The Forms and Functions of the Aiyanar Temple Complex: A Preliminary Study on the Cult of Male Godlings in Rural Tamil Nadu

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The Forms and Functions of the Aiyānār 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. Irâmacâmi (1985: 29-38), who has published a folklife study (nāṭuppura iyal) 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 Aiyângâr 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 Kâvēri 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 Tiruccirāppalji District and is separated from Taṅcāvūr District by the Kollīṭam (=Coleroon) River, a tributary of the Kāveri (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 Čōḷanāṭu, the region that was formerly under the sway of the Chola dynasty (9th–13th century).

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

Map 1  Areas surveyed
sense of the term). 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 Mūppaṭṭar and Pāṭaiyācci(Vaṇṇiyar) generally predominate, and there are also some villages where the Mutturāyar (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 Aiyāṅar 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 Aiyaṇār that may be found in the villages of present-day Tamil Nadu, it is practically only Aiyaṇār 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 Aiyaṇār's background when compared with that of other gods, and in this section I shall accordingly focus primarily on Aiyaṇār, presenting an overview of the origins and development of his cult with reference to the fruits of philological research.

The Question of Aiyaṇār's Appellations

There is not necessarily any generally accepted explanation of the etymology of the name ‘Aiyaṇār' (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 ‘aryα’ (Pāli ‘āyya’). (It is, therefore, also cognate with Tamil ‘āyir’, 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 Cānkam 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 Aiyaṇār5).

Several of the medieval Āgama texts refer to this god by the name ‘Āriya', and in the late-sixteenth-century Tamil lexicon Akarati-nikantu ‘Cattan’ (that is, the god Aiyaṇār) 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 Aiyaṇār 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 Cānkam 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; Kañakarattīṇam 1986: 102–103). As an example of 'Cattāṇ' apparently used to refer to some divine entity, mention may be made of the Puṇarāṇī Ṛg (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 'aiyaṇ' 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, Aiyaṇār-Sāstā 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 ‘aiyaṇ’ 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 Aiyaṇār have also been pointed out (Arunachalam 1977: 23–24). Aiyaṇār’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 Aiyaṇār-Sāstā 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 (Tirunāvukkaracu; 6th–7th century) Cattāṇ is mentioned as Śiva’s son⁷, thus indicating that this god was already being incorporated into myths relating to Śiva.

It was during the Chola period that the ‘importance of Sāstā increased and his aspects as a god associated with the great tradition came to the fore (Kañakarattīṇam 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 Sāstā 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 Aiyaṇār, while under the patronage of the landowning class as well as of kings and Brahmans, also received donations from villagers in general and that Aiyaṇār 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 Śāstā 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 Aiyanar
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 Aiyanar 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 Aiyanar cult as it has evolved in Tamil Nadu.

Myths Relating to Aiyanar

There has been preserved a Puranic tale relating to the birth of Aiyanar-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 (amṛta) 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 be-
witching 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 Aiyanar was born to the two gods (Krishna

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 Aiyanar are also known (Arunachalam 1977: 21), but it may
be said that, with the exception of the birth tale, the mythical facts concerning
Aiyanar hardly ever enter the consciousness of the villagers in the course of their
daily life9).

The first account hinting at the birth of Aiyanar as resulting from the union of
Viṣṇu and Śiva appears in the Tamil lexicon Pinkala-nikanṭu, thought to date
from somewhere between the eighth and thirteenth centuries (Clothey 1982: 42).
Here this god is referred to by the name ‘Arikaraputtirān’ (< Skt. Hariharaputra),
meaning ‘son of Viṣṇu and Śiva’. Although there is a possibility that the germs of
the tale of Aiyanar-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 (?) century10). Thus Aiyanar-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 Aiyanâr

The iconographical features of this god are described in detail in the Purânas and Âgamas (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 Tivâkaram (early 8th century?) cites five names for this god: 1) Kôlikkoṭiyôṇ (‘he who has the cock on his banner’), 2) Câtavâkânaṇ (?), 3) Kâri (‘black one’), 4) Katpaśrâvaiyaṇ (‘he who is the colour of the sea’), and 5) Câttan (Clothey: 1982: 38). This would suggest that the iconographical form of this god was already evolving at the time. An image of Sâstâ (8th century) unearthed in the vicinity of the Pallavan village of Uttaramêrû 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 question11). There are also some who take ‘câta’ to mean ‘horse’ (cf. Adiceam 1967: 12), and although it is difficult to determine whether Aiyanâr’s original vâhana (vehicle or mount) was an elephant or a horse12), it may perhaps be said that classical literature would tend to support the former. This inconsistency or “confusion” surrounding his vâhana has been carried over by the cult as it exists today.

According to the aforementioned Pinkâla-nîkaṇṭu, Aiyanâr, son of Hari and Hara, rides a white elephant, holds a ‘çeṇṭu’ in his right hand13), is flanked by two consorts, the goddesses Pûranâi (< Skt. Pûranâ) and Puṭkalai (< Skt. Puṣkalâ)14), is a yogin, and has the role of a protector of the Dharma (Clothey 1982: 42). One Sanskrit text (Suprabhedâgama) gives the names of his two consorts as Madana and Varṇânî (Gopinatha Rao 1914: 489), and there are also instances in which he is said to be accompanied by his consort Prabhâ and his son Satyaka (Adiceam 1967: 52-53).

Aiyanâr 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; Kâṇakaratîṇam 1986: 107)15). He wears a sacred thread (Skt. ya-jnospavîta) and sits with one knee raised in the pose known in Sanskrit as sukhasana, yogasana or vrèśana(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-pattra (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 Aiyanâr himself reflects nothing other than the fact that he is a yogin or brahmaçarin (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 grhastra 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\(^{16}\), and is worth noting.

Another god with the dual image of householder and religious practitioner (samnyāsīn) 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 AYIYANAR CULT IN THE VILLAGES OF PRESENT-DAY TAMIL NADU\(^{17}\)

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\(^{18}\). 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, Maturaivirān\(^{19}\) and Muniyan (= Muniyānti)\(^{20}\). 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 (vīrakkal or natukal) and satī 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 Aiyanar clearly differ in lineage and character from the powerful goddesses such as Mariyamma\(^n\) and Kāliyamma\(n\) who are worshipped independently and also become the objects of the villagers' ardent faith.

Unlike the temples of deities such as the above Mariyamma\(n\), which occupy important sites within the village\(^{23}\), the Aiyanar 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’ (nīrturāl), beside, for example, a river, reservoir or pond\(^{24}\), and to the southwest of a village (ūr), 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 Aiyanar 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 (vacati) 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 garbhagṛha ‘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, Aiyanar and his attendant gods (parivāra-teyvaṅkal, parivāra-mūrttikal) are believed to mount elephants or horses and to patrol (vetṭai)\(^{26}\) 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-teyvam (‘tutelary gods’), kāppu-teyvam (do.) or ār-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 Aiyanar temple,”\(^{27}\) Aiyanar 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; Perumāl 1990: 23). It is also possible to point out cases, although rare, in which there is nopativu or object representing the ‘divine’ at all (cf. Tu. Irămacāmi 1985: 16–17, 29–30).

The above proverb may be said to clearly show 1) that a plurality of gods is enshrined in an Aiyaṇār 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 Aiyaṇār the representation of the god’s ‘form’ (uruvam) by means of concrete images is not of any essential importance.

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

The Basic Character of Aiyaṇār

Notwithstanding the fact that Aiyaṇār 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’ 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.

As a guardian of the land (ksetrapāla) (Oppert 1893: 507–508; Adiceam 1967: 55, 78, 95), his primary duty is the safeguarding (kāval) 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 (Canmukacuntaram 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, Aiyaṇār is endowed with a largely public character and is basically a god belonging to the village as a whole (arukkup potuvāṇa teyvam), and it is to be surmised that he is a deity not readily conceived of as an object of prayers (vēntatal, pirīrttaṇai) born of purely personal motives.

Aiyaṇār is frequently referred to by the title ‘ānṭavar’, corresponding to the Sanskrit ‘śiva’ (‘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 ‘Aiyan’ is occasionally used when referring to this god, he is usually called ‘Aiyaṇār’ by the villagers, this being an honorific title formed by the suffixation of the honorific suffix ‘-ār’ (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 ‘Cattan’ (Śāstā) and ‘Arikaraputtirar’ (Hariharaputra) appearing in literary sources. By way of contrast, in the case of important gods such as Śiva (Civān) or Subrahmanya (Murukañ), 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 Aiyanar 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, Aiyanar is a so-called ‘vegetarian god’, and no offerings (patiyal) of sacrificial animals (pali) are made to him (cf. Kaṅakaratītam 1986: 125).

The Character of Aiyanar’s Attendant Gods

The situation differs somewhat, however, in the case of Karuppu, Maturaivīrañ and the other gods of Aiyanar’s entourage.

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

In the case of Maturaivīrañ too, whose popularity rivals that of Karuppu, an honorific title is not usually used, and he is either called simply ‘Maturaivīrañ’ or known by the name ‘Marutayān’, which is probably a contraction of ‘Maturaivīrañ’. In Tiruccirapalli District he is usually ranked next to Karuppu (Cī. Irāmacāmi 1982–84: 65), while in Tirunelveli District Karuppu and Maturaivīrañ 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. Irāmacāmi 1985: 38).

Muniyan (Muniyānti), another god sometimes appearing in Aiyanar temple complexes, will in some cases be ranked next to Karuppu, and in villages where Karuppu is absent he may even act as proxy for him (Tu. Irāmacāmi 1985: 40). Although in regard to his origins connections with Buddhism and Jainism have frequently been noted (Clothey 1982: 50; Tu. Irāmacāmi 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: “Muniyan, disliked by everyone, is like Caniyan, that is, Saturn (the evil planet disliked by everyone)” (Jensen
1897: 306 [no. 2765]). Muṇiyaṇ is also sometimes referred to by the ‘honorific title’ of ‘Muṇicuvaraṇa’ (‘*muni*’ + ‘-śvara’), 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 Aiyanār\(^{30}\).

Gods such as Karūppu, Maturaiviraṇ and Muṇiyaṇ are often represented by stone images scored with rough carvings or simply by erect stones, bricks or tridents (trisṭila) (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 ‘tusita-tēvatai’ or ‘evil gods’\(^{37}\). Partly on account of their fearsome (payam) 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\(^{38}\) and even come to function as the objects of ‘vows’ (veṇṭutal, pirārttai) 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 Aiyanār. In a word, Aiyanār 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 (unnāviratam), fire walking (ṭīmṭi), kāvi, 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 (cāruyam) to Maturaiviraṇ (Ci. Irāmacāmi 1982–84: 65).

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

**Dumont’s Understanding and Related Problems**

At this stage I wish to consider the role of the god Aiyanār 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 Aiyanār and his entourage of male deities in roughly the following fashion. First, while recognizing on the one hand that the character of the god Aiyanār is “ill-defined” (sa personalité mal définie), he conceives of the god Karuppu as lying structurally at the opposite pole to Aiyanār, 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 Kaṟuppu as “the black god” (le dieu noir) and emphasizes the contrast with “the pure god” (le dieu pur), namely, Aiyaṇār. He moreover develops his argument by unconditionally regarding Kaṟuppu 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 ‘Kaṟuppu’ is open to further consideration. There is a general tendency to interpret the word ‘kaṟuppu’ in the sense of ‘black (one)’ (Canmukacuntaram 1986: 222)40), 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 ‘Kaṟuppu’. In point of fact, images of Kaṟuppu that are pale in colour (or skin-coloured) are not uncommon (cf. Fig. 13), although it is indeed true that images of Kaṟuppu are often dark-blue in colour. But here one cannot exclude the possibility that, because of an association of Kaṟuppu’s name with that of Kṛṣṇa (cf. Kaṇakarattrinam 1986: 222), there evolved on a secondary level an identification of Kaṟuppu with Kṛṣṇa and that, when making images of Kaṟuppu, 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 Kaṟuppu as an incarnation (avatāra) of Viṣṇu, and it is not unusual to find the forehead of images of Kaṟuppu 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 Aiyaṇār as being white in colour in contrast to Kaṟuppu’s black. There is considerable latitude in the prescriptions of Aiyaṇār’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 Aiyaṇār 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 Aiyaṇār, whom Dumont considers to represent Brahmanical values, not always white? Dumont
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 Kaṟuppū. This god is, however, a so-called ‘meat-eating’ god (such as Muṇiyāṇ), differing from Aiyaṇār, 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 Kaṟuppū 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 Aiyaṇār temple complexes are not necessarily of any intrinsic significance. It has already been noted that Aiyaṇār and the gods of his entourage are not always represented by means of ‘images’ (patimam < Skt. pratimā) endowed with established iconographical features (uruvam, vāṭivu). 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 Aiyaṇār 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 Aiyaṇār 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 importance⁴⁷. 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 Aiyaṇār as ‘pure’ and Kaṟuppū 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’ (nallā cāmī), they avoid the expression ‘wicked god’ (ketṭa cāmī)⁴⁸. One cannot, of course, on this account immediately conclude that there exists no contrast between ‘pure’ and ‘impure’ among the gods. According to Nishimura
The Forms and Functions of the Aiyāṉār Temple Complex

(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 Aiyāṉār 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 Aiyāṉār may not have any meaning as criteria in regard to Kaṟuppu 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 Aiyāṉār) always face north, while Kaṟuppu 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 Aiyāṉār, as has already been noted, images facing east predominate, while in regard to Kaṟuppu 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 Aiyāṉār. 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 Aiyāṉār and those attending on Kaṟuppu 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 Aiyāṉār temple complexes and may be considered to reflect their original form.

The Question of Aiyāṉār’s Dependence

Dumont identifies Aiyāṉār with the upper castes (that is, Brahmans) and Kaṟuppu 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 Aiyanār 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 Aiyanār in an Aiyanār temple are not necessarily entities for whom coexistence with other gods is a prerequisite. That is to say, in addition to Aiyanār temple complexes, independent temples dedicated to Kaṟuppu, Maturaiviraṇ 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, Aiyanār 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 Kaṟuppu and Maturaiviraṇ functioning as, for instance, the attendants of goddesses are to be observed when they appear outside of an Aiyanār temple complex (Whitehead 1921: 25, 33, 108), it is in principle inconceivable for Aiyanār to appear as the attendant god of some other deity40). In other words, for Aiyanār the accompanying presence of certain other gods (typified by Kaṟuppu and Maturaiviraṇ) is a sine qua non or precondition of his very existence. Although Aiyanār 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'etre to the gods under his command. Dumont argues that the meat-eating gods depend for their existence upon higher ranking gods and that Aiyapar holds the power of life and death, as it were, over Kaṟuppu 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 Aiyanār 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 Aiyanār and Kaṟuppu exist only in relation to one another (Dumont 1953: 267). An important aspect of Aiyanār 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"—Aiyaṇar as an Inconspicuous Deity

As has been noted in the above, Aiyaṇar 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 Aiyaṇar, but rather the other gods enshrined together with him. When performing what is styled an Aiyaṇar temple festival, the villagers will behead some goats, ranging in number from three or four to several dozen, in sacrifice to gods other than Aiyaṇar (namely, the so-called ‘non-vegetarian gods’ such as Kaṟuppū) and make offerings of the meat after it has been prepared (Tu. Irāmacāmi 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 ‘Kaṟuppu temple’, it is not unusual to find that it is in fact an Aiyaṇar temple complex (cf. Tu. Irāmacāmi 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 Aiyaṇar 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 Aiyaṇar temple complexes one will also often notice huge erect figures. These are not, however, images of Aiyaṇar, but represent none other than Kaṟuppu, Muṇiyap and other attendant gods. This may be said to indicate that in the realm of actual ‘faith’ Aiyaṇar is not the foremost of the gods. This too clearly attests to the essential tenuousness of Aiyaṇar 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 Aiyaṇar and performed by non-Brahman priests (pučari), 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 (kurī), and the ritual procedure is also marked by formalism. As an object of intense private worship and devotion, Aiyaṇar 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 Aiyaṇar shares certain features with Kaṟuppu 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, Viṣṇu and other major bhakti gods (perunteyvaṅka).
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, bestaddling as he does the two separate value systems of Brahmans and non-Brahmans, and one might even say that this ambiguity and nebulousity 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.

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[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 Śrīnivas'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' (nāttuppurateyvankal or ciruteyvankal) not only in the narrow sense of ārteyvam (Skt. grāmadevata), but also in a broader sense embracing kulateyvam (Skt. kuledevatā) or kutiyacāmi, 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:...
33). As will be discussed later, this 'confusion' would in fact seem to be of considerable importance in considering the essence of Aiyaṇār.

4) If one wishes to ensure geographical exactitude, it must be pointed out that although the area to which Tirumāṇpur 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 Murukaṇ, and it is also interpreted as referring to Murukaṇ 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 'cāttu' ('trade caravan') appear in the Cāṇkam literature in the Akanāṭamu, 39.10, 119.8, 167.7, 245.6 and 291.15; Kuzuntokai, 390.3; and Perumpāṇāṟruppaṭai, 80. Outside of the Cāṇkam literature in the narrow sense, it is also found used in the same meaning in, for example, the Cilappatikāram, 11.190.

7) "Cāṭṭai mākai vaitṭai" (Tēvāram, 4486; cf. Clothey 1982: 38). Kaṇakaratiṭṭam (1986: 104, 106) considers that the existence of the deity Aiyaṇār 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 Purānic tale relating to the demoness Mahiṣī (or Mahiṣi-mukhi), who has the head of a buffalo-cow, has been transmitted (primarily by Brahmins); for a summary of this tale, see Arunachalam 1977: 36–40. Dumont mentions a number of local myths about Aiyaṇār (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 'Cāṭravākaṇṭam' (from Skt. Sāṭravāhana or Sāṭravāhanat), 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 Sāṭravāhana dynasty in the Deccan (ca. 3rd century B.C. – 3rd century A.D.), on which see Kaṇakaratiṭṭam 1986: 107–108.

12) According to Irācamaṇiṅkaḻār (1959: 320), the vāhana of the Buddhist Aiyaṇār 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' (kālai) (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 Aiyaṇār or images of Aiyaṇār riding a bull (Nandin) 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 Aiyaṇār's vāhana is an elephant or a horse (Kaṇakaratiṭṭam 1986: 107).

13) This 'cēntu' 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. Kriya'vig Ta'ukalat Tam'ij Akaratii, 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 Aiya'agar'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 'Aiya'agar as the 'fearsome one'.

16) Shulman (1980: 313, 421) also notes other shared features and looks upon Aiya'agar as an "allotrope" of Muruka'. The parallelism between Muruka' and Aiya'agar 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 Aiya'agar does appear as the retainer of another god (Tu. Ir@macami 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 Aiya'agar temples and that Aiya'agar is regarded as their leader (Whitehead 1921: 25, 89-91, 109), but he does not evince any further interest in this matter (see also n.44).

19) On the general characteristics of Maturaivirap, see Tu. Ir@macami 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-nayakar (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. Ca@mukacuntaram 1984). On Mu'liyap, see Tu. Ir@macami 1985: 40-42.

20) In addition to these, Cen@kama-la-an'tava and V@rapattiran (<Skt. Virabhada') also appeared in the area surveyed.

21) Nor can one consequently ignore connections between the Aiya'agar cult and ancestor worship (mu'ngor v@lipatu; cf. Tu. Ir@macami 1985: 32), hero worship and the burning of widows (satI). These may in some way be related to the fact that Maturaivirap is often enshrined together with Aiya'agar. For details on the tradition of hero stones (virakkal, natukal) in Tamil Nadu, see Kca'varaj 1978.

22) In the case of Tiruccirappalli District, for example, Pappattiyamma, Sapta-matrika (E'lu-ka'n@mar: 'Seven Maidens'; cf. Dumont 1953: 258; Raman and Shanmugam 1983: 40; Tu. Ir@macami 1985: 29; see also Fig. 15), etc. In some cases, Kama'tciyama'n and Celliyamma'n are also found. But Mariyamma'n, Kaliyamma'n (although Pattiirakali does appear), Re'ukamaًma, etc., are never found in Aiya'agar temple complexes. In the area surveyed on the present occasion, I was unable to discover any evidence of the coexistence of Aiya'agar and M@riyamma'n, such as has been pointed
out by scholars (Adiceam 1967: 96). In her discussion of Dumont 1953, Nishimura (1986: 7) describes Māriyammaq 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, Ammaq, etc.) are often called ‘natta-tēvai’. But the definition of this term is not necessarily fixed.

24) Aiyaṇār’s location near water is also alluded to in many folk songs (Caṅmukacuntaram 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 (avēsam kollutai) taking place near water are especially noticeable. The water’s edge (tuqai, nirtuqai) 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 Ainkurunūgu, 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 cenkal attaaqaiyum 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 Puthuṅkōṭtai 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 Paṅṭāram, mention may also be made of those from the Paṭaiyacci and Mūppaṇqā. 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 Kaṟuppāṇq 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 Pāppāṭiyammaq, for example, also appears in temple complexes as a ‘vegetarian deity’. But this goddess is not particularly well-known in Puthukkōṭtai 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 Vāḻuvar 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 (uyirppali, Skt. bālī) 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 Aiyar, 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 (irattapali). 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 Aiyānar with other gods such as Kaṟuppū and MaturaiVirāṅ. Judging from the general usage of the villagers, it is probably appropriate in this case to interpret ‘cuvāmi’ (< Skt. svāmin) and the cognate ‘cāmi’ as being used not with the connotations of Skt. Ts’vara (the Presider, the Almighty), but simply in the sense of ‘god’.

I was also able to ascertain the existence of Cappāni-kaṟuppū (‘Lame’ Kaṟuppū), Kailāsa-kaṟuppū (Kaṟuppū of ‘Mt. Kailāsa’), Kōṅkāṇi-kaṟuppū (Kaṟuppū of the ‘Leaf Umbrella’), Malaiyāli-kaṟuppū (Kaṟuppū of ‘Kerala’?), Vēcatāri-kaṟuppū (Kaṟuppū in ‘Disguise’), and Patțēṭṟai-kaṟuppū (Kaṟuṇṇu in ‘Eighteen-Stage’ Kaṟuppū). On the variant forms of Kaṟuppū, see also Tu. Irāmācāmi 1985: 28, 35, 39, etc.

An interesting introduction to the subject of spirit worship (āvivaZipOtO) centred on Muṟi(yaṉ) in rural Tamil Nadu is to be found in Nāṟappāraṇa 1987: 41–45. Literally speaking, the antonym of ‘tusta-te-vatai’ would be ‘atusta-te-vatai’, but as a rule ‘nalla-teyvam’ or ‘nalla-cāmi’ (‘good god’) is used instead (cf. n. 42). Although Aiyānar is usually regarded as a ‘good god’, there would appear to be some who look upon him as a ‘tusta-te-vatai’. Here too one may see the influence of the ambiguity of Aiyānar’s character discussed below (Tu. Irāmācāmi 1985: 31).

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 Aiyānar in a context similar to the above.

Acts of penance and oblations that are performed for the fulfillment of a particular wish are collectively known as ‘nērtikkatau’ (Kaṟakarattipiam 1986: 127–128). Adiceam (1967: 4, 53, 96) also follows this interpretation. ‘Karuppū’ is often spelt ‘karuppu’, but if one takes into account the etymology of the word, ‘karuppū’ is indisputably the correct spelling.

In this respect the Sapta-māṭrikā(cf. Fig. 15), for example, may be said to be affiliated
to Aiyānār, while goddesses such as Māriyammān belong to the same group of gods as Śiva, etc. It is true that Śiva and Viśṇu 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 (patīcu) 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 (mel-cāți) may be referred to as 'nalla-cāți' ('good caste'), the lower castes (kiṟ-cāți) are not called, for example, 'ketṭa-cāți' ('bad caste'), and the term 'ciṇṇa-cāți' is used instead. In addition, good gods as opposed to evil gods (tuṣṭa-tēvatai) are not called 'atuṣṭa-tēvatai', but are known as 'nalla-cāți'. 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 Aiyānār faces east, while Canmukacuntaram (1986: 221) reports on the basis of a case study of Tirunelvelī District that the Aiyānār temple is located on the northern boundary of a village and that the god Aiyānār himself faces north. Raman and Shanmugam (1983: 42) similarly state that in Lālkiṭi Taluk in Tirucirāppalli District Aiyappa faces east. In view of the fact that the direction in which Aiyānār 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-nācciyaamman Temple in Taṅcāvūr city. This temple constitutes a temple complex, with one of its shrines dedicated to Aiyānār. Ostensibly the principal deity of this temple is the goddess Cenkamala-nācciyaamman, but judging from my observations of the sequence of the kumbhābhiseka, etc., apart from the veneration accorded the principal deity, foremost respect (mutal-maryātai) is always shown to Aiyānār, 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, Tirucirāppalli District).

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The Forms and Functions of the Aiyanar Temple Complex

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Fig. 1  Aiyānār (Elākūrci village)

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

Fig. 3  An example of an Aiyānār temple in its most primitive form, with Aiyānār in the centre and Karūppu and Maturaiviraṇ in the foreground (Putukkōṭṭai village)
Fig. 4 Terra-cotta elephant (Aiyappa's vahana) (Kovilur village)

Fig. 5 Stucco horse (Kaguppu's vahana) (Kovilur village)

Fig. 6 Aiyappa represented by bricks; the two bricks standing in the background represent Aiyappa (compare with the size of the cigarette box) (Kila-ecañai village)
Fig. 7 A Paṇṭāram priest singing hymns in praise of Aiyaṇār (Pāṇāṅkūr village)

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

Fig. 9 Caṅkili-kaṟuppu represented by a chain (Ceṭṭikkulḷu village)
Fig. 10 Village tutelary gods (from the left, Karumuni, Ceñcaṭaiyãñ and Cemmalaiyappä) (Ceṭikkulì village)

Fig. 11 Image of Muñiyâñṭavar(= Muñiyañ) (Kõvilûr village)

Fig. 12 A goat being sacrificed in an Aiyâñár temple complex (Vatukappâlaiyam village)
Fig. 13  Offering to the ‘meat-eating god’ Karuppayacuvâmi (Vatukappâlayim village)

Fig. 14  Kaṟuppu represented by a trident (Skt. tris’tala) (Taṅcâvûr city)

Fig. 15  Sapta-mâtrikâ (or rather Ėju-Kaṇṇimâr) within an Aiyâṉâr temple complex (Kaṇṭarâttittam village)
Fig. 16 Devotees praying to Maturaiviraṇ, performing a sacrifice, and having their heads shaved in an Aiyāṅgār temple complex (Kōvilūr village)

Fig. 17 Image of Aiyāṅgār unearthed at the temple shown in Fig. 3 (Putukkōṭṭai village)

Fig. 18 Images of Aiyāṅgār and his two consorts buried in the ground (Ceṅkarāyaṅ-kaṭṭalai village)