialy and they tried to take off her sari. But Kisnin[22], who was up there, prevented them from doing so by putting her clothes back on multiple times. Although this never happened, the Kaoulévèl, however, spread the rumour that they had taken the virginity of the Pandévèl's wife, anyway. She said: ‛I am going to prove the truth to you. I'll light up a fire and I'll walk on it. If I am burned, this means I am not longer a virgin'. She was not burned.

While, in each of the above versions, interviewees situate the event at a precise moment in the history, most of the believers do not have in-depth knowledge of the narratives. This is not detrimental to ‛the rationalizations of social actors, whose relationship to the divine remains loaded with meaning and functions easily without elaborate theological knowledge' (Ghasarian 1991: 46, my translation).

Their arguments are very short, as in the following three examples:

> She [Pandialy] walks to show her purity. It was said that she was an easy woman because she had several husbands[23].

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[20] Skt. Kaurava.

[21] Recorded interview, September 17, 2015.

[22] Skt. Kṛṣṇa.

[23] Dominique, recorded interview, December 21, 2014.

> The *Barldon* says that she [Pandialy] had been raped; [she walked on fire] to prove her virginity[24].
>
> The woman was accused of being unfaithful. Pandialy, to prove that she was not unfaithful to her husband [...] decided to cross a blaze to prove it[25].

All variants, told by man and women with varying amounts of detail, relate to the question of Pandialy's sexuality[26]: adultery, rape, virginity. The fire-walking intended to restore purity or truth through fire[27].

A 'white' polyandrous marriage

Scholars of mythology have examined the question of Draupadī's polyandrous marriage. According to Georges Dumézil, this marriage can be understood conceptually. The author of *Mythe et Épopée I, II, III* (Dumézil 1995 [1968, 1971, 1973]) gave a 'simple and honourable explanation, of the scandalous marriage of Draupadi' (Dumézil 1995: 136, my translation). He indicated that polyandry did not exist during the Vedic period, when the epic was written. It was even against the uses of the Ārya (Dumézil 1995: 131–32). His explanation points to a pre-existing mytheme[28], which made it into the epic (Dumézil 1995: 74). This mytheme, he argues, is the abstract permutation of a tripartite vision of the world shared by Indo-Europeans based three hierarchically ordered functions: 1) 'magic and legal sovereignty', 2) 'physical and mainly warrior strength', 3) 'quiet and fertile wealth' (Dumézil 1995: 10). The Pāṇḍava, husbands of Draupadī, born from the power of their mother's divine invocation, sons of the gods, represent these three functions: 1) *dharma*, the code, the cardinal virtues, 2) *bala*, physical strength, 3) *rūpa*, beauty[29] (Dumézil

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[24] Raphaël, recorded interview, Jun 16, 2015.

[25] Virginie, recorded interview, October 14, 2015.

[26] For an analysis of Pandialy's character and her sexuality, see (Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo 2008; Hiltebeitel 1982).

[27] While it is beyond the purview of this paper to discuss at length, the theme of purity recurs throughout the ritual cycle.

[28] The term 'mytheme' was coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss to refer to a constitutive element of the myth (Lévi-Strauss 1958, 233–36).

[29] Yudhiṣṭhira – in Creole Darmèl – , son of Dharma, will become the king and he is the manifestation of *dharma* itself; 2) Bhīma – Vimèn in Creole –, son of Vāyu, and Arjuna – Aldjounin in Creole –, son of Indra, are the incarnations of *bala*, physical force; 3) the twins Nakula and

1995: 85). The brothers' attributes and the order in which they were born reflect this hierarchical tripartition; Draupadī is a synthesis of the three functions[30]. Dumézil argues that the relationship between the five brothers, and between the brothers and their shared wife is the ʽtransposition in human terms of a meaning-filled theological and mythological situation' (Dumézil 1995: 132, my translation). In this sense, the five brothers establish a structural unity, and Draupadī is considered as a Goddess Mother (Azzaroni 1998: 277–78). For Dumézil the tripartite ideology is the backbone of the Indo-European myths, which share a common eschatology, and are not a reflection of life in society (Dumézil 1995: 45). While in the mythological exegesis, polyandry is understood in conceptual terms, in La Réunion, polyandry was actually practiced in sugarcane plantations (M. Marimoutou 1989: 237; Govindin 2014: 336), certainly because indenture essentially implied a male emigration. The women were few, very sought after and sometimes used as compensation for the workers (Fuma 1999: 202, 211). Yet, this did not affect practitioners' representations of Pandialy: they saw her not as a woman, but as a goddess. She is seen as a pure, uncompromising and powerful divinity. Most devotees regard her polyandrous marriage as a 'white marriage', meaning that no sexual intercourse was expected and that the woman had to keep her chastity intact. Antoine[31], the president of a temple, calls it 'a philosophical communion, indeed; not a sexual encounter!' According to the believers, Pandialy is pure, and her reputation is only damaged by rumours – *ladilafé* – caused by jealousy – *zalouzi, i ral lo kèr*. Practitioners use this explanation because jealousy is an 'institutionalized idea' (Ghasarian 1991: 140) in La Réunion. Islanders are encouraged to protect themselves from jealousy, which brings with it the evil eye. As she is a victim of jealousy, believers sympathize with Pandialy's story. She also became a symbol of integrity: for that reason, whenever a vow is submitted to her, the ritual should be properly prepared – otherwise Pandialy could deny them protection and even make them pay.

Sahadeva – Nagoulèn and Sagardévèn in Creole –, sons of the Aśvin, are beauty, *rūpa* (Dumézil 1995: 85).

[30] In the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* the theogonic explanation of their birth from five gods is linked to a previous event. The five brothers are reported to be an incarnation of Indra himself, having been punished for pride, and Draupadī is the incarnation of his wife Śrī, Prosperity, Fortune (Dumézil 1995: 138–41).

[31] Recorded interview, October 13, 2015.

Image 2: Pandialy & Aldjounin, La Réunion, August 2014 ©Loreley Franchina

Actualizing the myth – The refutation

While the majority of believers associate the fire-walking with Pandialy, today some devotees reject this mythological derivation: in their view, Pandialy never walked on the fire, she rose from the fire. Gabriel, a fervent devotee of the goddess, is a proponent of this interpretation. According to him, the sacred fire – *yargom* – prepared in the morning in order to light the blaze is the representation of Pandialy, who was born from the fire of sacrifice. In fact, in the *Mahābhārata*, Drupada, king of Pañcāla, offered an oblation to the fire to give birth to a son who would carry out the father's vengeance by killing his enemy Droṇa. From the sacrificial fire, two twins were born: Dhṛṣṭadyumna and Draupadī. To the surprise of the assembly, it was the daughter who exacted vengeance, not the son.

> Everybody says that Pandialy walked on the fire. I am 100% sure this is wrong. Pandialy never walked on the fire! Pandialy was born in a spiritual *yargom*. Make no mistake! […] Pandialy never walked on the fire; she was born in the fire […] I say it now and I shall repeat it and I would even defend the cause if needed. Pandialy was born in the fire. Fire-walking was invented by our ancestors, it is the tradition which was invented by our ancestors when they arrived in La Réunion. […] There

> are people who confuse this with the *Ramayanam*[32], Sidé[33] and Rama[34].

Gabriel argues that the myth of Pandialy walking on the fire stems from a misunderstanding on the part of the ancestors who came to La Réunion as indentured labourers. He believes they mistook the *Mahābhārata* for the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the epic poem in which Sītā actually walks on the fire to demonstrate her fidelity to her husband Rāma, after her time as a captive Rāvaṇa, demon of Lanka.

The refutation of the myth does not really affect the representation of Pandialy in Réunionese society: like her, Sidé walked through fire to show her chastity and fidelity to Rama, meaning the mytheme remains unchanged here. I have elsewhere (Franchina 2015) documented the connection between the conceptual purity of the myth and the Malbar representation of women and of their position in the *milieu*.

Following the example of the believers who cast doubt on the myth, some scholars have asserted that the mythological framework of the rite is a blend of both epics. Yolanda Govindama, for example, contends that episodes of the *Rāmāyaṇa* were inserted into the rite of fire-walking by the *Malbar* out of necessity, because, being cut off from their country, they had to ensure the transmission of knowledge (Govindama 1997). Practitioners in search of knowledge may very well have also been influenced by this French scholarship.

Yet another different position is exemplified by Pascal, who knows the *Rāmāyaṇa* and is aware of the debates surrounding the question. He says he understands the arguments of those who deny that Pandialy ever walked on fire, but that they do not prevent him from believing in the divinity:

> I do listen![35] Then, if I walk on the fire for Pandialy, you see, it means that deep down inside myself I believe that she walked on the fire. You understand? When I walk on the fire I do not walk for Sidé, I walk on the fire for Pandialy![36]

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[32] Rāmāyaṇa.

[33] Skt. Sītā.

[34] Skt. Rāma. Recorded interview, August 1st, 2015.

[35] In the sense that he listens to the other explanations and understands them.

[36] Recorded interview, July 23, 2015.

MYTH'S DIFFERENT REALITIES

The cult of Draupadī in South India

If an amalgamation of both epics exists, it cannot have originated with Indian indentured labourers in La Réunion – the ancestors, as they are called – because sources report instances of fire-walking ceremonies in honour of Pandialy in India. Here are some examples where the heroine, called Draupati, Drobédé or Draopadî, walks on the fire. An 1899 chronicle published in *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* describes a fire-walking ritual in Alandur, close to Saint Thomas Mount, in the suburbs of Madras[37] (Jackson 1899: 190–93). The text traces back its mythological roots to the *Mahābhārata*, excerpts of which were staged during the ritual cycle.

> In India from the earliest times the honour and chastity of a woman have always been considered absolutely sacred, and at the termination of the great war, Draupati, who had been subjected to the grossest insults by one of the Kurus, was required to establish her chastity to the satisfaction of her five husbands and an assembly of great men. And the divine Draupati, whose one strong armour of protection against danger throughout the great war had been her chastity, openly submitted herself to a trial by ordeal; and the form this trial took was walking through fire. Out of this ordeal Draupati came most successfully and established her innocence beyond all possibility of doubt. She went further, and gave additional proof – a proof the efficacy of which was to remain unquestioned for all time to come, in support of her character; that is, she proclaimed to the assembled audience that whoever, placing implicit faith in her powers, undertakes to walk over fire, will get rid of any maladies he may be subject to, and attain all objects of his desire (Jackson 1899: 191).

Though obviously to be read with caution, this text is extremely interesting, because it goes beyond the fact that Draupadī walked on the fire and why she did so. The mythological narrative reported here includes the origin of the celebration of the cult, which serves as a guarantee and protection against evil and which allows to make a vow[38] to the goddess. This is in effect quite close to the *promès* logic at work in La Réunion. Yet this explanation of how the ritual practice arises from the myth is not given on the island.

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[37] Today Chennai.

Pierre Sonnerat, chief administrator, naturalist and pensioner of the French king in the eighteenth century, refers to a fire festival called Nerpou-Tirounal held annually in honour of Drobédé and Darma-Raja (Sonnerat 1782: 98–100). As in La Réunion, the ritual cycle he describes involves eighteen days of privations and abstinence. It ends with the crossing of a blaze, and it is based on the *Baradam* [*Mahābhārata*].

> The ceremony is held in honour of Drobédé. She married five brothers at the same time; every year, she left one to move on to another's arms; but before doing so, she made sure to cleanse herself through fire. Such is the origin of this singular festival […] (Sonnerat 1782: 100, my translation).

The same version is found in the descriptive text of a lithograph published in 1827 in *L'Inde française*, drafted by Eugène Burnouf:

> The fire festival, called Nerouppou Tirounâl in Tamil, is not celebrated in honour of the fire, which the Indians revere under the name of Agni, but in memory of the trial formerly endured by Draopadî, wife of the sons of Pândou, one of the former kings of Delhi. She had married five brothers, named in the heroic poems of India, Pândavas, and lived successively with each of them. But before moving on to the arms of a new husband, she purified herself by walking on hot embers. Such is, according to the tradition of the Hindus of Coromandel, the origin of this festival (Burnouf 1827, my translation).

According to Edgar Thurston, this fire festival was very widespread in South India. It brought protection to harvests and cattle, prevented all kinds of risks, and allowed every individual suffering from chronic ailments to make a vow to the goddess. Individuals walked on fire for healing. The festival's re-enactments were connected to the story of 'Draupati, the polyandrous wife of the five Pāndavas, who, to prove her chastity during their absence in exile, submitted to the trial by ordeal of walking through fire' (Thurston 1906: 471).

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[38] Called *promès* in La Réunion, which literally means 'promise'. They 'make a promise' when they make a vow and 'return a promise' when the goddess has granted them mercy.

These historical sources, which suggest that the practice of fire-walking in La Réunion did not arise from a misunderstanding by islanders, should however be treated with caution, as they are all from the late eighteenth and early twentieth century and filtered through a Western colonial gaze.

In his research, Alf Hiltebeitel, who analysed the continuity between the *Mahābhārata* and the living tradition, confirmed the occurrence of fire-walking ceremonies for Draupadī in South India – the climax of a cult lasting eighteen days. Hiltebeitel published two volumes on the subject, on the mythology (1988) and on the rite (1991). In his hypothesis, the cult of Draupadī gained momentum towards the end of the fourteenth century in the Gingee area[39] drawing on local mythology, the epic mythology, and everyday religious practice (Hiltebeitel 1988: 17). The cult would then have spread because of the depopulation of Gingee area beginning in the seventeenth century, a process that continued under the influence of English and French colonization in Singapore, Malaysia, the Fiji Islands and La Réunion (Hiltebeitel 1988: 23). This make it impossible to imagine that the Réunionese bent the myth. It is, however, worth considering why certain Réunionese believers refute the myth, and which issues are at stake in this denial. To answer this question, different versions of the myth and its ontological definition must be examined.

Different versions of the myth

The epic

The only research that focuses on the mythological frame of fire-walking in La Réunion is Sully Santa Govindin's thesis. From a linguist and historian's perspective, he analyses the sacred language of the *Barldon* and how this language has influenced Réunionese Creole. To distinguish various versions of the myth, Govindin uses a classification based on Claude de Grève's concepts. First of all, the *model*: the 'founding text', the 'ideal version of the myth' (Govindin 2014: 182); second, the *modulations*, whereby which the model is rewritten, translated, even deformed (Govindin 2014: 182); third, the *variations*, which determine the reviews of publishers on the theme of the myth (Govindin 2014: 182); finally, the *vulgates*, which refers to the chapbooks. In the case of the *Mahābhārata*, the text considered as the canonical version is its Sanskrit version, a kind of 'continuation of sacred Sanskrit texts of the Brahmanical tradition' (Govindin 2014: 183, my translation). The writing of the epic has been formally dated between 500 BC and 400 AD. It is attributed to one or several writers, Vyāsa being the mythological author. It was written in an epic poem form based on pre-existing mythemes (Dumézil 1995: 74). Yet, even in the hypothesis that a prototypical *Mahābhārata* once existed, it never reached us (Hiltebeitel 1988: xx). The oldest versions we know are from medieval times. During the very same period, the myth inspired several poets who transcribed and rephrased the epic by subjecting the text to several modulations. These modulations reproduce the Sanskrit canonical text more or less faithfully and integrate folk traditions. This involves the formation of several ramifications which influence themselves mutually and which concentrate on two main branches: the Northern and the Southern (Hiltebeitel 1988: xx; Dumézil 1995: 62). Among the vernacular languages of the South of India, where rewriting is a frequent practice (Govindin 2014: 184–85) the oldest epic version is a Tamil one (Hiltebeitel 1988: xx). In the South of India, the most frequently version used during the cult of Draupadī is the Tamil *Makāpāratam*[40] by Villiputtūr Āḻvār, probably written in the late fourteenth century (Hiltebeitel 1982: 73; 1988: xxii). This modulation was inspired by older texts and by the regional mythology (Hiltebeitel 1988: xxii). In it, as Alf Hiltebeitel notes, Pandialy subjects herself to purification by fire:

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[39] Gingee was a kingdom during the Middle Ages. Today it is '[…] a taluk headquarters in one of the most out-of-the-way, depopulated, nonindustrialized, hot, mountainously rugged, boulder-ridden, and beautiful areas of Tamilnadu […]' (Hiltebeitel 1988: 3).

> After thus performing the marriage [with Dharma], she entered/bathed in turn in the very hot loving fire which gave birth to her, and emerged again, with full black hair, a chaste lady like the north star [that is, like Arundhatī][41]; in this way the other four [Pāṇḍavas] married her'(Villiputtūr in Hiltebeitel 1988: 438).

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[40] *Makāpāratam* is the Tamil transliteration of the *Mahābhārata*, called *Barldon* in Creole. They also sometimes use one other modulation, the Nallāppiḷḷai *Mahābhārata*.

[41] According to interpretations of the readings of Villiputtūr, the North Star does not correspond to the pole star, but to Arundhatī, a star of the Big Dipper – Saptarṣi – which is situated next to the star Vasiṣṭha. Arundhatī is the wife of Vasiṣṭha. In India, it is common for spouses to watch these two stars at night on their wedding night, since they represent marital loyalty (Hiltebeitel 1988: 209).

This is the same version that a Réunionese brahmachari[42], specialist of the Vedānta, told me. Draupadī used to spend one year with each of her five husbands. When she was with one of them, the other four were like her brothers. Every year, she entered the fire to purify herself before changing husbands. According to him, Draupadī walked on fire but not in the sense of a divine judgement, as stated by Réunionese believers.

According to Govindin, it is necessary to also consider *vulgates*, popular works often used in the repertoire of the terukkūttu, a popular form of dance theatre performed by actors/itinerant dancers/storytellers (Govindin 2014: 225). In India, these actors[43] stage and recite epic episodes during the ceremonial cycles for Draupadī (Hiltebeitel 1988: xvii). In La Réunion, however, instead of professionals, penitents and believers become improvised actors. The vulgates are written texts, but they belong to a 'mixed tradition' where the oral aspect of the representation and the chants update the text (Govindin 2014: 187).

The Myth

In his body of work, Lévi-Strauss repeatedly contended that there is no such thing as 'good' or 'bad' versions' of a myth (1990 [1971]: 632). He viewed the search for an 'authentic version' as one of the main pitfalls of mythological studies (Lévi-Strauss 1958: 240). He argued that there is no original text, no myth of reference, because every myth is the translation of a previous myth borrowed from the past or from other societies, translated in a new updated language; it is always a deformation (Lévi-Strauss 1990: 644-5). Mythemes are actually constituent parts of a myth and they can be transported across time and space, as for tales and legends (Gaster 1953; Propp 1975). Every myth is ultimately defined by the sum of its versions: written, oral, performed; past, present, future. Hence, the *Mahābhārata* cannot be only seen as a canonical Sanskrit text, ‛but rather understood as a vast constellation embracing the totality of its oral, iconographic, ritual reformulations and thereby, all of its regional variants, both in India and on the Creole islands of the Indian Ocean' (Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo 2008: 547–48, my translation). According to the linguists' classification, inevitably, an implicit hierarchy is established where everything derives from the model, the canonical text, whose modulations and vulgates are only diversions. To consider the cult of Pandialy as a mere late ramification of the epic tradition would be one of the greatest errors which could be committed, warns Alf Hiltebeitel (1982: 78).

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[42] Recorded interview, September 24, 2015.

[43] The professionals who play during the festival are the Pārata-piracaṅkis: the ones who recite the (*Mahā*)-*bhārata* (Hiltebeitel 1982: 73).

One should not consider a source text, but the entire range of its variations (Hiltebeitel 1982: 78; Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo 2008: 581–82; Govindin 2014: 181). The Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, *Makāpāratam* by Villiputtūr Āḻvār and all the versions of the *Barldon*, to use its Creole name, belong to a continuum. The epic is embedded in a fluid and *in fieri* tradition, including diverse classic and folk, Sanskrit and vernacular forms where the oral aspect is a fundamental component, in particular during the worship *per se*. The myth experiences several modulations in vernacular languages, which takes a variety of theatrical, narrative, danced and sung poetic forms (J.-C.C. Marimoutou 2008: 344; Govindin 2014: 183).

Ritual textuality and ritual orality

In La Réunion, during the fire-walking festival, officiants have recourse to textual material on two occasions. The first is when the *pousari* reads texts in Tamil in a loud voice and narrates the stories – *zistoir* – in Creole to the audience sitting in front of him. Often the reading is set to a simple musical accompaniment. Then, during the staged scenes – *lé rol* – the *pousari* directs the believers/actors and reads some parts of the text as a voice-over.

The textual material used for ritual cycle of fire-walking is the *Barldon* in an edition that differs from temple to temple, from officiant to officiant[44]. According to the *pousari*, almost all former editions were destroyed by weather, in particular during the cyclones which ravaged the island. The Indian labourers likely brought the version by Villiputtūr Āḻvār. Today, books are mainly bought in India during trips[45] and Réunionese buyers do not ask themselves which edition to acquire. For re-enactment of scenes, the *pousari* often use photocopies of the selected passages to protect the pages from potentially damaging powders and liquids. For some plays, some priests use vulgates: the

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[44] For example, in a temple where I conducted fieldwork, a 1991 version was used.

[45] Some Réunionese who have sufficient resources organize trips to India, sometimes privately, but in most cases as guided tours.

Vanavarson[46] to stage Aldjounin's climb to Kaylason[47], and the *Aravan Kadabali Nadegam* to represent Alvan's[48] sacrifices.

The *Barldon* is read in Tamil, but generally neither readers nor listeners understand it: the reading is phonetic and the meaning of the words does not transpire. The *Barldon* is too complex, and the medieval language makes it difficult to understand even for native Tamil speakers. The officiants I met are unable to offer a simultaneous translation of the book. In Tamil, they know the prayers, the alphabet, and some keywords to find the episodes. The majority of the believers lack basic Tamil vocabulary; those with linguistic training, have often only learned beginners' level contemporary Tamil[49].

Even though they do not understand the reading in Tamil, many practitioners are to some degree familiar with the frame of the mythology and the outlines of the performed scenes, even though over the course of my fieldwork I did speak to people who could not narrate the stories performed and could only say a few words on Pandialy. Alleyn Diesel noted in her studies on the Tamil diaspora and on the Cult of Draupadī in Natal (1994) that practitioners retained the ritual aspects of the fire-walking. In La Réunion, not only the ritual is maintained, but also the mythologies are still being passed on.

The semantic knowledge of the narrated episodes is inevitably mediated through Creole orality, giving rise to a 'mixed practice', meaning that ancestral orality is anchored in artistic and literary practice (Govindin 2006: 60). Narratives are part of a 'sacred oral tradition', and new versions of the myth are closely informed by the creolization process (Govindin 2014: 229, 272). As Sully Santa Govindin notes, this 'mixed practice' is a factor of evolution in the *Barldon* tradition. Modifications are connected to the insertion of Creole language in the translation and to the comments made by the

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[46] Sully Santa Govindin bases his studies on this vulgate, an eighteenth-century Tamil-language epic poem written in Tamil entitled Pañcapandava Vanavarçam, 'Chant of the Exile'. The actual or symbolic author is Pougajéndi Poulavar. The poem consists of twelve chants in free verses and corresponds in part to the third book of the Mahābhārata (Govindin 2014: 185–90). Kamabhaïrava Vanam, the 'Twelfth Chant'of Pañcapandava Vanavarçam, also called 'Chant of the Mast', is used to perform Aldjounin's climb to Kaylason.

[47] Skt. Kailāsa.

[48] Skt. Irāvāṇ.

[49] The *Maison des langues de l'Université de La Réunion* has an academic course on Tamil language and culture. Some ashrams and private establishments concerns also offer courses.

pousari in the reading, when Tamil references 'come into contact with the local realities' (Govindin 2006: 70).

The prevalence of orality allows for continuous updates. The episode on Pandialy serves as the blueprint for the practice of fire-walking: 'we walk on the fire because Pandialy walked on the fire', practitioners say. Yet, the fact that some refute the myth is an opportunity to shed light on some dynamics at work in the *milieu*. In the Villiputtūr Āḻvār modulation, as in oral tradition, the heroine is indeed the protagonist of a fire ritual which allows her to purify herself. Denying or disregarding this means to raise the epic Sanskrit version of the myth as the only unique and authentic reference model while giving no credit to the oral versions. For similar reasons, some scholars have asserted that Réunionese have distorted the myth, but they are coming from a different place. While for academics these are epistemological questions, the devotees' arguments are of an individual and sociological nature. Remarkably, the people who refute the myth are among those who know the *zistoir* well. They have a keen interest in studying the religion, they take Tamil classes, they watch lots of video, read books, travel to India. Those who refute the myth have got in contact with information from books, the internet, people. They did not go to search for the 'Sanskrit model', but this is the only one they found; none of the practitioners I met in the island know the Draupadī cult in India and only few Réunionese saw the fire-walking during their travels in India[50].

REFUTING THE MYTH – A QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The refutation of the myth and the Tamil Revival in general can seem reminiscent of the Sankritization process in India. When he introduced the latter concept, M.N. Srinivas presented it as a tool to analyse Indian society, considering castes as the structural basis of Hindu society (Srinivas 1956). According to his argument, the lower castes appropriate the customs and rituals of the higher and dominant castes, who are more sanskritized, in order to achieve social mobility. Likewise, Réunionese have changed some of their practices to emulate a culture that is viewed as more rewarding. Indeed, in a broad sense, the Tamil Revival both symbolizes and strives for social promotion (Benoist 1998: 260). It allows Hinduism to be displayed as a major religion that distances itself from witchcraft and possession rituals. Yet, as the caste system does not exist in La Réunion, and Réunionese do not expressly and exclusively adopt Sanskrit religious forms, trends of Tamilization or Indianization seem to better describe the religious projects of those Réunionese Hindus who engage in a quest for knowledge and acknowledgement.

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[50] These are often organized touristic trips. Over the course of three years of fieldwork, I met three Réunionese who attended a fire-walking ritual in India, but those were not dedicated to Pandialy. One of these three did not only attend but also walked on fire himself for Marliémèm/Māri/Mariamman.

If Sanskritization is happening, it might be indirectly, in the sense that people from Tamil Nadu bring local worldviews and approaches to religion to La Réunion. To cite Ayèr Védaya once again:

> Who walks on fire? They are villagers, people who do not have the means to practice religion like us, the *high class*[51], to practice the classical religion, who do not have the means to understand the very intellectual things. Villagers, travellers, labourers, miserables who live in difficult economic situations, and do not have the time to practice religion every day. Over a year, they practice ten, fifteen days. […] It is hard. […] Not everyone can do it […]. It is the only way the poor people can show their sacrifice. They do not know of others [in Callandre-Barat, 2013: 47, translated from French].

Obviously, claims that fire-walking is a practice of ignorants have not left Réunionese indifferent. Some have even internalized these discourse, but still practice the ritual anyway. Nambi is one of them. After having paraphrased Ayèr Védaya's discourse in bowdlerized words, he said: 'I told you, I'm gonna stop [walking on fire]. But each time I say that, I start again'[52]. Nambi may reflect on religion in intellectual terms, but he is still attracted to fire-walking. Like many other practitioners, he speaks of 'the call of the fire'. He also told me of his intensifying practice of thaumaturgy, which in La Réunion is closely linked to the use of medicinal plants, magic and witchcraft. This is an aspect of the complexity and diversity of Creole society, which also nurtures the idea that the concept of Sanskritization does not perfectly suit the Réunionese case.

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[51] In English in the original French text.

[52] Recorded interview, March 16, 2015.

Hinduism in La Réunion takes on multiple forms, seemingly organized around two different poles: one leaning towards a Tamilization and Indianization, and the other anchored to the ancestors' heritage, considering that everyone has a Creole culture through which information is filtered. A believer may shift from one pole to the other according to his desires and needs. Contrasting fire-walking with *kavadi*, a ten-day ritual cycle in the honour of the War God Mourugan (Murukaṉ, Kārttikeya, Skanda), helps illustrate this. It is unclear when the first *kavadi* took place on the island; some practitioners claim it was introduced in the second half of the twentieth century. Called *Tai pucam* in Tamil Nadu, it also ends with a corporal sacrifice. The practitioners pierce their bodies with *vel* – metal rods – and carry the *kavadi*, a symbolic mountain, from a river to the temple. The fire-walking is linked to Pandialy, a village goddess and involves animal sacrifices, while the *kavadi* evokes Murugan, son of Sivèn (Śiva) and Palvedi (Pārvatī), and features only vegetarian offerings.

Some practices like the *kavadi* are closer to Tamilization and in a way to Sanskritization, whereas fire-walking, a practice directly inherited from the ancestors, is more representative of the heritage-oriented pole, and has staunch devotees. Many of the practitioners have a striking attachment to the fire-walking ritual. They will never stop fire-walking: they see this practice as a symbol of being a Hindu in La Réunion as well as a highly effective ritual to improve one's life or to heal. The refutation of the myth must accordingly be situated within a broader dynamic. First of all, refuting the myth does not equate being against fire-walking. Rather, it is a part of a negotiation between the ancestral heritage, which is prominent in fire-walking and the successive waves of Tamil revival. Secondly, the literary and theatrical heritage Indians brought to La Réunion was not necessarily related to Sanskrit culture. On the island, this heritage was enriched by creolisation processes. The devotees who, like Gabriel, refute the myth of Pandialy, aspire to increase their wisdom. In the case of Pandialy, they reassess their knowledge in light of what they consider to be the model: the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, the only version translated into French and entirely intelligible for the general public in La Réunion[53]. Some believers also learn about the contents of the *Mahābhārata* online, through movies, and for those who speak English, through English-language content. In all these sources, Pandialy simply does not walk on the fire. Contrary to the past, when all believers based themselves on knowledge passed on by the ancestors, these Réunionese draw on everything that allows them to expand their knowledge, including scholarly Réunionese literature. They are the fathers and the sons of the Tamil Revival which began in the 1970s on the island. In fact, since then, some of the population has been making tentative steps via multiple paths towards the recovery of something lost, the construction of an imagined diaspora, the search for a 'real orthodoxy'. These Réunionese see everything that comes from India as more authentic. Yet, even if practitioners draw on a Sanskrit version of the myth, the refutation reflects a Tamilization process rather than a Sanskritization. It echoes their wish to acquire knowledge and be acknowledged. That this fire-walking debate concentrates on the episode of Pandialy walking on fire, but not on other episodes, is it itself noteworthy. Practitioners could have refuted other passages, for example Alvan's sacrifice – *trant-dé morso* – which is staged but does not appear in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. Devotees do not cast doubt on those episodes, simply because no one ever has. In a series of conferences on Hinduism in 1995, transcribed by Florence Callandre, Ayèr Védaya explained that Pandialy never walked on the fire; Sidé did in the *Ramayanom* (Vedaya Ramassamipoullé and Callandre 1997: 48).

The questioning and refutation of the myth of Pandialy walking on fire ultimately appear to be part of a complex Tamilization process, exemplifying a negotiation between respect and love for the Réunionese ancestral heritage and a quest for knowledge and acknowledgment that is largely a response to the discredit of Creole Hinduism since the Tamil renewal started.

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[53] For the purpose of philological exegesis, a comparison with a Tamil version would be interesting. Today, to my knowledge, there is no complete translation of the *Barldon*. This prospect also raises a methodological question: which edition of the book should be translated, since there are several in circulation on the island? The only accessible translated passages are extracts of the vulgate Tamil *Pañcapandava Vanavarçam* called in La Réunion *Vanavarson*. The translated passages by Sully Santa Govindin are the first one, the *Sourya Vanam*, 'First Chant' (Pougajéndi Poulavar 2000), and the twelfth, the *Kamabhaïrava Vanam* 'The Chant of the Mast' (Govindin 2014: 533–48).

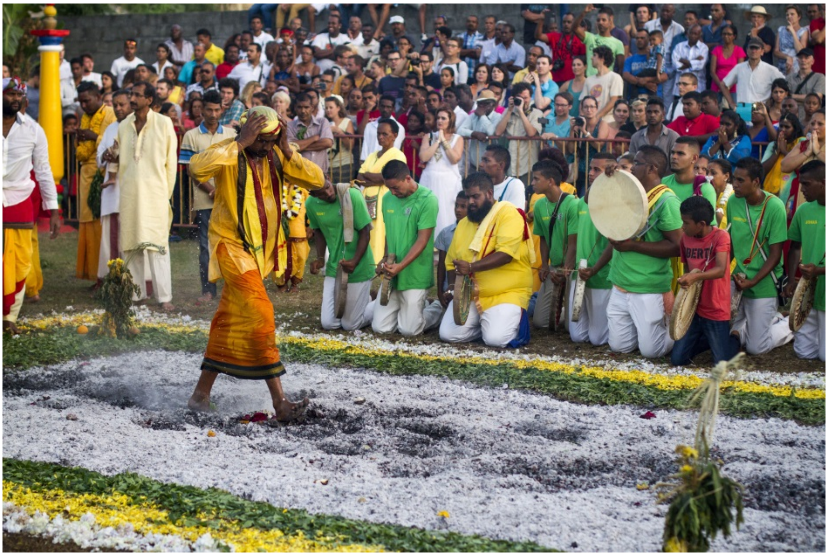

Image 3: Fire-walker, La Réunion, April 2016 ©Loreley Franchina

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