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Senri Ethnological Studies
Volume 36
Page range 269-303
Year 1993-09-10
URL http://doi.org/10.15021/00003053
The Forms and Functions of the Aiyāṇar Temple Complex: A Preliminary Study on the Cult of Male Godlings in Rural Tamil Nadu

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INTRODUCTION

Some Prefatory Comments

When seeking to understand the religious phenomena of Indian society, it may be said (provisionally using M. N. Srinivas's terms; Srinivas 1952: 214-219) that those elements associated with 'Sanskritic Hinduism' and those associated with the 'local Hinduism' that is centred on particular villages and regions together constitute the dual focus of one's inquiries). It is probably no exaggeration to say that the validity of one's understanding of Indian religious phenomena is largely dependent upon how rational a definition one is able to apply to the different aspects of Hinduism, which may be described in general terms by means of, for example, the above two concepts, and how consistently one is able to interpret them within the context and structure of Hinduism as a whole.

As regards so-called 'Sanskritic Hinduism', considerable light has been shed on its characteristics, primarily in respect to its historical development, as a result of progress in textual studies since the nineteenth century, while details on the subject of so-called 'local Hinduism' too, although by no means adequate, are gradually being made available to academic circles not only by way of the accumulated investigations and reports of local scholars, but also through the analyses undertaken from fresh perspectives by Western ethnologists and anthropologists. Thus these two fields have, as individual topics of research, each been subjected to separate processes of elucidation. But when it comes to presenting a unified reinterpretation that integrates the results of these two processes and conforms with the framework of Hinduism as a whole, the present situation is one of which it can hardly be said that an integrated conception winning the uniform consensus of all scholars is being formulated, notwithstanding the fact that its importance has been pointed out by L. Dumont and others (Tanaka 1981: 93-94). Especially in the case of Japan, it would even seem that a de facto separation of roles between philologists and anthropologists has been established by tacit consent, and there is no denying the fact that this, coupled with their diametrically opposed forms of methodology, has led to the creation of a barrier to mutual understanding, which is in turn proving to be a major obstacle to gaining insights into the phenomena under consideration.
in their entirety.

This tendency towards an absence of any integrated perception or viewpoint, or towards a disregard for the context as a whole, that is evident in attitudes towards the study of Hinduism is not confined to the relations between different fields of academic research, but may also be similarly discerned in regard to the approaches taken to 'local Hinduism' itself. For example, on account of the fact that overmuch attention has hitherto been focussed on 'goddesses' (especially in research relating to South India), a correspondingly sufficient amount of attention has not been paid to the 'gods', who may be considered to fulfill equally important roles in the religious life of the villagers. One even gains the impression that in the strictly 'segmentary' facts of goddess worship village religion in its 'entirety' is concentrated and compressed and that the corpus of so-called 'local Hinduism' is complete with its system of cults centred on goddesses, and it is probably true to say that this has resulted (even if only unconsciously) in the presentation of a somewhat distorted overall picture of the religious phenomena of Hindu villages.

It is of course an indisputable fact that in religion on the village level the worship of goddesses is especially prominent and that, by way of contrast, cults centred on male deities are relatively inconspicuous. Furthermore, members of the groups of village gods and goddesses do not seem to form couples, nor would a cursory glance at their functions and roles suggest any complementary characteristics. It may also be said that in respect to cosmology and ritual too the members of one group do not of necessity presuppose the existence of the other group or any sharing of roles. In this sense, both systems are self-contained, and there would not appear to exist any interrelations of primary importance between them. But when one considers the fact that, in spite of major contrasts in their character, they share the same village setting, exist side by side within the pantheon of each regional society or village community, and are worshipped conjointly and simultaneously by village members, it would be more natural to suppose that, rather than evolving in complete independence of one another, they coexist by way of some form of common context and links within the framework of the village cult as a whole or the awareness of individual villagers. This is why it is difficult to obtain an overall picture of village religion without a suitable definition of the position of the worship of male deities.

In view of the above considerations, I shall in the present paper bring together the provisional results of textual research and on-the-spot investigations, and by bringing more light than hitherto to bear on the question of 'male deities', which have but rarely received the attention that they deserve, it is my aim to provide a lead towards a total understanding of village Hinduism.

The Present State of Research on Gods and Points at Issue

Although there is yet to appear a scholarly work devoted solely to the subject, the study of the non-Sanskritic male deities to be found in the Hindu villages of South India has by no means been left until now in a state of complete neglect.
Mention of these gods is made, for example, in the reports by W. T. Elmore (1915) and H. Whitehead (1921), which may be described as pioneering achievements in the study of village gods, and outlines of their cults were also made known to academic circles by these two scholars. However, not only is the information that they provide on the god cults generally rather limited, but it is also marked by not inconsiderable confusion and factual errors, and one is forced to say that their accounts contain too many points open to question for it to be possible to accept them as representing the truth of the matter. One serious shortcoming in particular is the absence of any interest in the existence of a certain hierarchy evident within particular groups of gods, and in the case of Elmore it would even appear that he was totally incognizant of the very fact of this stratification.

A similar state of affairs is to be observed also among contemporary Indian researchers. For example, although Tu. Irāmacāmi (1985: 29-38), who has published a folklife study of the rites associated with village gods in the district of Tirunelvēli in Tamil Nadu, does recognize the existence of a certain ranking of male gods and the fact of caste differences among groups worshipping different gods, he does not evince any searching interest in the significance of the ‘stratification’ underlying these phenomena. Generally speaking, in the case of Indian researchers, their work consists of little more than the uncritical enumeration of individual phenomena (—it is of course true that such ‘enumerations’ greatly benefit our own research—), and one is forced to note the shared absence of any awareness of the existence of a ‘structure’ or some sort of unifying principle lying beneath these multifarious phenomena.

An analogous tendency may also be partially observed in the report of several surveys of Tamil rural villages conducted in and around 1980 by the Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa affiliated to the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (Raman and Shanmugam 1983: 38-52). Here the writers’ interest is limited to the origins and types of male gods and to the distribution of their temples, and no attention whatsoever is paid to the stratification of the gods and its significance.

It was Dumont who drew attention to the hierarchy obtaining among male gods and examined its relationship to the idea of caste hierarchy, and his arguments and the problems that they involve will be discussed in detail in a subsequent section.

An Outline of the Area Surveyed

The cult of the god Aiyānār and related godlings, which constitutes the central theme of the present study, is to be found historically only in southern India south of the Godavari River (Gopinatha Rao 1914: 486), and today, although popular throughout Tamil Nadu, it generally predominates in the southern half of the state, including the Kāvēri delta region (Arunachalam 1977: 46), and there are not a few large-scale temples devoted to the cult. The fieldwork on which the present study is based was undertaken in August and September 1989, and it was conducted in cen-
tral and southern inland Tamil Nadu (cf. Yamashita 1992b), centring on Tirumāṇūr Panchayat Union in the Ariyalūr Taluk, which lies in the western extremity of Tiruccirāppāḷḷi District and is separated from Taṅcāvūr District by the Kollitam (=Coleroon) River, a tributary of the Kāvēri (Cauvery). I was able to survey a total of almost one hundred villages, including some in neighbouring Taṅcāvūr and Putukkōṭṭai Districts. This corresponds to so-called Cōḷanāṭu, the region that was formerly under the sway of the Chola dynasty (9th–13th century).

Tirumāṇūr, the main area surveyed, belongs to the 'Kāvēri Delta' in the broad

Map 1 Areas surveyed
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1 Aiyanar
2 Dvarapalaka (entrance guardian)
3 Dvarapalaka (entrance guardian)
4 Celliyammap (goddess)
5 Cēṇkamala-anṭavar
6 Muṇıcuxarar (= Muṇiyan)
7 Karuppaia-cuvami (= Karuppu)
8 Marutaiyāṅ (= Maturaiviraṅ)
9 Hanumān
10 Rāma

Map 2 Plan of a typical Aiyanaar temple complex (Aiyanaar Temple, Kilavanṭam village)

sense of the term⁹). It is farmed by means of irrigation cultivation sustained by a plenteous underground water system, and it constitutes a rich granary. Hence my fieldwork was, needless to say, undertaken primarily in wetlands, but nearby drylands and intermediate areas were also included as the occasion demanded. The caste composition of this region varies considerably from one village to the next, but the Mūppaṇṭar and Paṭṭaiyāccī(ヴァンニヤール) generally predominate, and there are also some villages where the Mutturāṭar (Mutturāja) constitute the dominant caste.

In conducting my investigations, my primary objective was to gain a faithful grasp of the general characteristics and overall features of the cult by gathering and examining as much general information on Aiyanar and related deities and cults as could be obtained from the villagers. At the same time, I also endeavoured on all occasions to cover and record to the greatest possible extent the sequence of rites,
festivals and consecrations (abhiṣeka) related to these deities.

THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE AIYANĀR CULT

Within the group of male deities related to Aiyanār that may be found in the villages of present-day Tamil Nadu, it is practically only Aiyanār himself whose name has been clearly preserved in written literature and whose historical evolution may be traced to any degree. This fact is in itself sufficient to suggest a difference in the nature of Aiyanār's background when compared with that of other gods, and in this section I shall accordingly focus primarily on Aiyanār, presenting an overview of the origins and development of his cult with reference to the fruits of philological research.

The Question of Aiyanār's Appellations

There is not necessarily any generally accepted explanation of the etymology of the name 'Aiyanār' (or Ayyaṇār). The word 'aiyaṇār' is composed of 'aiyaṇ' and the honorific affix '-ār' (deriving from the plural suffix), and when examining its etymology, it therefore becomes necessary to inquire into the etymology of 'aiyaṇ'. Although there are some who seek the etymological origins of 'aiyaṇ' in pure Tamil (Oppert 1893: 505; cf. Arunachalam 1977: 17–18), the Dravidian Etymological Dictionary (DED 163, DEDR 196) and Tamil Lexicon (p. 580) give 'father', 'sage', 'teacher', 'master', etc., as the basic meanings of 'aiyaṇ' and suggest that it derives from Sanskrit 'or va' (Pali 'ayya'). (It is, therefore, also cognate with Tamil 'atyaṇ', denoting 'Brahman' or 'Brahmin'.) This may be regarded as a reasonable view (cf. Adiceam 1967: 10). There appears a mere single instance of the use of 'aiyaṇ' in the Čaṇkam poems representing the oldest literary sources of the Tamil language, but it occurs in the Kalittokai, 43.5 (4th–6th century?), a work belonging to the newer stratum of texts, and there is moreover no positive evidence suggesting that it here refers to the god Aiyanār5).

Several of the medieval Āgama texts refer to this god by the name 'Āriya', and in the late-sixteenth-century Tamil lexicon Akarāti-nikantu 'Cattan' (that is, the god Aiyapar) is given as one of the meanings of 'aiyaṇ' (Adiceam 1967: 10–11). One should, however, be mindful of the fact that the terms 'aiyaṇ' and 'aiyaṇār' appear on the whole but rarely in written sources.

'Cattan', another name by which the god Aiyanār is known, is generally considered to derive from Sanskrit 'śāstā' ('teacher', 'ruler', 'king', 'father') (Gopinatha Rao 1914: 487–488), but there are some who derive it from Tamil 'cāttu' ('trade caravan'; < Skt. sūrtha), and there is no consensus on the matter (cf. Arunachalam 1977: 18–19; Clothey 1982: 36)6). The word 'cattan' would appear to have been widely used as a proper noun in ancient Tamil Nadu, and many poets of the Čaṇkam period (ca. 1st–3rd century) are known to have used the name 'Cattan' (or its honorific form 'Cattanār') (Subrahmanian 1966: 354–356; Arunachalam
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1977: 19–20; Clothey 1982: 36; Kaṇakarattīṇam 1986: 102–103). As an example of ‘Cattāṇ’ apparently used to refer to some divine entity, mention may be made of the Puṇḍāṇīya (ca. 1st century B.C.–3rd century A.D.), 395.21 (Clothey 1982: 36). Be that as it may, it is by no means clear what exactly the terms ‘aiyāṇ’ and ‘cattāṇ’ denote in texts predating the bhakti period.

The Historical Development of the Aiyāṇār Cult

In this subsection I wish to give an outline of movements in the Aiyāṇār cult from since the time of the bhakti period, and I shall refer primarily to the study by F. W. Clothey (1982: 37–49).

As a deity, Aiyāṇār-Śastā emerges in the sixth to eighth centuries, but in the period prior to this Buddhist and Jaina elements must also not be overlooked, and it is no easy matter to ascertain the character of his cult at this early stage. ‘Cattāṇ’ and ‘aiyāṇ’ would also seem to have been titles given to Buddhist and Jaina sages at the time. He is said to have been worshipped as a tutelary god by Jains or at Jaina temples, and iconographical similarities with the present-day god Aiyāṇār have also been pointed out (Arunachalam 1977: 23–24). Aiyāṇār’s tutelary character may therefore be considered to go back to at least prior to the sixth to eighth centuries (Arunachalam 1977: 32).

Tamil Hinduism began to flourish from the seventh and eighth centuries onwards, supplanting Buddhism and Jainism, which had been popular prior to this time, and the Aiyāṇār-Śastā cult too, coming under the influence of especially Śaivism, was forced to undergo various changes and gradually became ever more Hinduized. In the Tevāram by Appar (Tirunāvukkaracū; 6th–7th century) Cattāṇ is mentioned as Śiva’s son[^9], thus indicating that this god was already being incorporated into myths relating to Śiva.

It was during the Chola period that the importance of Śastā increased and his aspects as a god associated with the great tradition came to the fore (Kaṇakarattīṇam 1986: 106–107). Inscriptions referring to him appear in the eighth to ninth centuries and further increase from the tenth century onwards, and it is known from the content of these inscriptions that by the tenth or eleventh century Śastā had come to be enshrined on the south side of many villages under Chola rule. This would mean that his position as a village god too was in the process of being established. In addition, inscriptions and other historical sources indicate that temples dedicated to Aiyāṇār, while under the patronage of the landowning class as well as of kings and Brahmans, also received donations from villagers in general and that Aiyāṇār functioned also as their lineage god.

In Kerala, on the other hand, again on the basis of epigraphical sources, the worship of this god by tribal chieftains may be traced back as far as the eighth to ninth centuries. Poems dedicated to him in the fourteenth century are already sufficiently charged with the devotional atmosphere to suggest that the cult here was gradually diverging from the Tamil course of development. In a history dating from the sixteenth century Śastā is described as the guardian of Kerala. Generally
speaking, there were strong ties between this god and kingship in Kerala, and his links with Vaishnavas are also older and closer than in Tamil Nadu. Today Aiyappa is known in Kerala by the name of ‘Aiyappan’ and is gaining enormous popularity as an important bhakti god, thus presenting a marked contrast to the Aiyappar cult in Tamil Nadu, where it would appear to have been on the decline since the end of the last century (Adiceam 1967: 97). There are many points of considerable interest in the Aiyappan faith of Kerala, but I shall defer a consideration of these to another occasion, and in the present study I wish to proceed with my inquiry by focussing on the Aiyappar cult as it has evolved in Tamil Nadu.

Myths Relating to Aiyappar

There has been preserved a Puranic tale relating to the birth of Aiyappar-Śastā. According to this tale he was born to Viṣṇu (Hari) and Śiva (Hara) and is therefore known in Sanskrit as ‘Hariharaputra’ (‘son of Hari and Hara’). There are many variations of the tale of his birth, but it may be summarized as follows:

A conflict over the ambrosia (amrta) that had been obtained by churning the Ocean of Milk broke out between the gods (deva) and the antigods (asura). Viṣṇu transformed himself into a charming damsel named Mohini and, cunningly bewitching the Asuras with her beauty, succeeded in obtaining the ambrosia for the gods. Śiva, having conceived a desire for her immediately upon setting eyes on her, embraced her, and as a result a son Aiyappar was born to the two gods (Krishna Sastri 1916: 230; Arunachalam 1977: 20-21; Clothey 1982: 42-43). According to a folk-etymological explanation that has gained some currency, Mohini received Śiva’s seed in the palm of her hand, and because the child was born from this, he was named ‘Kaiyanar’ (kai: ‘hand’), and this was corrupted to ‘Aiyapar’ (Adiceam 1967: 92; Arunachalam 1977: 20). (But this explanation cannot be said to be particularly prevalent among villagers in general.) A number of other myths relating to Aiyappar are also known (Arunachalam 1977: 21), but it may be said that, with the exception of the birth tale, the mythical facts concerning Aiyappar hardly ever enter the consciousness of the villagers in the course of their daily life.

The first account hinting at the birth of Aiyappar as resulting from the union of Viṣṇu and Śiva appears in the Tamil lexicon Pinkala-nikantu, thought to date from somewhere between the eighth and thirteenth centuries (Clothey 1982: 42). Here this god is referred to by the name ‘Arikaraputtiraṇ’ (< Skt. Hariharaputra), meaning ‘son of Viṣṇu and Śiva’. Although there is a possibility that the germs of the tale of Aiyappar-Śastā’s birth may be traced back to Sanskrit sources of the eighth to ninth centuries or even earlier (Clothey 1982: 42-43), for a more detailed account one must wait until the Tamil Purāṇa Kanta-purāṇam (by Kacciyappacivācāriyar) dating from the fourteenth (?) century. Thus Aiyappar-Śastā’s links with the Vaishnavas surfaced in Tamil Nadu somewhat later than those with the Śaivas, gradually becoming more marked in the tenth to eleventh centuries and later, and they were further strengthened by royal patronage from the mid-
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thirteenth century onwards (Clothey 1982: 43).

The Iconographical Features of Aiyānār

The iconographical features of this god are described in detail in the Purāṇas and Āgamas (Adiceam 1967: 24–57; Gopinatha Rao 1914: 488–490), but initial references appear, as in the case of the inscriptions, in the eighth to ninth centuries (Clothey 1982: 38). A Tamil lexicon Tivākaram (early 8th century?) cites five names for this god: 1) Kōjikkotiyōṅ ('he who has the cock on his banner'), 2) Cātavākaṇaṅ(?), 3) Kāri ('black one'), 4) Kaṭaṇavaiyaṅ ('he who is the colour of the sea'), and 5) Cattan (Clothey: 1982: 38). This would suggest that the iconographical form of this god was already evolving at the time. An image of Śātā (8th century) unearthed in the vicinity of the Pallavan village of Uttaramērūr is already endowed with the basic features to be seen in images today (Gros et Nagaswamy 1970: 89 and Fig. 13; Clothey 1982: 38).

Among the above five appellations, 2) is considered by some to mean 'he who rides a (white) elephant' (Gopinatha Rao 1914: 488; Clothey 1982: 38), but the validity of this interpretation is open to question. There are also some who take 'cātā' to mean 'horse' (cf. Adiceam 1967: 12), and although it is difficult to determine whether Aiyānār’s original vāhana (vehicle or mount) was an elephant or a horse, it may perhaps be said that classical literature would tend to support the former. This inconsistency or “confusion” surrounding his vāhana has been carried over by the cult as it exists today.

According to the aforementioned Pinkala-nikāṇṭu, Aiyānār, son of Hari and Hara, rides a white elephant, holds a ‘ceṇṭu’ in his right hand, is flanked by two consorts, the goddesses Pūrṇaṅ (< Skt. Pūrṇā) and Puṭkalai (< Skt. Puṣkalā), is a yogin, and has the role of a protector of the Dharma (Clothey 1982: 42). One Sanskrit text (Suprabhedāgama) gives the names of his two consorts as Madana and Varṇāṅ (Gopinatha Rao 1914: 489), and there are also instances in which he is said to be accompanied by his consort Prabhā and his son Satyaka (Adiceam 1967: 52–53).

Aiyānār is usually depicted as a youth with his hair erect and with a peaceful countenance (Gopinatha Rao 1914: 488; Clothey 1982: 39), but it is also known from textual sources that he very occasionally assumes a wrathful aspect (Adiceam 1967: 26; Kaṇakaraṭṭiṇam 1986: 107). He wears a sacred thread (Skt. ya-jnopavīta) and sits with one knee raised in the pose known in Sanskrit as sukhasana, yogāsana or vīrāsaṇa (cf. Figs. 1 and 2), but in later times he is generally shown with his raised knee held in position with a yogic band called a yoga-patta (Adiceam 1967: 26; Clothey 1982: 39). The use of a sacred thread would suggest that this deity embodies in some form or another Brahmanical or Sanskritic values.

The outward appearance of Aiyānār himself reflects nothing other than the fact that he is a yogin or brahmācārin (Clothey 1982: 42; Gopinatha Rao 1914: 488). But at the same time his attendance by two consorts, together with the presence of his son Satyaka, is indicative of his character as a grhastha or householder, and this
would suggest that his image oscillates between that of a householder and that of a renouncer. This ambiguity of character, in particular its duality or two-sidedness, is also to be seen in other South Indian gods, especially Murukan\(^6\), and is worth noting.

Another god with the dual image of householder and religious practitioner (\textit{samnyāsin}) is Śiva, and similarities and correspondences may be observed between Aiyānār and Śiva in other respects too. Dumont has already considered this question, and I wish to leave details, including an examination of the validity of his conclusions, to another occasion.

At all events, the information to be gleaned from literary sources on Aiyānār and the related group of gods is extremely fragmentary and limited, and one has to admit that it is too scant to enable one to clarify the actual state of the cult in former times. Moreover, whatever the origins and history of these gods might have been, these facts are not of any primary importance in at least the sphere of actual religious life, and it is therefore impossible to elucidate the true significance of such beliefs in contemporary villages on the basis of historical research and analysis based on literary sources alone. It is for this reason that fieldwork becomes indispensable.

**THE AIYĀNĀR CULT IN THE VILLAGES OF PRESENT-DAY TAMIL NADU\(^7\)**

**An Outline of the Aiyānār Temple Complex**

As was noted earlier, the god Aiyānār is worshipped in almost all parts of Tamil Nadu, but his cult is especially popular in the central and southern parts of the state where I conducted my survey, and large temples are also more numerous here than in other regions. The above-all most distinctive feature of Aiyānār is the fact that this god is almost without exception enshrined together with other male deities within the same temple. In other words, within the precincts of an ‘Aiyānār temple’ there will be found not only a sanctuary dedicated to Aiyānār, but also invariably the shrine/s of another god or gods. Hence an Aiyānār temple will as a matter of course constitute a ‘temple complex’, and Aiyānār is looked upon by the villagers as representing the ‘chief god’, as it were, of the gods enshrined together within the same temple\(^8\). This fact has often been overlooked by researchers, and by this oversight they must be considered to have overlooked a phenomenon of some importance when considering the essence of Aiyānār and his cult.

The types of gods that appear together with Aiyānār are generally fixed (with some minor regional differences), and one may mention as representative of them Karuppu, Mūrtaivīra\(^9\) and Muniyān (= Muniyantī)\(^20\). But they are not all enshrined together within a single Aiyānār temple; it is only that some among them are invariably installed in an Aiyānār temple. A temple complex will also often have large numbers of hero stones (\textit{vīrakkal or nāṭukal}) and \textit{sati} stones\(^21\). In addition
to the male deities, certain goddesses will also be frequently found enshrined within the temple compound\(^22\), but they are all goddesses wanting in individuality or a strong sense of being, and they are confined to rather subordinate roles. These goddesses who appear together with Aiyānar clearly differ in lineage and character from the powerful goddesses such as Māriyammān and Kāliyammān who are worshipped independently and also become the objects of the villagers’ ardent faith.

Unlike the temples of deities such as the above Māriyammān, which occupy important sites within the village\(^23\), the Aiyānar temple is usually located on the village outskirts or on the boundary with a neighbouring village. It is, therefore, shown scant regard by the villagers except when a festival or some similar event is held, and the compound is usually left in a state of total neglect(cf. Fig. 3). In principle the temple should be situated near the ‘water’s edge’ (nīṟtuṟaḻ), beside, for example, a river, reservoir or pond\(^24\), and to the southwest of a village (ūṟ), but it may also be found to the northeast (Arunachalam 1977: 43)\(^25\). Because of subsequent movements by the settlement, however, the direction in which it lies as seen from the present position of the village will not infrequently be found to be at variance with this principle. In the present survey, images of Aiyānar himself were often seen to be facing east (see also n. 43).

The size of the temple compound ranges in width from about ten metres to almost one hundred metres. The configuration of the temple grounds is of no particular shape, and it is not unusual to find that the extent of the precincts is not even clearly defined. Generally speaking, it may be observed that the more favoured a temple’s economic conditions (vācai) are and the more sophisticated it becomes, the greater the tendency is for it to be surrounded by walls and for the compound to become square in shape in the manner of Hindu temples of the great tradition.

As regards the architectural style of the temples too, in cases of some sophistication they will consist of a vimāna or main sanctuary with, although small in scale, a maṇḍapa (anterior halls), ardhamaṇḍapa, antarāla(anteroom) and garbhagrha ‘sanctum sanctorum’, and one will even see complex temple buildings with a structure resembling a śikhara or spire surmounting the vimāna. But apart from such cases, the structure is generally very simple, and it is by no means rare to find no building or permanent structure at all within the temple grounds(cf. Fig. 3)

During the night, Aiyānar and his attendant gods (parivāra-tyeḻvāṅkaḻ, parivāra-mūrttikal) are believed to mount elephants or horses and to patrol (veṭṭai)\(^30\) the village, thereby protecting it from demons and other external enemies. It is maintained that it is for this reason that their temple is located on the outskirts of the village. Because of this role of theirs, they are collectively known as kāval-tyeḻvam (‘tutelary gods’), kāppu-tyeḻvam (do.) or ūr-kāval (‘village guardians’), and in many of the temples a stucco or terra-cotta figure of an elephant or horse is placed facing each of the divine images(cf. Figs. 4 and 5). But on the other hand, as is indicated by the Tamil proverb to the effect that “a god resides in all the bricks of an Aiyānar temple,”\(^27\) Aiyānar and the other gods enshrined in the temple complex will frequently be seen to be symbolically represented by small and
somewhat flat stone pillars or bricks, one for each god (cf. Fig. 6; Perumal 1990: 23). It is also possible to point out cases, although rare, in which there is no pativu or object representing the ‘divine’ at all (cf. Tu. Irāmacāmi 1985: 16–17, 29–30).

The above proverb may be said to clearly show 1) that a plurality of gods is enshrined in an Aiyānar temple, 2) that it is common to find that these gods are represented by objects such as simple bricks, and 3) that this has become a matter of common knowledge for the villagers. As will be explained below, in the cult centred on Aiyānar the representation of the god’s ‘form’ (uruvam) by means of concrete images is not of any essential importance.

The position of priest (pūcāri) is often filled by a person of Paṇṭaram birth (cf. Fig. 7), but villages in which other non-Brahman priests fulfill these duties are also found (cf. Fig. 8).

The Basic Character of Aiyānar

Notwithstanding the fact that Aiyānar is regarded as the leader of the group of male deities, within the village pantheon he is not by any means an individual or conspicuous figure (Clothey 1982: 43). As was noted earlier, he has since ancient times been attributed the role of ‘protector of the Dharma’ and ‘preserver of order’ (cf. Fig. 8), and this aspect of his has in principle been preserved down to the present day. In point of fact, it is customary in some villages to refer to him as the ‘god of truth’ (mey-veyam, meyyaṇa teyvam), and he is held in high regard by the populace as an impartial god presiding over justice (cf. Oppert 1893: 507–508; Adsieam 1967: 55, 78, 95), his primary duty is the safeguarding (kāvaḷ) of the village as a whole, but he also evidences that facet of a god concerned with rainfall, which exerts a great influence on the harvest (Canmukā cuntaram 1986: 220). That the temples dedicated to this god are often situated near water is no doubt not unconnected with this fact.

Such functions may be said to be linked to the order and welfare of the village or communal society (samutāyam) as a whole rather than to the direct interests of the individual villagers. In this sense, Aiyānar is endowed with a largely public character and is basically a god belonging to the village as a whole (ārakkup potuvāṇa teyvam), and it is to be surmised that he is a deity not readily conceived of as an object of prayers (vēṇtutal, pirāttanai) born of purely personal motives (cf. Fig. 8). Aiyānar is frequently referred to by the title ‘āṭavar’, corresponding to the Sanskrit ‘tāvāra’ (‘supreme god’), and this fact in itself would suggest that he is a figure reflecting a view of the divine of a higher order, removed from the plane of personal prayer.

Although the appellation ‘Aiyān’ is occasionally used when referring to this god, he is usually called ‘Aiyānar’ by the villagers, this being an honorific title formed by the suffixation of the honorific suffix ‘-ar’ (deriving from the plural
indicator). This is a point worth noting, and within the village milieu he is but rarely referred to by names suggestive of proper nouns without any honorific affix, such as the ‘Cättan’ (Sātā) and ‘Arikarputtīrān’ (Hariharaputra) appearing in literary sources. By way of contrast, in the case of important gods such as Śiva (Civān) or Subrahmanyana (Murukaṇ), who serve as the objects of personal bhakti in Hinduism, it is general practice to use a name without any honorific affix. They are, in other words, referred to without any honorific title, whereas Aiyanār is usually ‘mistered’, as it were, and from this it is to be inferred that the emotions and attitudes of the villagers towards him are somewhat distant.

Judging from the results of my own investigations, Aiyanār is a so-called ‘vegetarian god’, and no offerings (pataiyal) of sacrificial animals (pali) are made to him (cf. Kānakappattuham 1986: 125).32

The Character of Aiyanār’s Attendant Gods

The situation differs somewhat, however, in the case of Kaṟuppu, Maturaivīraṇ and the other gods of Aiyanār’s entourage.

If we consider for example Kaṟuppu, we find that, in addition to being called simply ‘Kaṟuppu’ or ‘Kaṟuppaṇ’ without any honorific title, he is also widely known by names to which has been added ‘ānan’ (even ‘elder brother’, such as ‘Kaṟuppanan’, ‘Kaṟuppa(a)na-cuvāmi’ and ‘Periyaṇa-cuvāmi’), thereby indicating that he is treated with a certain sense of familiarity by the villagers (cf. Raman and Shanmugam 1983: 44). Many variants of Kaṟuppu are known to exist—for example, Ākāca-kaṟuppu (Kaṟuppu of ‘Space’), Umai-kaṟuppu (‘Dumb’ Kaṟuppu), Nōti-kaṟuppu (‘Lame’ Kaṟuppu), Cankili-kaṟuppu (Kaṟuppu of the ‘Chain’) and Ellai-kaṟuppu (Kaṟuppu of the ‘Boundary’)—and when these are also taken into account, it would suggest that the god Kaṟuppu is generally regarded by the villagers with considerable interest.

In the case of Maturaivīraṇ too, whose popularity rivals that of Kaṟuppu, an honorific title is not usually used, and he is either called simply ‘Maturaivīraṇ’ or known by the name ‘Marutaiyāṇ’, which is probably a contraction of ‘Maturaivīraṇ’35. In Tiruccirappali District he is usually ranked next to Kaṟuppu (Cī. Irāmacami 1982–84: 65), while in Tirunelveli District Kaṟuppu and Maturaivīraṇ are often confused with one another, and there have also been instances reported in which the latter is included within the scope of the former (Tu. Irāmacami 1985: 38).

Muṇiyān (Muṇiyānti), another god sometimes appearing in Aiyanār temple complexes, will in some cases be ranked next to Kaṟuppu, and in villages where Kaṟuppu is absent he may even act as proxy for him (Tu. Irāmacami 1985: 40). Although in regard to his origins connections with Buddhism and Jainism have frequently been noted (Clothey 1982: 50; Tu. Irāmacami 1985: 42), today he is generally conceived of as an ambivalent or preeminently evil god, and this fact may also be inferred from the following proverb: “Muṇiyāṇ, disliked by everyone, is like Cāniyaṇ, that is, Saturn (the evil planet disliked by everyone)” (Jensen
Muniyan is also sometimes referred to by the 'honorific title' of 'Munićuvarau' (←‘muni’ + ‘-ēvāra’), but in this case the honorific title should be regarded as giving expression to emotions of fear and the corresponding sentiments of dislike and distance, and one is advised to distinguish it from the case of Aiyānār\textsuperscript{36}.

Gods such as Karuppu, Maturaivirau and Muniyan are often represented by stone images scored with rough carvings or simply by erect stones, bricks or tridents (triśūla) (cf. Fig. 14), but when made the subject of distinct artistic representations, they often assume a wrathful appearance, and the beholder will be overwhelmed by a huge concrete or stucco image (generally seated) sometimes rising to three or four metres in height (cf. Figs. 10 and 11).

Because these gods are believed to occasionally exert adverse influence on the daily life of man, they are sometimes collectively known as ‘tuṣṭa-iēvatai’ or ‘evil gods’\textsuperscript{37}. Partly on account of their fearsome (payaitkaramd4a, tutty04a) appearance when represented in the form of an image, they are worshipped by the villagers with a ‘(submissive) devotion marked by fear (payam)’, described as ‘paya-pakti’ (< Skt. bhaya-bhakti). Through the medium of the individual’s pressing emotions of ‘fear’, these gods arouse a personal rapport with each of the villagers\textsuperscript{38} and even come to function as the objects of ‘vows’ (vēṅtutal, pirārtta4a) for the fulfillment of their private prayers. This attitude on the part of the villagers may be said to be in direct contrast to that espoused towards Aiyānār. In a word, Aiyānār treats the villagers as a ‘whole’, whereas the other gods treat them as ‘individuals’.

In the case of these gods, the practice of severe penances (tavam, viratam) such as may be observed in the cults of goddesses—fasting and abstinence (unnaviratam), fire walking (īlimiti), kāvati, etc. —is not required, but instead sacrifices (kāvu) using a he-goat (katā) are often performed (cf. Figs. 12 and 13). In addition, it is also general practice to make offerings of liquor (cūrāyam) to Maturaivirau (Ci. Irāmacāmi 1982–84: 65).

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AIYĀNĀR AND HIS ATTENDANT GODS**

**Dumont’s Understanding and Related Problems**

At this stage I wish to consider the role of the god Aiyānār within the village pantheon with reference to a monograph by the French anthropologist Louis Dumont (1953: 255–270; see also Dumont 1986: 440–448).

Dumont interprets Aiyānār and his entourage of male deities in roughly the following fashion. First, while recognizing on the one hand that the character of the god Aiyānār is “ill-defined” (sa personalité mal définie), he conceives of the god Karuppu as lying structurally at the opposite pole to Aiyānār, and he posits a scheme involving a clear-cut conceptual distinction and opposition between the two. Dumont seeks to understand this conceptual contrast within a bipolar
framework by regarding it as a transference or projection of social relations such those obtaining between upper castes and lower castes, vegetarian castes and non-vegetarian castes, pure castes and impure castes, and Brahmans and Untouchables. He perceives, in other words, a reflection or analogy of the social institutions and hierarchy of the village community in the striking contrast between the character of these two gods.

This type of dualistic interpretation grounded in the notions of purity and impurity is Dumont’s forte, but upon having attempted to verify the validity of his views on the basis of on-the-spot investigations, it behoves me to point out that in many respects they do not accord with the actual situation.

Dumont defines Karaṇupp as “the black god” (le dieu noir) and emphasizes the contrast with “the pure god” (le dieu pur), namely, Aiyāṇār. He moreover develops his argument by unconditionally regarding Karaṇupp as being ‘black’ in colour, a colour which he considers to suggest the lower castes (Dumont 1953: 270), but this assumption is not without its problems.

Firstly, the meaning of the name ‘Karaṇupp’ is open to further consideration. There is a general tendency to interpret the word ‘karaṇupp’ in the sense of ‘black (one)’ (Canmukacuntaram 1986: 222), but this meaning is also closely linked to the meanings of ‘become angry’, ‘be at enmity’, ‘become dirty’, etc. (DED 1175, 1176; DEDR 1395, 1396), and it is no easy matter to determine which corresponds to the original meaning of ‘Karaṇupp’. In point of fact, images of Karaṇupp that are pale in colour (or skin-coloured) are not uncommon (cf. Fig. 13), although it is indeed true that images of Karaṇupp are often dark-blue in colour. But here one cannot exclude the possibility that, because of an association of Karaṇupp’s name with that of Kṛṣṇa (cf. Kaṇakarattinam 1986: 222), there evolved on a secondary level an identification of Karaṇupp with Kṛṣṇa and that, when making images of Karaṇupp, it eventually became customary to use dark-blue in imitation of images of Kṛṣṇa (cf. Dumont 1986: 409). In actual fact, the villagers often do look upon Karaṇupp as an incarnation (avatāra) of Viṣṇu, and it is not unusual to find the forehead of images of Karaṇupp marked with a nāmam, the sign of God Viṣṇu or his devotees.

In his study, Dumont appears to be taking great care not to define Aiyāṇār as being white in colour in contrast to Karaṇupp’s black. There is considerable latitude in the prescriptions of Aiyāṇār’s colour, including golden, silken, blue, white and black, and he is in fact generally described as being of a dark complexion, with some texts, as has already been noted, calling him ‘Kāri’ (‘black one’) (Gopinatha Rao 1914: 488–490; Adiceam 1967: 27). It is thus obvious that from a philological standpoint too it is inappropriate to unconditionally regard Aiyāṇār as being white in colour. In his discussion of the ‘two consorts’ to be found in attendance upon various South Indian gods, however, Dumont states that the divine consort from the upper caste is white in colour (teint clair) while the other is dark in colour (teint foncé) (Dumont 1953: 270). If this should be the case, then why is Aiyāṇār, whom Dumont considers to represent Brahmanical values, not always white? Dumont
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has not been able to give a convincing explanation for this anomaly.

Furthermore, the large image of a god fair-complexioned (or skin-coloured) and wearing a sacred thread is often to be seen standing next to a dark-blue image of Kaṟuppu. This god is, however, a so-called ‘meat-eating’ god (such as Muṇiyāṇ), differing from Aiyanār, and, according to Dumont, belongs to the line of ‘inferior gods’ (dieux inférieurs) representing projections of non-Brahman castes. In addition, large black (or blue) images of gods usually representing Kaṟuppu sometimes wear a sacred thread, while images of Maturaivirāṇ, who is often a ‘meat-eating’ god, are also frequently found with a sacred thread. How are these facts to be explained by Dumont’s logic?

In the final analysis, discussions of the iconographical features of the gods found in Aiyanār temple complexes are not necessarily of any intrinsic significance. It has already been noted that Aiyanār and the gods of his entourage are not always represented by means of ‘images’ (patimam < Skt. pratīmā) endowed with established iconographical features (uruvam, vaṭīvu). It is of course possible to suppose that there first existed a concrete (iconographical) conception and that this was later simplified to forms such as stones and bricks for economic and other reasons affecting the faithful (that is the villagers). But if this should have been the case, then one would expect to find a similar state of affairs in regard to, for example, Śiva and Viṣṇu. But it is quite inconceivable that Śiva or Viṣṇu should be represented by a mere stone or brick. This is probably because (at least in the context of their cults) these gods are inseparably connected with the notion of anthropomorphism and constitute a fundamental part of their devotees’ conception of the divine. In the case of Aiyanār and his entourage, on the other hand, it is to be surmised that because, on account of a different conception of the divine, there is no absolute need to attribute concrete characteristics to a ‘god’, there is no great psychological resistance to expressing manifestations of the divine by means of a fetish, and that therefore such examples are to be observed on a daily basis. In the case of Aiyanār temple complexes, the presence or absence of any image and the extent to which the image is anthropomorphically carved are largely matters of arbitrary choice and are of only secondary importance. Consequently, it is difficult for iconographical differences to serve as meaningful criteria in determining the essential nature of the gods found in these temple complexes.

Next, Dumont classifies the village gods into the two categories of ‘pure’ (cuttam) and ‘impure’ (acuttam) and, defining Aiyanār as ‘pure’ and Kaṟuppu as ‘impure’, stresses the contrast between the two (Dumont 1953: 264). But in actual practice it will be found that there is a tendency among the villagers to carefully avoid applying the opposite concept of ‘acuttam’ to other village gods. The very notion or expression ‘impure god’ is regarded as objectionable by the villagers. A similar state of affairs may be discerned in the fact that although they may use the term ‘good god’ (nalla cāmi), they avoid the expression ‘wicked god’ (ketṭa cāmi). One cannot, of course, on this account immediately conclude that there exists no contrast between ‘pure’ and ‘impure’ among the gods. According to Nishimura
(1987: 59), all gods are ‘pure,’ and in the light of the above facts, setting aside the question of the validity of Nishimura’s arguments, the soundness of interpreting the nature of village gods by containing them within a scheme based on a dichotomy of pure and impure must be subjected to careful scrutiny. As may be inferred from Tamil classical literature, since ancient times the ‘impure’ has as a source of mystical power had a particularly important significance in religious terms in Dravidian society. A conception of the divine distinctly different from North Indian notions, attributing as they do positive and sacred values to above all ‘purity’ and ‘light’, was current in the South Indian society of ancient times (cf. Hart 1979: 15–17). If the cults centred on the male deities of the village should be in some way connected with this ancient indigenous conception of the divine, then one must naturally be wary of applying to them values associated with the contrasting Sanskritic system based on the concepts of purity and impurity. Supposing, for example, that Aiyañār should be informed with a certain Brahmanical value or conception of the divine, there is a possibility that the criteria of purity and impurity applied to Aiyañār may not have any meaning as criteria in regard to Karuppu and similar gods. The single criterion of purity/impurity may serve as an effective yardstick for entities belonging to the same logical scheme, but one cannot expect it to serve as a yardstick when applied to a different semantic system (cf. Sekine 1986).

Dumont presents a clear-cut schema according to which vegetarian gods (such as Aiyañār) always face north, while Karuppu and other meat-eating gods face south (Dumont 1953: 264). But in view of the results of my own investigations, this assertion must also be called into question. In the case of Aiyañār, as has already been noted, images facing east predominate, while in regard to Karuppu and other attendant gods no particularly noticeable tendency could be ascertained, and it is not at all unusual to find them even facing the same direction as Aiyañār43). Simplification and typologization are, in fact, not possible when considering the direction in which images of the gods face.

On the subject of priests, Dumont states that, ideally speaking, there are two types, namely, those attending on Aiyañār and those attending on Karuppu and the other gods (Dumont 1953: 264). But such a situation is to be found only in a small number of sophisticated temples, and it differs markedly from the realities of the smaller temples, without even any proper divine images, that account for the majority of Aiyañār temple complexes and may be considered to reflect their original form.

The Question of Aiyañār’s Dependence

Dumont identifies Aiyañār with the upper castes (that is, Brahmans) and Karuppu with the lower castes (non-Brahmans) and recognizes between them a relationship based on domination, such as that existing between master and servant. It is true that a superficial reading of his arguments would seem to suggest that his insights are correct. But once one examines the realities of the situation with
greater care, it would appear to be possible to interpret the phenomena not on the basis of a rigid bipolar scheme, but within a different context. This I now wish to do.

It has already been pointed out that when Aiyanar is enshrined in a temple, he is without exception accompanied by other gods and is regarded as their leader. What is important to note here is the fact that the gods enshrined together with Aiyanar in an Aiyanar temple are not necessarily entities for whom coexistence with other gods is a prerequisite. That is to say, in addition to Aiyanar temple complexes, independent temples dedicated to Karuppu, Maturaiviru and so forth are by no means uncommon (Whitehead 1921: 33; Canmukacuntaram 1986: 222). It is optional whether or not these gods appear as the retainers of other gods. This fact would suggest that, while coexisting within the same temple complex, Aiyanar and the other gods differ from each other in an important respect in regard to their respective characters.

Here it is also important to take note of the following fact. Namely, whereas examples of gods such as Karuppu and Maturaiviru functioning as, for instance, the attendants of goddesses are to be observed when they appear outside of an Aiyanar temple complex (Whitehead 1921: 25, 33, 108), it is in principle inconceivable for Aiyanar to appear as the attendant god of some other deity. In other words, for Aiyanar the accompanying presence of certain other gods (typified by Karuppu and Maturaiviru) is a sine qua non or precondition of his very existence. Although Aiyanar would seem to be the 'leader' or 'chief' of the gods who are enshrined together with him, and is regarded as such by the villagers, in actual fact he owes his raison d'être to the gods under his command. Dumont argues that the meat-eating gods depend for their existence upon higher ranking gods and that Aiyanar holds the power of life and death, as it were, over Karuppu and the other gods (Dumont 1953: 266; 1986: 410). But one is forced to conclude that his discussion is based on no more than a one-sided observation of the actual facts.

Although it may appear somewhat paradoxical, on the basis of the above it becomes evident that Aiyanar of necessity anticipates and presupposes the existence of other gods. Insofar that his own being is found in the first instance in relation to others (in this case, a group of male deities), one is justified in understanding him as a deity whose basic characteristic is a certain 'heteronomy' or 'dependence'. Dumont points out that Aiyanar and Karuppu exist only in relation to one another (Dumont 1953: 267). An important aspect of Aiyanar is indeed that of a god immersed in relationships. One must not, however, overlook the fact that the 'relation' in this case is not one of equal implications for both parties, but has subtle differences of nuance. The two gods do not simply stand in a relationship of mutual contention, and they do not therefore constitute the twin stays of a single structure or framework. For this reason it is open to question whether the alleged "complementarity" (Dumont 1986: 440) of the two gods does in fact reflect the real situation in the true sense of the term.
The "Buried God"—Aiyañar as an Inconspicuous Deity

As has been noted in the above, Aiyañar is invariably enshrined together with certain other gods, and in such cases it may be said that the real object of the villagers' worship is not the chief god Aiyañar, but rather the other gods enshrined together with him. When performing what is styled an Aiyañar temple festival, the villagers will behead some goats, ranging in number from three or four to several dozen, in sacrifice to gods other than Aiyañar (namely, the so-called 'non-vegetarian gods' such as Karûppu) and make offerings of the meat after it has been prepared (Tu. Irâmacåmi 1985: 29) (cf. Figs. 12, 13 and 16). If one carefully examines the structure of a temple customarily referred to by the villagers as, for example, a 'Karûppu temple', it is not unusual to find that it is in fact an Aiyañar temple complex (cf. Tu. Irâmacåmi 1985: 30). In my own investigations I even came across the example of a temple where, although there were bricks representing the other gods, the stone image of Aiyañar lay buried in the ground as if forgotten (cf. Figs. 17 and 18). This may be regarded as a highly symbolic and suggestive instance.

Within the precincts of Aiyañar temple complexes one will also often notice huge erect figures. These are not, however, images of Aiyañar, but represent none other than Karûppu, Muñiyañ and other attendant gods. This may be said to indicate that in the realm of actual 'faith' Aiyañar is not the foremost of the gods. This too clearly attests to the essential tenuousness of Aiyañar and his lack of any real sense of being (cf. Clothey 1982: 43).

It is known that there are rituals of divine possession and revelation connected with Aiyañar and performed by non-Brahman priests (puçãri), but they all concern the aforementioned welfare of the village community as a whole, as is typified by the ritualistic and formalized questions and answers that are exchanged by the priest and the villagers or believers on the occasion of these divine revelations (kurâ), and the ritual procedure is also marked by formalism. As an object of intense private worship and devotion, Aiyañar may be said to have become an entity estranged from the villagers.

CONCLUSIONS

Although my discussion of points raised in the latter sections of the above has been by no means adequate, on the basis of the foregoing general considerations it has been shown that while the god Aiyañar shares certain features with Karûppu and other male deities insofar that he is made the object of worship within a particular locality, in several important respects he also exhibits major differences from these gods, and that although on the one hand he exhibits evidence of Brahmanical characteristics, in regard to certain points, such as relations between the divine and the faithful, he is endowed with qualities fundamentally different from Śiva, Viñû and other major bhakti gods (perunteyvâṅkal).
This ambiguity and elusiveness of Aiyaṇār would appear to be connected to the essentially marginal character of this god. As was noted earlier, Dumont has commented that the character of this god is ‘ill-defined,’ but he does not seem to have paid any particular attention to the significance of this point. Yet is it not in fact this ‘undefinedness’ that expresses the true essence of this god? In other words, his ‘undefinedness’ arose, or was caused to arise, as a matter of necessity or inevitability on account of the eclectic (or marginal and syncretic) nature of this god, bestraddling as he does the two separate value systems of Brahmans and non-Brahmans, and one might even say that this ambiguity and nebulosity of character is in fact the principle or sine qua non that guarantees and sustains the existence of the god Aiyaṇār. It is the very indeterminateness of his character that acts as the decisive factor in making Aiyaṇār what he is.

For what functions and roles differing from those of other gods do the villagers, then, look to Aiyaṇār, with his character that is so ‘ill-defined’? In answering this question, it is essential that one proceed on the basis of a careful examination of concrete examples, and I accordingly wish to leave this for a more detailed consideration on a future occasion.

[Acknowledgements]
I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. P. Shanmugam of the Department of Ancient History and Archaeology at the University of Madras and Mr. Abdul Majeed of the State Department of Archaeology of Tamil Nadu for their invaluable guidance and advice while I was in India. In addition, an expression of thanks is due to my good friend Dr. T. Ganesan of Beijing Languages Institute (former fellow of the Pondicherry Institute of Language and Culture), who acted as assistant during my investigations and accompanied me on bicycle through the fertile plains of ‘Cōjanāṭu’ day after day under the blazing sun in temperatures of close to 40°C. And above all I tender my heartfelt gratitude to all the villagers who kindly divulged to me, sometimes eloquently and sometimes hesitantly, their deeply felt thoughts on the subject of the gods.

[Note to Transliteration]
With a few exceptions, Tamil terms follow the transcriptions of the Tamil Lexicon, and Sanskrit terms the transcriptions applied in most Sanskrit dictionaries.

NOTES

1) I wish it to be understood that ‘local Hinduism’ as used here also encompasses Śrinivas’s concept of ‘regional Hinduism’.
2) C.J. Fuller (1988: 21–22) goes so far as to cast doubt on the very notion of ‘village god’, but in the present study I wish to tentatively define ‘village god’ (nattuppurat-teyvankaḷ = ciruteyvankaḷ) not only in the narrow sense of ārteyvam (Skt. grāmadevataḥ), but also in a broader sense embracing kulateyvam (Skt. kuladevatiḥ or kutīyacāmi, etc., and as a general term for the regional gods with strong non-Sanskritic tendencies centred on the villages (and forming a counterpart to the pan-Indian deities of the great tradition) (cf. Ramanujan 1973: 34).
3) For example, Elmore (1915: 152) defines Aiyaṇār as a ‘demon’. There is also evidence of confusion with the attributes of the gods who accompany Aiyaṇār (Whitehead 1921:
The Forms and Functions of the Aiyāṅgār Temple Complex

33). As will be discussed later, this 'confusion' would in fact seem to be of considerable importance in considering the essence of Aiyāṅgār.

4) If one wishes to ensure geographical exactitude, it must be pointed out that although the area to which Tirumāṉur belongs adjoins the delta area, it does not belong to the delta itself. In 1989 the area in question was designated a part of the 'Kāvēri Delta' by the DMK administration under M. Karunanidhi, and a lavish festival in celebration of this was held locally. This was because by receiving the designation of 'Delta' from the state government, the local inhabitants could expect to be granted various favours and benefits in the spheres of agricultural management, etc.

5) The fourteenth-century commentator Nacciparkkipiyar identifies this term with Murukaṅ, and it is also interpreted as referring to Murukaṅ by Subrahmanian (1966: 178).

6) On trade caravans (Skt. sārtha) and caravan leaders (Skt. sārthavāha) in ancient India, see Yamazaki 1980: 392–394. Examples of the use of Tamil 'cāṭtu' ('trade caravan') appear in the Cāṅkam literature in the Akanāṭur, 39.10, 119.8, 167.7, 245.6 and 291.15; Kuruntokai, 390.3; and Perumppāṟṟuppatai, 80. Outside of the Cāṅkam literature in the narrow sense, it is also found used in the same meaning in, for example, the Cilappatikāram, 11.190.

7) "Cāṭṭaṅai makanā vaittūr" (Tevāram, 4486; cf. Clothey 1982: 38). Kaṇakarattinām (1986: 104, 106) considers that the existence of the deity Aiyāṅgār was required by the Hindus in order to unite the Śaivas and Vaiṣṇavas and that he was adopted from Buddhism and Jainism.


9) One will find, although only rarely, that a Purāṇic tale relating to the demoness Mahiśī (or Mahiśi-mukhi), who has the head of a buffalo-cow, has been transmitted (primarily by Brahmans); for a summary of this tale, see Arunachalam 1977: 36–40. Dumont mentions a number of local myths about Aiyāṅgār (Dumont 1986: 369–370, 445–446, etc.), but I was unable to collect any such myths in the area where I undertook my investigations. Is one to assume that these traditions are dying out?


11) On the different views concerning the original meaning of 'Cāṭavākaṇṭa' (from Skt. Śātavāhana or Śātavāhanā?), see Nakamura 1966: 25–26. When considered in conjunction with n. 6, one should perhaps also take into account possible connections with the term for 'caravan leader' (Skt. sārthavāhana, Pāli satthavāhana). One is also, of course, reminded of the Śātavāhana dynasty in the Deccan (ca. 3rd century B.C. – 3rd century A.D.), on which see Kaṇakarattinām 1986: 107–108.

12) According to Iracamāṇikkaṅpar (1959: 320), the vāhana of the Buddhist Aiyāṅgār is a horse, while in the case of Jainism it is an elephant, but he gives no supporting evidence. There is even a classical source that gives his vehicle as the 'bull' (kālaṇḍi) (Gopinatha Rao 1914: 490), and in contemporary villages it will actually be found that there are instances in which terra-cotta images of bulls have been presented as votive offerings to Aiyāṅgār or images of Aiyāṅgār riding a bull (Nandī) have been painted (or placed) on the walls of the temple buildings or on the roof of the main sanctuary. Nor can one ignore regional differences in regard to whether Aiyāṅgār's vāhana is an elephant or a horse (Kaṇakarattinām 1986: 107).

13) This 'centu' is considered to be a type of weapon, and it is depicted as a short stick with
a crooked point (cf. Fig. 2). Arunachalam (1977: 27), Clothey (1982: 42), and many other scholars equate it with a 'whip' (cf. Tamil Lexicon p.1585), but there is no conclusive evidence as to what this term really does denote (cf. Adiceam 1967: 12). In modern usage, 'ce4tu' means bouquet of flowers (cf. Kriyāvīṇa Taṅkālaṭa Tamiḻ Akarāṭi, p.468).

14) The presence of 'two consorts' is not at all unusual in the case of the Hindu gods of South India; see, for example, Shulman 1980: 267–294 and Zvelebil 1981: 52–53. The distinctions of colour, etc., in the case of Aiyaṇār's two consorts are vague (Dumont 1952: 270; Adiceam 1967: 39; Shulman 1980: 292; Zvelebil 1981: 52–53), and this fact was generally borne out by my fieldwork.

15) During the course of my fieldwork in the villages of Tamil Nadu I heard on several occasions a folk-etymological explanation which, through association with the word 'aiyam' ('fear', 'concern', 'doubt'), would interpret the meaning of 'Aiyaṇār' as the 'fearsome one'.

16) Shulman (1980: 313, 421) also notes other shared features and looks upon Aiyaṇār as an "allotrope" of Murukaṇ. The parallelism between Murukaṇ and Aiyaṇār has also been pointed out by L'Hernault (1978: 121–122) and Kjaerholm (1986: 122–123). I hope to devote a separate study to a discussion of this question.

17) For reasons of space, I have in the present study refrained from giving the names of individual villages (except in special cases).

18) On some rare occasions Aiyaṇār does appear as the retainer of another god (Tu. Irāmacāmi 1985: 30, 47), and I was able to ascertain one such example during my fieldwork (cf. Yamashita 1992a). This particular case involves some interesting questions, which I intend discussing in detail elsewhere, but here I wish it to be understood as representing no more than an exception. Whitehead alludes to the fact that numerous gods are enshrined in Aiyaṇār temples and that Aiyaṇār is regarded as their leader (Whitehead 1921: 25, 89–91, 109), but he does not evoke any further interest in this matter (see also n.44).

19) On the general characteristics of Maturaivirar, see Tu. Irāmacāmi 1985: 38 and Whitehead 1921: 25, 33, 89, 92–93, 98, 108, 113–114. He is a legendary figure said to have been a contemporary of Tirumalai-nāyakar (17th century). His wife is said to have committed suicide following his death and is looked upon as a paragon of feminine virtue (Raman and Shanmugam 1983: 44; Cu. Caṃmukacuntaram 1984). On Muṇiśyaṇ, see Tu. Irāmacāmi 1985: 40–42.

20) In addition to these, Cen Kama-la-anṭavar and Vīrapattirāṭha (<Skt. Virabhadrā) also appeared in the area surveyed.

21) Nor can one consequently ignore connections between the Aiyaṇār cult and ancestor worship (muggrār valipāṭu; cf. Tu. Irāmacāmi 1985: 32), hero worship and the burning of widows (satī). These may in some way be related to the fact that Maturaivirar is often enshrined together with Aiyaṇār. For details on the tradition of hero stones (vīrakkaḷ, naṭukkaḷ) in Tamil Nadu, see Kēcavarāj 1978.

22) In the case of Tiruccirappalli District, for example, Paṭṭattiyammaṇ, Sapta-mātrikā (Eḷu-kaṇṭhīmār: 'Seven Maidens'; cf. Dumont 1953: 258; Raman and Shanmugam 1983: 40; Tu. Irāmacāmi 1985: 29; see also Fig. 15), etc. In some cases, Kāmāṭciyaṃnaṇ and Celliyamman are also found. But Māriyammaṇ, Kāliyammaṇ (although Pattirakāḷi does appear), Renukāmmaṇ, etc., are never found in Aiyaṇār temple complexes. In the area surveyed on the present occasion, I was unable to discover any evidence of the coexistence of Aiyaṇār and Māriyammaṇ, such as has been pointed
out by scholars (Adiceam 1967: 96). In her discussion of Dumont 1953, Nishimura (1986: 7) describes Mariyamman as the Consort of Aiyaṇār, but she has perhaps misunderstood the gist of Dumont’s argument.

23) Gods that are found within the village and are worshipped in common by the villagers (such as Śiva, Viṣṇu, Amma, etc.) are often called ‘nattu-tevai’. But the definition of this term is not necessarily fixed.

24) Aiyaṇār’s location near water is also alluded to in many folk songs (Caṃmukacuntaram 1986: 220–221). His connections with water would suggest a correlation between Aiyaṇār and agricultural rites (Kjaerholm 1986: 122–123, 127). Aiyaṇār’s festivals are often held shortly before the busiest farming season, and the pronouncements (kuri, kattu) of the possessed priest are frequently predictions of the coming harvest. In the rites of Aiyaṇār and other village gods, cases of spirit possession (āvēsam kolluṭai) taking place near water are especially noticeable. The water’s edge (tuṟai, nāṟtuṟai) has been generally recognized as the abode of the ‘divine’ ever since the time of Cankam literature (1st–3rd century); see, for example, Kuruntokai, 53, and Ainkurunūṟu, 28, 53, 174, etc. (cf. Yamashita 1987: 176, 181, 184).

25) Ci. Irāmacāmi, who has reported on cases in the vicinity of the area I investigated, states that Aiyaṇār is situated either to the west or to the south of a village (1982–84: 64).

26) Although frequently translated as ‘hunting’, in this case it is probably more appropriate to render it as ‘driving away’.

27) “Aiyaṇār-kōyil cekkai attaṟaiyum cāmi” (cf. Arunachalam 1977: 42, 44; Tu. Irāmacāmi 1985: 17). There are said to be cases in which there is not only no image, but also not even any such symbol (Tu. Irāmacāmi 1985: 16–17, 30), and I was able to ascertain one such example in Putukkōṭṭai District. On the question of ‘anthropomorphism’ in the religion of ancient Tamil Nadu, see Yamashita 1987, Yamashita 1988, and Yamashita and Furusaka 1989.

28) In addition to those from the so-called Panṭāram, mention may also be made of those from the Paṭaiyācchi and Mūppaṇār. These are all dominant caste groups in this region (cf. Tu. Irāmacāmi 1985: 33). The special relationship that has been frequently noted to exist between Aiyaṇār and the caste of potters (cf. Inglis 1980) is not necessarily found in all villages.

29) This is also reflected in his old appellation of ‘dharma-sāsta’ (Kjaerholm 1986: 122–123). In addition, a number of old proverbs relating to Aiyaṇār would suggest that he is an ‘adjudicator’ (Jensen 1897: 59 [no. 539], 202 [no. 1833]).

30) It is reported that in the mediation of disputes and quarrels he is actually assigned the role of judge and the matter will be submitted to his sanction by the villagers (Tu. Irāmacāmi 1985: 31).

31) There are, of course, cases in which Aiyaṇār is also looked upon as a lineage god (kulaṭeyvam, kutiyacāmi). According to Sekine (private communication), Aiyaṇār is sometimes made the object of a vow. But it is at least true that, when compared with Karuppāṇ and other gods mentioned below, this is by no means a salient characteristic in the case of Aiyaṇār.

32) In addition to Aiyaṇār, the goddess Pappattiyammaṇ, for example, also appears in temple complexes as a ‘vegetarian deity’. But this goddess is not particularly well-known in Putukkōṭṭai District. Nishimura (1986: 7; 1987: 57–63) maintains that differences in the offerings given to village gods (that is, whether the offering is vegetarian or non-vegetarian) reflect the dietary habits of the priests and are ultimately attributable to
differences in the priests’ castes. She then goes on to mention a ‘non-vegetarian Aiyanar’ at an Aiyanar temple built in recent years (about 60 years ago). But on the basis of at least the results of my own investigations, it is difficult to dispute the fact that Aiyanar is a ‘vegetarian god’, and no principle such as that alluded to by Nishimura was observed. At all events, she gives only one instance as evidence, and since it belongs to a rather exceptional category (—the temple itself is new, a member of the Untouchable Vaijuvar caste serves as priest, etc.), it is difficult to reach any general conclusions on the basis thereof. Fuller (1988: 20–24) emphasizes the qualitative differences between the animal sacrifices (uvirppali, Skt. bali) and vegetarian offerings (caivuppali, Skt. naivedya) made to village gods. I do not wish to go into the matter in detail, but if one accepts this, then one is forced to question the attributing of differences in the two types of offerings to differences in the priests’ eating habits alone, as in the case of Nishimura.

During my investigations, I was able to observe the case of a live hen (and even a horse) being offered to Aiyanar, but this was only for the purpose of allowing it to range freely in the temple compound, and it was not made the object of any sanguinary sacrifice (irattapalli). According to Raman and Shanmugam (1983: 42), sacrifices of fowls and other animals were made to Aiyanar, but one cannot exclude the possibility that they have confused Aiyanar with other gods such as Karuppai and Maturaviañra.

Judging from the general usage of the villagers, it is probably appropriate in this case to interpret ‘cuvam’ (< Skt. svamin) and the cognate ‘cami’ as being used not with the connotations of Skt. Tāvara (the Presider, the Almighty), but simply in the sense of ‘god’.

I was also able to ascertain the existence of Cappâni-kaṟuppu (‘Lame’ Karuppai), Kailaśa-kaṟuppu (Karuppai of ‘Mt. Kailaśa’), Koonkâni-kaṟuppu (Karuppai of the ‘Leaf Umbrella’), Malaiyâli-kaṟuppu (Karuppai of ‘Kerala’?), Vēcatâri-kaṟuppu (Karuppai in ‘Disguise’), and Patiṇṭâmpâṭi-kaṟuppu (Karuppai of ‘Eighteen-Stage’ Karuppai). On the variant forms of Karuppai, see also Tu. Īrāmacāmi 1985: 28, 35, 39, etc.

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An interesting introduction to the subject of spirit worship (āvivaZipOtu) centred on Muṇi(yaṉ) in rural Tamil Nadu is to be found in Nāṇacēkaraṉ 1987: 41–45.

Literally speaking, the antonym of ‘tusta-te-vatai’ would be ‘atuṣṭa-te-vatai’, but as a rule ‘talla-tevām’ or ‘talla-cami’ (‘good god’) is used instead (cf. n. 42). Although Aiyanar is usually regarded as a ‘good god’, there would appear to be some who look upon him as a ‘tusta-te-vatai’.

In describing the so-called ‘dveṣa-bhakti’ (Skt.) seen in Tamil religion, Shulman makes the following comment: “Both hatred and love establish an intimate relationship with their object; when the latter is a god, the intimacy carries its own reward (1980: 180–181). Although the emotions of ‘fear’ cannot be discussed in exactly the same terms as ‘dislike’ and ‘hatred’, it is perhaps permissible to consider the gods that accompany Aiyanar’s character discussed below (Tu. Īrāmacāmi 1985: 31).

Acts of penance and oblations that are performed for the fulfillment of a particular wish are collectively known as ‘nerittikkatau’ (Kanakarattiat 1986: 127–128).

Adiceam (1967: 4, 53, 96) also follows this interpretation. ‘Karuppu’ is often spelt ‘karuppai’, but if one takes into account the etymology of the word, ‘karuppai’ is indisputably the correct spelling.

In this respect the Sapta-māṭrikā(cf. Fig. 15), for example, may be said to be affiliated
to Aiyāṅaṅ, while goddesses such as Māryamman belong to the same group of gods as Śiva, etc. It is true that Śiva and Viṣṇu are also represented in forms such as that of the linga and śālagrāma, but these are to be regarded as nothing more than ‘symbols’, and they differ in significance from the stones and bricks (pativu) that serve as the abode of a god and become the objects of fetishism (in the narrow sense) (cf. Oguchi and Hori 1973: 377–379).

42) Although in Tamil slang the upper castes (mēl-cāti) may be referred to as ‘nalla-cāti’ (‘good caste’), the lower castes (kīl-cāti) are not called, for example, ‘ketṭa-cāti’ (‘bad caste’), and the term ‘cinṇa-cāti’ is used instead. In addition, good gods as opposed to evil gods (tusṭa-tēvatai) are not called ‘atuṣṭa-tēvatai’, but are known as ‘nalla-cāmi’. On the basis of these facts, one may discern an eschewal or hesitation on the part of the villagers to unconditionally apply opposite concepts when alluding to certain entities such as, for example, the gods. See also n. 37.

43) Kjaerholm (1986: 127) states that Aiyāṅāṅ faces east, while Canmukacuntaram (1986: 221) reports on the basis of a case study of Tirunelveli District that the Aiyāṅāṅ temple is located on the northern boundary of a village and that the god Aiyāṅāṅ himself faces north. Raman and Shanmugam (1983: 42) similarly state that in Lālkiṭi Taluk in Tiruccirāppaḷi District Aiyāṅāṅ faces east. In view of the fact that the direction in which Aiyāṅāṅ faces varies in this manner from one region to another, it is not possible to draw any general conclusions on the basis of a tendency observed in one particular region.

44) As a very unusual case encountered during the course of my investigations, mention may be made of Cenkamala-nācciyammaṇ Temple in Tāṅcāvur city. This temple constitutes a temple complex, with one of its shrines dedicated to Aiyāṅāṅ. Ostensibly the principal deity of this temple is the goddess Cenkamala-nācciyammaṇ, but judging from my observations of the sequence of the kumbhābhiseka, etc., apart from the veneration accorded the principal deity, foremost respect (mutal-mārīyattai) is always shown to Aiyāṅāṅ, and during the ritual he functions as the de facto principal deity. I briefly discussed this case in Yamashita 1992a. See also n. 18.

45) In the village of Putukkōṭṭai (Ariyalūr Taluk, Tiruccirāppaḷi District).

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『民族学研究』, 51(3): 11–33.


The Forms and Functions of the Aiyañar Temple Complex

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Fig. 1 Aiyānār (Elākuricci village)

Fig. 2 Aiyānār accompanied by his two consorts (Narpavālakkuṭī village)

Fig. 3 An example of an Aiyānār temple in its most primitive form, with Aiyānār in the centre and Karuṇṇu and Maturaivīraṇ in the foreground (Putukkoṭṭai village)
Fig. 4 Terra-cotta elephant (Aiyānār’s vāhana) (Kōvilūr village)

Fig. 5 Stucco horse (Kāṟuppu’s vāhana) (Kōvilūr village)

Fig. 6 Aiyānār represented by bricks; the two bricks standing in the background represent Aiyānār (compare with the size of the cigarette box) (Kīḻa-ecanai village)
Fig. 7 A Paṇṭāram priest singing hymns in praise of Aiyānār (Pāpankūr village)

Fig. 8 A Brahman priest presiding over the rites of a festival at an Aiyānār temple (Vatukappālaiyam village)

Fig. 9 Caṅkili-kaṟuppu represented by a chain (Ceṭṭikkuḷi village)
Fig. 10 Village tutelary gods (from the left, Karumuṇi, Cēṇcaṭaiyāṇ and Cēnnalaiyappā) (Cēṭikkuli village)

Fig. 11 Image of Muṇiyāntavar (= Muṇiyāṇ) (Kōvilūr village)

Fig. 12 A goat being sacrificed in an Aiyāṇār temple complex (Vatukappālaiyam village)
Fig. 13  Offering to the 'meat-eating god' Karuppayacuvāmi (Vatukappālayam village)

Fig. 14  Karṇuppu represented by a trident (Skt. triśāla) (Tāncāvūr city)

Fig. 15  Sapta-mātrikā (or rather Ėlu-Kanñimār) within an Aiyāṉār temple complex (Kaṇṭarattittam village)
Fig. 16 Devotees praying to Maturaiviran, performing a sacrifice, and having their heads shaved in an Aiyânar temple complex (Kôvilur village)

Fig. 17 Image of Aiyânar unearthed at the temple shown in Fig. 3 (Putukkotâi village)

Fig. 18 Images of Aiyânar and his two consorts buried in the ground (Cenkarâyan-katâlai village)