

Aiyandar and Aiyappan in Tamil Nadu : Change and Continuity in South Indian Hinduism

The Aiyappan Cult : The Meeting Ground of Hindu Militancy, Egalitarianism and Universalism

Introduction

IN recent years the Aiyappan cult has attained enormous popularity. It has spread from Kerala and into Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka and is now moving even further north. Obviously this fairly conventional *bhakti* cult is seen by many as the answer to their religious and social needs at the present time. But what are these needs? The answer to that question is rather complex.

There are conservative Hindu groups, who try to project the cult as the answer to all the forces, which seem to threaten Hinduism in the modern world, such as conversions to Islam and Christianity, as well as the rise of militant nationalism in conjunction with religious revivalism such as can be seen in all the states surrounding India, like Sri Lanka, Burma, Malaysia, Pakistan and Iran. No doubt this general trend in the area also affects people in India, who feel they must respond to this threat and rally round their endangered spiritual heritage. This aspect is stressed in much of the writings on the Aiyappan cult, which is often referred to as the proper religion of the Kaliyuga, the dark age in which we live where men and values are debased. Hence the need for austerity and self-control, so that one may withstand the prevailing negative tendencies of the modern world. There are numerous myths about Aiyappan's prowess as a warrior and they are well known and popular. Since he is the eternal celibate, the link between sexual continence and spiritual and physical power is strongly brought out. This is also a prominent feature in the cult practice, since a period of sexual abstinence of at least forty days is mandatory for all who wish to go on pilgrimage to Aiyappan's temple at Sabari Malai.

However, there is also another tendency, which sustains the popularity of the cult, and that is the egalitarian element which is common to all *bhakti* cults. Most informants stressed this as the most attractive feature of the cult and said: "We are all equal in the eyes of Aiyappan". Obviously the pilgrimage and the preparation time preceding it are a welcome escape from the restrictions of traditional hierarchic norms.

A third aspect of the cult, closely linked to its egalitarian tendency, is its aspirations to become a universal religion. People of all castes, creeds and religions are welcomed without the slightest reservation. Anyone who wishes to participate can do so, provided he prepares himself in the prescribed manner.

The cult is truly open and willing to accept all. My participation in the pilgrimage on several occasions as participant observer was not seen by my fellow pilgrims as a conversion to Hinduism, but rather as evidence of the genuinely universal nature of this cult.

All these aspects of the cult cannot be treated within the limitations of this article, and some I have treated elsewhere. Here I present the results of a field study of the gradual spread of the Aiyappan cult in a region in Tamil Nadu, and how this new cult is integrated into the existing religious patterns in that area, and how newly formed Aiyappan groups in Tamil Nadu have allied themselves with an ancient royal lineage in Kerala, the traditional keepers of Aiyappan's jewels, and are forming a new religious network, transcending the former impregnable barrier between Kerala and the Tamil area.

In recent years there has been a spectacular growth in the number of pilgrims, who gather at Sabari Malai in Kerala in January every year in worship of Aiyappan, the peculiar South Indian god. The rapidly growing interest in Aiyappan in Tamil Nadu seems to be mainly responsible for this.

Aiyappan is a son of Shiva and Vishnu (in the female form of Mohini), who is known only in South India, mainly in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. There are now Aiyappan temples in Bombay and New Delhi and a few other places in North India, but these have all been built by Keralites residing in the North, and are mainly attended

by th m. (concerning Aiyappan's theogony see : Vaidynathan 1978, Kjaerholm 1982, and appendix). Apart from these exceptions, Aiyappan worship is not known further north than mid-Karnataka, where it was probably introduced from Kerala (Srinivas 1965). Although Aiyannar and Aiyappan are considered to be the same god, (Gopinatha Rao 1916), there have emerged two rather different modes of worship of Aiyappan in Kerala and Karnataka, and of Aiyannar in the Tamil area. In Tamil Nadu Aiyannar is worshipped as a village guardian god and his priests are mainly from non-Brahman castes, like the Velar (potters). In Kerala Aiyappan is worshipped in Shiva temples and has Brahman priests. Another striking difference is, that Aiyappan unlike Aiyannar has been made the object of *bhakti* devotion (*i.e.* a popular emotional form of worship, which aims at merging with the god in devotional love).

The Return of the Native

In this article I am not concerned with the historical development which led to the evolution of the Aiyannar Aiyappan forms of worship (see : Clothey 1978, Adiceam 1967). What I am concerned with here is the unique and interesting historical situation, that a god—Aiyappan—is today being introduced in the Tamil area with a mode of worship, which was unknown to most people in that area before 1940. At the same time the Tamils recognize Aiyappan as identical to Aiyannar or Sasta, the common village god of Tamil Nadu. Whether it is justified or not the Tamils accept all references to “Sasta” in classical Tamil literature, which dates back—possibly—to 300 A.D. as clear evidence of the worship of Aiyannar/Aiyappan in the Tamil area in such ancient times.

Aiyannar Worship in and around Madurai

Aiyannar is a village deity, and his temples are found—as a rule—only in villages. There are Aiyannar temples within the city limits of

Madurai, but this is because the city has grown so much recently. Most Aiyannar priests in this area are of the Velar (potter) caste, who also make the terracotta figures of the gods in the temples, as well as the numerous votive offerings, cows, horses and other animals, which are so typical of the rural scene in Tamil Nadu. To seek better business opportunities many village potters have now moved to Madurai. There are important Velar settlements at Arappalaiyam and Talla-kulam, but they retain their links to the surrounding villages.

The running of the temples is usually financed by temple lands, and the right to dispose of the income from these lands are inherited in individual potters families. Over the years these rights have been split between many heirs. For example, a group of eight male relatives may have inherited a priesthood and income from temple lands. This right is then shared in a rotation system, which means that each of them takes a turn to function as priest for one year. In spring there are many Aiyannar festivals, when villagers place votive offerings at their local Aiyannar temples. These offerings are usually terracotta figures, representing horse, cows, chickens, babies, scorpions, camels, elephants, and other things, given as thanks for boons bestowed on the worshipper. Such festivals take place at irregular intervals, every third year or so, depending on the wealth of the villagers. The terracotta figures are taken out in procession from the house of the potter, who is priest, and perhaps also made the figures, to the village temple. This is why so many processions can be seen going from the suburbs of Madurai to a great number of villages around Madurai.

The Role of the Kodangi

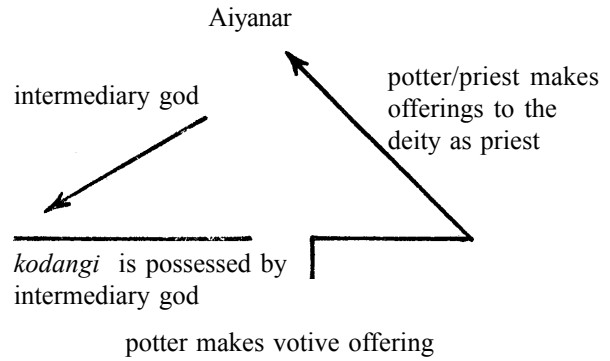
The reason why people decide to donate votive offerings is usually that they have a problem. Then they consult a *kodangi*, a man who is able to get possessed by the village gods. He beats an hour-glass shaped drum, sings, and when the god has descended on him he can be consulted as oracle about what to do to gain the help of the gods to solve the problem. The *kodangi* then suggests which offering to make, and to which

god, and it is then ordered from the potter and offered at the next festival. However, it is never Aiyandar himself, who is consulted thus, because people who are possessed by him are unable to speak; they stand stock-still while tears run from their eyes. Aiyandar is thus too powerful for possession, so for divine guidance lesser gods like Karuppaswami, a god always found in Aiyandar temples, are invited to descend on the possessed.

Aiyandar is the protector of the village against flood and evil spirits, and Karuppaswami is the next-in-command in Aiyandar's army in eternal combat against evil forces. The two gods are often seen as statues of gigantic figures on horseback in front of Aiyandar temples. There are also people who take vows to go to an Aiyandar temple once a year and become possessed by Karuppaswami. They are called *cami adis* ("god dancers"). They have to prepare for this for weeks, abstaining from meat, liquor and sex. On the appointed day they dress up in a peculiar dress and hat supposedly worn by Karuppaswami and start walking from their homes to the temple preceded by a band with *nagaswaram* (oboe) and drums. Sometimes they also carry the big chopping knife, which Karuppaswami holds in his right hand. As they approach the temple they get more and more possessed. People on the route come out and stop the *cami adi* and ask questions about their problems and how to solve them. I once saw a mother place her child in a *cami adi's* arms and ask him about the child's future education. When the *cami adi* reaches the temple and faces the god, who has possessed him, he is overpowered and passes out, and the possession is over.

Someone in the family may also get possessed by Karuppaswami or any other village deity and in oracle fashion tell the family which offering to make to solve a particular problem.

We may briefly sketch the Aiyandar worship as a closed religious-economic village system largely devoted to solving mental, health and economic problems of the villagers. This system involves no higher deities and no Brahman priests. Only through Aiyandar is it formally connected with sanskritic Hinduism, since he is the son of Shiva and Vishnu.



Aiyandar Temples and Village Hierarchy

Aiyandar temples usually contain 21 gods. The other gods may vary from temple to temple. These gods may be the family deities—*kula devyam*— of particular lineages, which gather from all parts of the country once a year in order to worship and become possessed by the deity. In this way the lineage retains a geographical link to a place of origin, which all family members may have left long ago. There is also a certain hierarchy among the gods (Dumont 1970), which is based on the local principles of caste hierarchy. Some gods are vegetarian and hence purer than others, who will accept blood-offerings. As one particular example I list the gods in the Aiyandar temple at Kochidai near Arappalayam on the outskirts of Madurai in the order in which they receive offerings from the temple priest:

1. Ganesh (is always worshipped first as a matter of convention, not because of higher rank in this case)
2. Aiyandar
3. Karttikeya (Murugan)
4. Adi pucari (a late priest)
5. Pecci Amman (female)
6. Muthu Karuppu (Karuppaswami)
7. Irulappan
8. Viranan
9. Bhadrakali
10. Rakkayi Amman (female)
11. Irulayi
12. Samayan
13. Cappani
14. Mandi Karuppu

15. Conai
16. Muniyandi
17. Naga
18. Nagappa
19. Navangraha (nine planets) and outside the temple wall:
20. Sangili Karuppu (Karuppuswami with the Chain)
21. Meiyandi

Aiyanar, Karuppaswami and the Complex of the Village Religion

In the minds of the Tamil villagers Aiyanar is the figure who links almost all the characteristics of Tamil village religion. He is the chief, so to speak, of almost all the village gods. This means that he is always implicitly present when one of the lesser gods is worshipped, even if he is not represented in the temple. This village religion also involves annual worship of the lineage deity during which lineage members are possessed by the deity.

Both the lineage deities and the lesser gods in the Aiyanar temples may be thought of as intermediaries in relation to Aiyanar, who is more powerful than they are. He is too powerful for people to be possessed by him, so Karuppaswami is often sought as intermediary. Karuppaswami is so closely linked to Aiyanar, that to mention one is to mention the other. This is why Karuppaswami plays such an important role as a linking figure—as we shall see later—in this religious complex. Karuppaswami is also important as a link between this village religious complex and the new version of Aiyanar worship, the Aiyappan pilgrimage cult, to which we shall now turn.

Aiyappan Worship in Madurai

Through systematic interviews with a great number of Aiyappan devotees from various groups in Madurai, I have found that the cult was introduced in this area from Kerala beginning in 1945. I have found a few isolated instances of pilgrims going from Tamil Nadu to

Sabari Malai as far back as the 1920s, but their activity seems to have left no trace in Tamil society. Prior to 1945 the cult seems to have been virtually unknown in the Tamil area. I reached this conclusion by asking the Aiyappan devotees who their gurus were, and when and how they came to know about Aiyappan. I then tried to find the gurus and ask them the same questions. Invariably I ended up with either a guru who had come to Madurai some time around or after 1945, or a Tamil guru who had gone to Kerala and became acquainted with the cult there around the same time.

There are now—to my knowledge—four Aiyappan temples in Madurai, and three of them have had Aiyappan statues installed between 1981-83. In January 1983, I witnessed the inauguration of an Aiyappan temple and the installation of a statue of Aiyappan in West Masi Street in the centre of Madurai. The ceremony started on 19th and lasted three days. I heard a long speech there by Kandaswami Pulavar, the well-known Tamil scholar. He explained that Aiyappan was not a foreign god, but really of Tamil origin, although the cult was being introduced from Kerala. As evidence of this he quoted the ancient Tamil epic, *Silappadikaram*. This information surprised the audience, but it is true, that there is mention of a god called Patanda Sasta in this epic, and Sasta is another name for Aiyanar/Aiyappan. It seems that the Tamils accept all references in ancient literature to “Sasta” as synonymous with Aiyanar/Aiyappan, although the texts give absolutely no information about these “Sastas” apart from the name. Later Kandaswami Pulavar told me about the important role which P.T. Rajan played in Madurai in spreading knowledge about Aiyappan. P.T. Rajan was an industrialist who was active in collection of money for a new Aiyappan statue for the temple at Sabari Malai. An Aiyappan Sangam (society) started in 1955 is responsible for the collection for the new temple in West Masi Street in Madurai. The sangam has about 200 members. From a brochure, printed by the sangam in order to raise funds, I quote the following information about its history:

“From the early fifties quite a number of Aiyappan devotees would meet in West Masi Street, Madurai, in the months of Karthigai and Margali every year for singing bhajan in praise of Lord Aiyappan and offer worship to Him. That fraternity grew wider from year to year and finally merged into Sri Sabari Malai Ayyappa Bakhtargal Sangam, and in course of time found an ideal president in the late Tamizhvel Sri P.T. Rajan.

It was under the guiding and inspiring leadership of Tamizvel P.T. Rajan that the Ayyappa Bakhtargal Sangam embarked upon the plan of erecting a pucca temple for Lord Ayyappa in Madurai city. It was on the first of March 1968 that the Sangam was registered ...”

The text then mentions that:

“Sri Ayyappa according to history was brought up by the then Panjian king who was reigning over the Pandala kingdom having his headquarters at Pandalam formerly of Tamil Nad but now forming part of Kerala.”

In this way several things are brought to the attention of the Tamil public, which is requested to donate money for this new temple : that Aiyappan’s place of origin was old Tamil territory, that the king who adopted Aiyappan was of Pandyan decent related to the old Pandyan rulers of ancient Madurai. Thus not only literary sources, but also “history”, are used to demonstrate the links between Tamil culture and Aiyappan. All this shows, that the Tamil audience needs to be told about it.

Since many people mentioned P.T. Rajan’s great importance, I went to see his son, Kamla Tyagarajan, who now manages the family’s factory. One often hears P.T. Rajan described as a man who worked particularly to spread the worship of Aiyappan in Tamil Nadu, but during the talk I had with his son, I got a somewhat different picture of P.T. Rajan’s involvement. He was an extremely pious man who supported many other religious causes. What prompted him to collect money for the new Aiyappan statue at Sabari Malai, was the fire accident there in 1949,

in which both temple and idol were destroyed. Since it was rumoured that people from Tamil Nadu were behind the fire, P.T. Rajan felt that the Tamils should donate money to the temple. He was a prominent member of the group of people, who collected money all over Tamil Nadu for the Sabari temple. Thus, in his view, could the Tamils atone for the sin, which might have been committed by some of them. Fred Clothey (1982 : 47) also mentions P.T. Rajan’s importance in spreading the Aiyappan cult. But although many of my informants have told me that they first came to know about the cult through his campaign, I think that the evaluation of P.T. Rajan’s role presents a classical problem in history writing and evaluation of sources. The fact is, that most of my informants learned about Aiyappan through a variety of other sources, and that it was the example of close friends, and the boons they got by going to Sabari Malai, which actually prompted them to do likewise. The oldest members of the Sathagoparamanuja group, with which I went to Sabari Malai in January 1984, told me, that it was the example of Karuppa Pillai, a close friend of the guru, that really convinced them of Aiyappan’s power. Karuppa Pillai had been unable to get children for a long time, and as a last attempt wanted to try to implore Aiyappan to grant him issue. Shortly after his return from Sabari, his wife conceived, and bore him a son, and this really made an impression on many people, and convinced them that they should worship Aiyappan. But as time goes by, and all these individual stories are forgotten, the importance of the personal contact is perhaps forgotten, and in retrospect the importance of famous men tend to grow larger than it actually was.

Simultaneous with the opening of the West Masi Street temple, another Aiyappan temple was inaugurated at Tallaku-lam near the tank of the Vishnu temple. This temple has been built by a sangam centering around a guru from Kerala, now settled in Madurai. A third temple is found near the Collector’s Office Bus Stand, but it is not functioning due to personal strife in the sangam.

A fourth temple is located at Arappalaiyam near the bypass road south of Madurai. R. Sadasivasami, who was born in Kerala in 1927 and came to Madurai in 1936, started building this temple in 1960. He spent most of his own money and collected money from others. It got its final shape in 1973. In 1984 March, a stone statue of Aiyappan was installed at a grand ceremony lasting three days and three nights. When Sadasivasami came to Madurai, nobody there knew about Aiyappan. He went himself to Sabari Malai in 1942 along with 25 natives of Madurai. Their guru was from Kerala. Since 1945 he has functioned as guru and has every year taken about 60 people to Sabari Malai. However, the most important part of Aiyappan worship is the pilgrimage to Sabari Malai and the preparations for it. For that reason, the following account of my observations of a pilgrimage group in 1983-84 is important to explain what the cult means in the present-day religious life of the Tamils.

Report from a Pilgrimage: Preparation Time

On December 24th 1983 I went to an Aiyappan puja in a private house in Madurai. A number of Aiyappan devotees had been invited to come and worship Aiyappan by a man, who was just about to leave on a pilgrimage to Sabari Malai. The one room in the house was transformed temporarily into an Aiyappan temple, and only men were allowed to enter it. As I have seen in many other houses, there were picture of Aiyappan and other Hindu gods on the walls, and a special Aiyappan altar with the indispensable model of the 18 steps leading up to the temple at Sabari Malai. This temporary transformation may last 40-50 days and starts, when the pilgrims wear a necklace made of rudraksha beads given to him by his guru.

After receiving the necklace the pilgrim lives a restricted life. He stops shaving, walks bare-foot, and abstains from sex, meat and alcohol. He wears the special dress of the Aiyappan pilgrim' a coarse cotton *vesti* (South Indian men's dress), which is either blue, green, saffron or black.

Since the men gathered in that small house were all men, who had started preparing themselves for the pilgrimage about a month earlier, they all looked very much alike with their rudraksha necklaces (some wore several of them), coloured *vestis* and the grey smears of holy ash and red *kum-kum* on their foreheads. The devotees addressed each other as "swami", meaning Aiyappan, and they were in fact in the process of merging their identity with the god. Hence it was logical that they greeted each other by kneeling down and touching each others feet with their hands.

I had started growing a beard, but had not yet received my rudraksha necklace. My guru was present at the gathering, and after we had been served a meal on the roof terrace, I went with him to a small Murugan temple nearby. My guru was the son of the illustrious Aiyappan guru, Sathagoparamanuja, whose life-size portrait hung to the right in this Murugan temple. The guru and I made offerings of bananas, betel leaves and incense sticks. He garlanded me with a huge flower garland, which I took off immediately, as one is supposed to do. He then placed the rudraksha necklace round my neck. I had bought it earlier the same day in the Meenakshi temple in the centre of Madurai. Attached to it was a bronze medallion showing Aiyappan in yogic meditation posture. I was to wear this necklace day and night until the guru removed it after our return from Sabari. I knelt down to worship his feet, and the guru did the same to me. Then he applied holy ash and red *kum-kum* to my forehead. I was now a member of the Sathagoparamanuja group, which was to leave for Sabari Malai on January 10th in time for the very important annual festival, Makaravilakku. I had been told, that "our group is green", so I wore a green vesti. During the two months before the pilgrimage, the pilgrims attend a great number of bhajans-religious song gatherings. I attended a number of bhajans arranged in the houses of members the Sathagoparamanuja group. The guru was invariably invited, but he was in such demand, that he could not always attend. The group had around 300 members, and no house could

accommodate them all at the same time. It was inevitable, that our group members would occasionally arrange bhajans on the same dates. When the Aiyappa swamis arrived at the bhajan dressed in their green or blue *vestis*, they would line up outside the house. The women of the house would then come out with water and wash their feet, apply sandal paste and *kum-kum* to them, and kneel down and touch their feet in worship. Then the swamis would enter the house and gather around the Aiyappan altar with the inevitable 18 steps in front, always profusely decorated with flowers. On some occasions the stress would be on ritual, and the Aiyappan service might last an hour or more depending on how many of Aiyappan's *saranams* (Aiyappan's holy epithets) were recited. In the ritual part of the bhajan was included worship of particular interest to the host and his family, and this might be performed by members of the family. Thus the Aiyappan devotion was woven into the religious life of the individual hosts and their families, and into the larger pattern of South Indian—and indeed pan-Indian—*bhakti* religion. Aiyappan devotion is rather novel in Tamil Nadu, but the worship of this god seems to be easily absorbed into the traditional patterns of religious life as yet another facet of Hinduism.

After the rituals would follow the true bhajan with songs, and sometimes dances. The songs would cover the whole range of well-known Hindu deities, and there were always songs on Murugan (Tamil name for Karttikeya), the god of war, so popular in Tamil Nadu, as well as Ganesh, Rama and Mariamman. The element of *bhakti* was very much stressed in these gatherings. Sometimes the devotees would sit in pairs with one swami resting his head on the other's lap while singing about the divine love between Radha and Krishna. Sometimes more energetic dances would be performed, for instance accompanying songs on Hanuman, the divine monkey warrior, with vigorous leaps, but more often the dance was a simple, slow circular dance with the swamis holding each other's hands. It was not easy to get the necessary room for dancing, because the house was invariably

crowded with on-lookers, men who were not going on pilgrimage, and women who took great interest in the activities of the Aiyappa swamis, although they could not participate themselves. (On the reasons for this see Kjaerholm 1982). All through the evening swamis would arrive, greet the guru and the other swamis by kneeling down and touching their feet, and the greeting would be returned. Some swamis had been garlanded with huge flower garlands. To show proper humility one is supposed to very quickly present it to someone else. I received garlands quite often, and it was not easy to pass them on, because the other swamis protested in show of modesty.

After the bhajan a light meal would be served, and the host would be very particular that all the swamis ate his food and the fruit presented to Aiyappan. To feed swamis is an act which gives the host merit, like the feeding of Brahmans. Once I tried to leave the bhajan discretely, but was told that I must ask the guru's permission to leave and greet him properly by kneeling and touching his feet. Apart from this recognition of the guru's superiority the stress in an Aiyappan bhajan group is on equality of all members, including the guru. The basic idea is to approach one's identity to the divine object of devotion, so that "we are all equal in the eyes of Aiyappan," as one swami put it.

I never received any formal teaching from the guru, since the cult's rituals and mythology are public knowledge. The Aiyappan guru is supposed to be just a good example for the devotees and to lead the way on the hazardous journey through the jungles and mountains around Sabari Malai. The pilgrims can learn about Aiyappan's mythology and rituals from a very large number of books and pamphlets on these matters, which are published or reprinted during the pilgrimage season. Also a large number of songs are available in books and cassettes. In fact, the pilgrim can learn everything necessary about the cult from the songs at bhajans and by watching the rituals on those occasions. Temple worship of Aiyappan is not necessary and not yet very common in Tamil Nadu, where there are not yet many Aiyappan temples.

The participants at the bhajan were not only members of our group but came also from other groups. Membership of a group is not a permanent or binding thing. One may join other groups at one's convenience. Since the groups leave at different times, one may not be able to go with one's usual group, but can then easily shift to another group.

During the preparation time there are also special *kanni pujas* (literally : virgin puja). These are special Aiyappan services at which the swamis, who are going for the first time, are worshipped. I was once invited to attend such a *puja* performed by another group. The *kanni swamis* were placed, one after the other, on a low stool and people, mostly women, lined up to worship the *kanni*. They bent down and touched the swami's feet, which had been washed and anointed with sandal paste and red *kum-kum*. When they got up and faced him with their palm joined in greeting, he would apply sacred ash and *kum-kum* on their foreheads, thus giving them the *kanni's* blessing, which is considered especially powerful. Since I was also a *kanni swami*, I was asked to receive homage like the others.

At no time during this period of preparation did I meet any obstacle in my quest for knowledge about the Aiyappan cult, and nobody ever questioned my right to be present at any gathering. On the contrary, I was greeted warmly by most and it was never thought strange, that a *vellaikaran* ("white man") should join them in worship of Aiyappan. This is because the cult stands out from all others as a "universal" brand of Hinduism. To worship Aiyappan is a seasonal thing which during a short period can unite all men, be they Hindus of different castes, or even Muslims or Christians, in universal brotherhood. So the Hindu Aiyappa swamis did not consider me as a Christian convert to Hinduism (which I never pretended to be), but rather a Christian who temporarily wished to share this universal brotherhood with them.

It was explained quite often to me, that the Aiyappan cult is the religion of the Kaliyuga, this most difficult and conflict-ridden and debased period, in which we are now considered to live. It was to help man overcome conflict and

base lust, that Aiyappan came into being, and hence the stress on brotherhood, love and friendship between men of different castes and religions, as well as the stress on asceticism in the cult practice.

I often heard the claim, that Muslims and Christians participate in great numbers in the Aiyappan pilgrimage, but although I was constantly on the look out for them, I never came across any Muslim or Christian Aiyappa swamis. Those I have met and interviewed were all Hindus from Tamil Nadu or Kerala.

The Pilgrimage

On January 10th all the members of the Sathagoparamanuja group gathered in the evening in front of the guru's house in the Raliway Colony in Madurai. A large leaf-thatched shelter had been erected in front of the house—large enough to accommodate the 300 pilgrims with family and friends. Now the *irumudi* ceremony was to take place, i.e. the pilgrim's cloth bag with its two compartments was to be packed. The front part contains a coconut filled with ghee and other offerings to Aiyappan, the rear part contains the pilgrim's own food. (Concerning the *irumudi* see Vaidyanathan 1978 and Kjaerholm 1982). Under the shelter were too Aiyappan altars with the 18 steps in front decorated with flowers and light bulbs. The filling of the *irumudi* is an important ritual done by the guru, and each swami comes forward and sits in front of the guru. They both pour ghee in the coconut, and when it is filled it is sealed and placed in the front part of the *irumudi*. Rice is taken handful by handful and poured into the rear part of the *irumudi*, and family members come forward to pour in rice. Although not all were aware of it, the significance of this is that of the Hindu death rite, where the relatives offer rice to the deceased. Should the pilgrim die on the way, he would then not miss this essential last rite. When the *irumudi* was packed and tied securely by the guru, the pilgrims placed blankets on their heads and knelt in front of the guru, who then placed the bags on their heads. The pilgrims then

got up, were turned around thrice and respectfully backed away from the guru, so as not to show him his back. The pilgrims were now—so to speak—under the guru’s command and must stay with him, until they returned from pilgrimage. They could not remove the *irumudi* from (their heads without the guru’s permission. This ceremony lasted well into the night, and once we had received the *irumudi* we were allowed to place it in front of Aiyappan’s altar and lie down to get some rest. Once the pilgrim has received the *irumudi*, he is a member of the sacred brotherhood and can under no circumstances go back to his home, until he has finished his pilgrimage.

In the morning on the 11th the *irumudis* were distributed (they were numbered) to their owners by the guru, and we proceeded one by one to the four buses to find the seat allotted to us, carrying the *irumudi* and blankets on our heads and other necessities for the journey in shoulder bags. On the way the pilgrims were greeted by relatives, many of whom knelt down and touched the pilgrim’s feet and received his blessing. The pilgrims smashed coconuts on the ground and children fought eagerly to get the pieces. This ritual signifies the pilgrims’ departure and separation from his former social identity.

Our group consisted mostly of elderly and middle-aged men, but there were some small girls and older women as well. Women who are able to bear children are not allowed to participate in this pilgrimage. (On the reasons for this see Vaidya-nathan 1978 and Kjaerholm 1982). I was given a seat in the guru’s bus, in which the bhajan group was also travelling, so we had good music and singing on the way. The buses first went round the Meenakshi in the centre of Madurai and then proceeded south towards Sabari Malai. On the way we halted south of Madurai and had breakfast. This was prepared earlier in Madurai by our eight cooks and brought out to the spot in advance. The group had hired cooks, because cooking is of special importance—as we shall see below—to this particular group.

We proceeded south in our four buses with bhajan singing and the chorus call “*swamiye*

saranam Aiyappa” which is repeated frequently all through the journey in order to urge the pilgrims on. We passed by Tenkasi, crossed the Kerala border and started climbing the Western Ghats. At 1 PM we reached one of the five important Aiyappan temples, the one at Ariyankavu. Here the group rested, worshipped Aiyappan, had lunch, bathed in the river, and the cooks and their volunteer helpers prepared lunch packs for the next day, when we were to start trekking, and cooking therefore would be difficult. Late in the afternoon we drove on to Erimeli, a village in the Western Ghats, which has another important Aiyappan temple, and with a brief stop for dinner on the way we reached Erimeli at 1 A.M. on the 12th. Since Erimeli is the starting point for the 48 miles trek to Sabari Malai, the crowd there was extremely dense. Our group, although fairly large, seemed to drown in this sea of people as we pushed our way to the place allotted to us in advance in front of the local school, where we lay down to sleep on the ground. We were awakened before dawn and prepared ourselves for an important ritual, which takes place at Erimeli, the Ottu Tullal dance. We adorned our heads with coloured balloons, (formerly feathers were used), decorated ourselves with powder in different colours and began a lively dance while singing “*swami tindakatom-tom*”. This meaningless phrase was explained to me as being a corrupted Malayalam phrase meaning “the swami (Aiyappan) is in your heart”. We hired a local band consisting of nagaswaram (oboe) and drums, and with the musicians in front we joined the countless other dancing groups. It was quite a sight. I cannot even guess how many pilgrims were there, may be more than half a million, all gaily decorated with balloons and coloured powder, dancing and singing, while the bands competed with each other.

The dance started at the Ganesh temple, where make-up and balloons were put on, went around “Vavar’s Temple” (Vavar is a Muslim warrior associated with Aiyappan; see Vaidyanathan 1978), and ended at the Aiyappan temple, where everybody had a bath in the river and washed the colours off. Some in the group carried the guru

on their shoulders while dancing. This is a tradition started eight years earlier in the time of the present guru's father. I saw no other group carrying their guru in this fashion. The crowd was so thick, and the dancing so vigorous and the lanes so narrow in places, that people could have been easily trampled to death—as so frequently happens at film premiers in India—if people had not shown admirable regard for each other in spite of their abandon.

The whole idea of the Ottu Tullal was puzzling to me. and when I asked members of my group about it, I was told that the idea was, that we should humiliate by behaving like primitive forest people. Thus singing and dancing with child-like abandon we would get rid of our pride, forget our social position, and be able to merge more completely with the “Swami” (Aiyappan). The dance is in memory of Aiyappan's visit to the jungle people during his sojourn in the jungle.

After this dance, on the morning of January 12th, our group split in two, the elderly men and women went on by bus to the river Pampa to take the short 8 miles route to Sabari, but most of us started on the arduous 48 miles trek through jungles and mountains. At the beginning of this route is a Muslim “shrine” for Vavar, where a fakir collects offerings of money. After walking some hours we rested at Kalaikatti Ashram, the place from where Shiva watched the fight between Aiyappan and the buffalo demoness Mahisi. We went onto the Alutha river, where huge numbers of pilgrims were preparing lunch. Our cooks had gone there ahead of us and made the food. However, it was not so easy to find the exact spot. Fortunately, we could easily recognize members of our group among the five million other pilgrims, because we all wore yellow cloth tags with the name Sathagoparamanuja group printed on it. Due to our number and the enormous mass of people moving along the jungle path, we could not possibly keep together while on the move.

On the banks of the Alutha river the battle between Mahishi and Aiyappan took place. After killing her, Aiyappan was informed by Brahma, that the demon's dead body would grow until it darkened the sun and the moon, unless it was

buried under a heap of stones. This may be the origin of the custom of taking a pebble from the river bed while crossing the Alutha river and placing it on large heap of stones later on.

However, it seemed that not many pilgrims were aware of this mythological detail. The motive, I encountered most often, was simply, that they wanted to have a wish fulfilled, and thought this was a sure way of achieving it.

After a bath in the river we crossed the Alutha river, some took up stones from the river bed, and we continued through still rougher country to a night camp called Mukkuli. It was a huge temporary camp, accommodating tens of thousands, with huts covered with flimsy palm leaf thatch, that did not protect us from the light rain throughout the night.

Along the route the Aiyappa Seva Sangham had laid electric cables and in the big camps they had offices, which mainly served as meeting places for lost pilgrims and their groups. All through the night I heard the Aiyappa Seva Sangham's loudspeakers blasting Aiyappan songs and religious discourses, but mainly announcing the name of lost Aiyappan pilgrims and where they hailed from, informing their groups where they could be picked up. This was interesting to listen to, because I could deduce—if we got a representative sample of the pilgrims—that virtually all of the pilgrims were from Tamil Nadu, and that all districts of Tamil Nadu were represented.

Receiving Aiyappan's Jewels

On the 13th morning we proceeded from Mukkuli before dawn to reach another very large camp, Periya Yanai, at the Pampa river and at the foot of Sabari Malai. Outside the pilgrimage season this is a watering place for elephants. Occasionally there are problems with elephants. Two pilgrims were killed by elephants just after our departure. Most of our group camped in the open on a ground reserved for us. Some of us rented room in thatched huts. This camp was very densely populated and there may have been anything between a half and one million people. Day and night the pilgrims came pouring in and

out of the camp. Many individual styles of religious worship could be seen here. Some groups of pilgrims performed a peculiar ritual after they had eaten a meal on palm leaves. The leaves were then placed in a row with the leftover food on them, and one or several in the group would lie down and roll over the leaves, so they were smeared with rice and various vegetable dishes all over. Then the group would proceed to the river while singing and dancing, carrying the dirty leaves, to take a bath in the Pampa river. Such groups could be seen everywhere day and night. To my knowledge no explanation for this ritual is found in Aiyappan's mythology, and some groups frown on it. I was told by members of my group that, "we don't do that", and that they found it irrelevant and in bad taste. The reason I got, when I asked, was that through this ritual "we wash away our sins". To touch other people's food, especially left-over food, is normally highly polluting, so this was certainly a "reversal rite". However, the idea might be that since as we are all Aiyappans on this pilgrimage, none can pollute the other. Later I was told, that this peculiar ritual is fairly common in Tamil Nadu, and that people do it in order to cure stomach ailments

Another ritual performed on this spot is called "Pampa Vilakku" ("Pampa Lamp"). On structures made of sticks, candles are placed and lighted. Balloons are tied to the base of the structure, and the groups go singing and dancing to the river and place the floats on the water. The floats "carry our sins away", was the justification for this ritual, which also lacks any basis in the mythology, and it was not done by our group either. These two rituals are the only exceptions, I observed, to the general rule, that the whole pilgrimage is a detailed enactment of the very eventful Aiyappan mythology. This is in fact such a large subject, that I have only been able to give a few examples in this account.

In the evening our group performed *Ali puja*. (*Alis* are the huge demonic warriors, in this case the forest spirits, in the retinue of the gods). A big fire was built in the middle of the camp and offerings like camphor, coconut, ghee, apples and

money were thrown into the fire. The pilgrims danced round the fire singing bhakti songs. After this, *puja* was performed for the *irumudis*, which were placed in a big heap while we camped. In the night, while everybody else in the group slept, 20 members of the Sathagoparamanuja group opened all the *irumudis*, took out the rice in them and closed them again. This rice was to be used for the great feast for the raja of Pandalam, when we were to serve lunch for him and his party the following day.

On the 14th, the first day in the Tamil month Tai, we had *Pongal* (rice boiled with brown sugar) for breakfast. This was the Tamil New Year, called *Pongal*. Because of this festival we took bath in the river, worshipped the guru and offered coins to him, which he gave back. The coins were kept in a special cloth bag with sacred ash as a sign of the spiritual bond between the guru and his disciple.

Now the Sathagoparamanuja group started hectic preparations to receive the Pandala raja and his party and serve them lunch. It is a special privilege of the group to do this. The custom was started in 1958, when Sathagoparamanuja insisted on the honour of serving a meal to the Pandala raja. No one and nothing may stop the raja and his party, when they carry Aiyappan's jewels to Sabari, so naturally they declined the offer. However, one of the men carrying the boxes was possessed and said that they must accept the invitation from Sathagoparamanuja. For five years after this, the raja was received by the Sathagoparamanuja group. The boxes were placed on a shelter, where a member of the group had the privilege of opening the boxes and worship the jewels. In the boxes were, according to this man, two elephants, two swords, and a large face mask made of gold. But after five years the police prohibited the opening of the boxes for security reasons.

After the camp was cleared, a shelter was built, and the entrance was roped in to keep the crowd away. The cooks and numerous helpers had been working since early morning to prepare a first class South Indian rice meal. Then the guru and four others went to invite the Pandala raja, who

was resting in a camp two miles away. The guru invited the raja and his retinue, as well as five members of the Sathagoparamanuja group, who were travelling with the raja. They had left Madurai on the 10th and gone to Pandalam, where they received the *irumudi* from the raja. To have the coconut filled with ghee by him is very auspicious, since the raja is a relative of Aiyappan. On the 12th day the raja's party and the five guests from our group started from Pandalam. They have two days to cover the long and arduous stretch to Sabari Malai, so they walk day and night. Two white-faced kites will precede the Pandala group all the way from Pandalam to Sabari, and we were waiting in the Periya Yanai camp for the kites to announce the imminent arrival of the raja. When we saw the two kites glide high in the air the entire crowd called out "Swamiye saranam Aiyappa", and worshipped the kites. There were also other signs that the raja was approaching. The police came with communication equipment to guard the three jewel boxes and their precious contents. The kingdom of Pandalam was abolished long ago, but still the descendants of the royal lineage claim the right to keep the Jewels in their ancestral palace in Pandalam. Sabari is located in the former Pandalam territory, so the royal family are so to speak the hosts for all the pilgrims entering the area. The royal Pandalam family must be present at the temple on this occasion still.

The members of the Sathagoparamanuja group received the raja with bhajan singing, as he and his party came rushing into our camp. The boxes containing the jewels were placed on the shelter and worshipped, and the raja and his relatives were welcomed by the guru. Under the shelter a very fine meal was served for them on palm leaves. The royal party ate the meal behind a curtain, so no one could see them eat. When they had finished the meal, members of our group went to kneel in front of the raja and receive his blessing. An enormous crowd had by now gathered, and our group had quite a job controlling them. They surged forward to see the boxes and receive the raja's blessing. After a brief rest the raja's party continued to Sabari and we

all had lunch, and I must say that this meal—although prepared in the wilderness—was fit for a king. After the raja's departure our group packed quickly and started climbing Sabari Malai. We were to reach a place half way up in time to see the Makara Vilakku, the holy light, which appears on the hill tops above Sabari. We saw the light around 7 P.M.; it was rather tiny and shone very briefly but aroused huge enthusiasm among the hundreds of thousands of pilgrims around us. Our choice of this particular spot to watch the light was dictated by necessity. Along the entire width of the 6-8 yards wide path a flood of pilgrims was pouring down all evening, so it was impossible to go up. At 2 A.M. on the 15th it was possible for us to climb up to Sabari Malai, where we were let in groups of about 200. Then we rushed forward to climb the 18 steps while breaking a coconut. This was the culmination of the pilgrimage. At the temple a dense crowd was jostling to reach the temple door and get a glimpse of the deity. The Kerala police were out in strength and controlled the crowd efficiently. Those swamis who tried to ascend the stairs which were meant for descending were pulled down without the slightest regard for their sanctity.

After visiting the temple we went to rest in the Nambiar lodge, one of the permanent buildings in the otherwise uninhabited area, put at our disposal by Nambiar, the Tamil film actor and Aiyappan devotee. Later our group carried sandal paste in huge quantities as offerings to Aiyappan. In the evening a *puspanjali* – an offering of flowers – worth more than rupees 3000 was carried by our group to the temple. Our group decorated the 18 steps with lamps. The latter ceremony is a prerogative of the Sathagoparamanuja group and together with the lunch for the raja of Pandalam testifies to the special merit earned by the late Sathagoparamanuja. Flowers and sandal paste offerings are also made by many other groups, but the number of pilgrims at Sabari Malai is now so great it was estimated that year to be around 5 million people over three days—that they cannot all be allowed to bring their offerings to the sanctum sanctorum.

The ghee in the coconuts was poured out. Some was given to the temple and a small quantity was carried back by pilgrim in bottles. Many pilgrims regard this ghee as miracle-working medicine for all sorts of ailments, because it has been poured over Aiyappan's statue. In the early morning on the 1-th we climbed down the 18th steps while breaking a coconut, thus taking leave of Aiyappan. Below the steps in a huge fire the coconuts which had contained the ghee were burning. This was explained to me as a symbolic funeral pyre. The ghee is the essence of life, the ever-living soul; the coconut is the body, which serves no purpose after the soul has passed on. After a quick walk 8 miles downhill we came to the Pampa river, took a bath, boarded our buses and reached Madurai at 2 P.M. on the 18th. The guru then removed the necklace, received a symbolic offering of money from each, and the pilgrims dispersed in the night. The journey had cost each of us about rupees 300, bus travel, meals, and *irumudi* included. On top of that some swamis had spent large sums on special puja decorations and offerings on the way. Three hundred rupees is close to the average monthly income of a clerk or labourer in Tamil Nadu, and is a substantial sum of money for most people.

Conclusion

After two years of fieldwork in the Madurai area I can draw some conclusions about the relation between Aiyandar and Aiyappan worship, and what the introduction of a new version of an old god means in the cultural and religious system of the Tamils.

The rapid spread of the Aiyappan cult has the effect of revitalizing Hinduism and certain of its traditions. This revitalisation comes about because the Aiyappan devotees realise that this new god is identical to the ubiquitous and familiar Tamil village god, Aiyandar. At many Aiyandar temples can be seen depictions of the Mohini myth. Aiyappan/Aiyandar was the son of Shiva and Vishnu in his female form, Mohini. However, the two styles of worship and slightly different identities of Aiyappan/Aiyandar are still

kept separate. This is because the Aiyandar worship is in the hands of the Velar priests and closely connected with their artistic traditions, and depends on hereditary rights. I found only one example, where Aiyandar and Aiyappan had been merged into one identity. This was an old Aiyandar temple at Panaiyur about 10 miles South East of Madurai. This temple had been renamed "Sri Sabari Aiyandar/Aiyappan temple", which was written above the entrance to the sanctum sanctorum. Significantly the hereditary priest of this temple was not a Velar but a Pillaimar.

When the identity between the two gods is realised, the Aiyappan devotees tend to become more interested in worshipping Aiyandar and the god so closely associated with him, Karuppaswami. Evidence of this is the fact that there is a Karuppaswami temple at Sabari Malai to the right of the Aiyappan temple, and the god's name is written in Tamil letters, because this god obviously is the main concern of the Tamil Aiyappa swamis, not those from Kerala. One member of the Sathagoparamanuja group had "18-Steps-Karuppu" as his *kula devyam* and was frequently possessed by him. It so happens that there are 18 steps leading up to some Karuppaswami temples—hence the name 18-Steps—Karuppu. This is taken as evidence of a link between Aiyappan and Karuppaswami. This man took Karuppaswami's symbol, the chopping knife—with him to Sabari and placed it on the 18 steps leading up to Aiyappan's temple. Then he took the knife back and placed it on his model of Aiyappan's 18 steps in his house when worshipping Aiyappan there. To this man Karuppaswami's chopping knife and 18 steps is tangible evidence of the link between his old village religion and the new *bhakti* cult. A closer look at the character of the Aiyappan worship shows a very conventional attitude, which is derived from the Aiyandar village cult. Having interviewed a large number of devotees of Aiyappan and Aiyandar my conclusion is, that the goal, which is highest in the Aiyappan worship—according to the popular Aiyappan pilgrimage literature—namely merging with the god, is secondary. The most important motive for going on pilgrimage is the same, which makes people

present votive offerings to Aiyannar : a certain material goal is desired. Most commonly the Aiyappa swamis desire offspring, success in business, farming or education, or relief of illness. Although the Aiyappan cult introduces a new style of worship, the motive for worship has not changed significantly among the Tamils. Another aspect of the revitalising effect of the Aiyappan cult is the tendency, I observed in my sample of swamis, who had forgotten or ceased to worship their *kula devyam*, and who took a renewed interest in the family deity, renovated the family deity temple, and gathered all the relatives at the annual *kula devyam* festival. One swami told me how someone had said at an *irumudi* ceremony; he attended, “there is someone here who does not worship his *kula devyam*”. This had struck his bad conscience, because his family had not worshipped its *kula devyam* for decades. So the family began to search for the *kula devyam* temple, they did not even know where it was any more, and contacted other family members, and now worship the *kula devyam* on a grand scale. The *kula devyam* and its worship is of great importance in Tamil Nadu, but may easily be overlooked, because the deity is never represented in people’s homes in any visible form, although numerous other god’s may be represented either with prints or small bronze statues. Nevertheless, the *kula devyam* is always thought of as present in the house, and whenever the family is afflicted with disease or financial problems, some coins are offered at the *kula devyam* temple. The *kula devyam* still looms large in the religious life of the family. Often family members—mainly the women—see the deity in their dreams and receive messages from it.

It is a plausible hypothesis that strong religious involvement in a cult like that of Aiyappan tends to remind people of other, more traditional aspects of their religious life, and to further their interest in religion in general. Aiyappan devotees tend to be very active in other religious spheres as well. They participate in bhajans for various other gods, they frequent a great number of local temples, go on pilgrimages to temples all over Tamil Nadu, and worship a great variety of

gods. Only to very few does Aiyappan worship become so important, that all other gods are neglected. I have found only one devotee of Aiyappan, a guru, who had taken Aiyappan as his *kula devyam* and ceased to worship his hereditary *kula devyam*, because he declared that now Aiyappan was his *kula devyam*. But there was no sign, that other Aiyappan devotees would do the same. However, all this does not explain, why people in such great numbers choose to worship Aiyappan, when there are so many other gods and so many other *bhakti* cults in South India, and so many other pilgrimage places, so naturally one must ask:

Why Aiyappan ?

There are several reasons, one might list, for Aiyappan’s recent popularity. In the first place, there is the very simple reason, that Sabari Malai is geographically within reach. In my interviews I found very few, who had gone on pilgrimage outside Tamil Nadu; many declared, that they wished to go to Benares and other holy places in North India, but could not afford it. Secondly, Aiyappan is a god, who is known only in South India. Aiyappan’s theogony is an exclusively South Indian addition to the wellknown myth about the churning of the ocean. Since Aiyappan is introduced to the Tamil public as a product of Tamil culture, he is received as a lost son. When references are made to ancient Tamil texts in order to demonstrate Aiyappan’s Tamil birth right, the Tamil consciousness about their cultural separateness is strengthened.

In the third place, the Aiyappan cult entails an adjustment of the social forms of contact. Although Aiyappan and Aiyannar may be identical, Aiyannar worship is socially very rigid and connected with particular geographical spots, and local village hierarchies. The Aiyannar cult expresses the social and political exclusiveness of the village. This is seen in the fact that Aiyannar is tied to a specific local pantheon and always has a local name or epithet. Aiyappan, on the other hand, represents the national level, that which is common to the Tamil nation.

Aiyappan worship makes it possible to form groups of people from different castes, who may have various motives to be together. It is doubtful whether the Aiyappan cult activity as such creates new contacts but is obvious, that it gives people a plausible reason for gathering periodically.

The strongly publicised ideals of equality in this cult do not seem to have any socially revolutionary purpose. It is simply a new way of meeting, but what makes the meeting possible is that the lower castes must accept the purity ideals, (vegetarianism asceticism of the life style of the higher castes. So the meeting between high and low castes takes place on the terms of the high castes. This really means a universal acceptance of the hierarchic principles of ritual purity/impurity on which caste hierarchy largely rests in Tamil Nadu.

Now that an egalitarian cult like the Aiyappan cult is becoming popular, one might expect *kula devyam* worship to die out, but the opposite seems to be the case. This is understandable once we consider, that the equality in the Aiyappan cult is only “in the eyes of Aiyappan”. It is my hypothesis, that *kula devyam* worship has an important role to play in the somewhat schizophrenic situation with two very different versions of the same sod existing simultaneously. *Kula devyam* worship seems to be the part of Tamil tradition, which is able to create a unity out of the village religious complex and the newly arrived Aiyappan cult. The lineage god was the link between the lineage and the common Aiyandar cult in many cases, perhaps the most important one, and now it seems to reconcile tradition and innovation in Tamil Hinduism as represented respectively by Aiyandar and Aiyappan.

The Divine King—The Royal God

Two interesting aspects of the Aiyappan pilgrimage are the return of the royal god, Aiyappan, which is accompanied by the temporary resuscitation of the kingdom of Pandalam, on the one hand, and on the other, the

evolving alliance between the descendants of the royal family of Pandalam and the Sathagoparamanuja group. The latter comes about because the Pandalam family is interested in retaining its mythical, hereditary rights as keepers of Aiyappan’s jewels, and this is then just another example of the numerous battles in India between the traditional keepers of the god’s possessions, lands and jewels, and the secular powers, the modern government, which attempts to usurp these rights, as it has succeeded in many cases in doing. In this particular instance of the ongoing struggle between sacred and profane powerholders the Sathagoparamanuju group enters as allies of the royal Pandalam lineage. Together the two allies recreate symbolically—in the magnificent annual spectacle at Sabari—the political conditions as they supposedly were during Aiyappan’s avatar as prince of Pandalam.

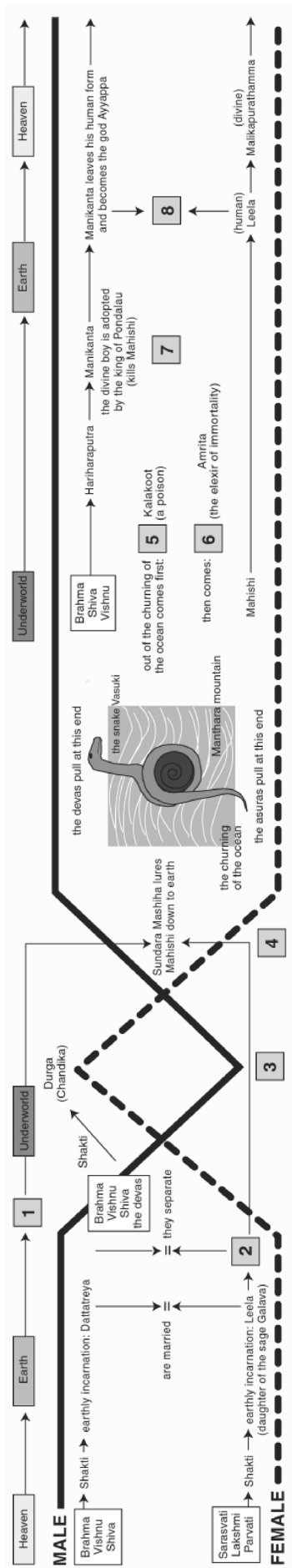
Politics and religion meet and merge to a certain extent in the Aiyappan myth and in the pilgrimage. This expresses in yet another way how the egalitarian mood of the Aiyappan *bhakti* cult in the end will have to subject itself to the predominant hierarchic tendency in Hindu society. The Aiyappan cult and the role played by the Pandalam raja is a good demonstration of this, because even when the traditional Hindu kingdoms have been abolished long ago and replaced by secular political powers, the role of the king in this particular cult is not only rejuvenated, its importance is growing. The descendants of the royal lineage of Pandalam still claim the right to keep Aiyappan’s jewels in their ancestral palace in Padalam. Sabari is located in the area which was formerly Pandalam, so the royal family is so to speak the hosts for all the pilgrims entering the area. The raja of Pandalam must be present at the temple on this occasion to sanction the proceedings. So whereas the Aiyandar and Aiyappan cults formerly served as legitimisation for power, as writers like Fred Clothey assume, we now have a curious reversal of this situation, in which the phantom of an ancient is temporarily raised from the dead in order to legitimise a religion.

Tekst og billeder: Lars Kjærholm

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Appendix 1



1: Dattatreya wants to retire to ascetic life. Leela is against it, they quarrel! Dattatreya curses leela, she is reborn as a she-buffalo: mahishi daughter of an asura (Karamba) takes the form of a buffalo, Sundara Mahisha, the metamorphosis is due to Mahishi with the help of Brahma.

2: reborn as Mahishi, she-buffalo, daughter of Karamba, an asura. Karamba and his elder brother Ramba, stand in water and fire in order to propitiate Agni, the fire-god. Devendra, the king of heaven, feels that his throne and the position of devas is threatened and kills Karamba. Agni promises Ramba that neither asura nor deva nor man can kill him. Ramba falls in love with a she-buffalo and is killed by a jealous bull. The enamoured she-buffalo throws herself on the funeral pyre of Ramba, and out of the fire comes their son: Mahishasura.

3: Mahishasura is helped by Brahma, who promises, that no-one of the male sex can kill him. Mahishasura oust the devas from heaven and take power there. The devas seek help from Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Their energy is united with that of the devas in the goddess Durga (here: Chandika). She places herself on the summit of the Vindhya mountain. Her laughter infuriates Mahishasura, they fight and Chandika kills him.

4: Mahishi wants to revenge herself on the devas for the killing of her cousin, Mahishasura. Brahma promises her, that only a boy born from a union of Shiva and Vishnu can kill her. She now takes power in heaven. Vishnu asks Sundara mahisha to go to heaven and lure Mahishi down to earth. Mahishi falls in love with Sundara Mahisha and follows him to earth.

5: Kalakotha, a poison which can destroy the whole world. Shiva swallows the poison. Parvati strangles him. The poison is now in his throat. This accounts for the blue colour of Shiva's face.

6: a life-giving nectar. The devas want all of it. Vishnu takes the form of a beautiful woman. Mohini, and lures the asuras away. Of their union comes Hariharaputra (Ayyappa)

7: Hariharaputra is left on the banks of the river Pampa. King Rajasekharan finds him, the childless king and queen adopt him and name him Manikanta. Later the queen has a son of her own. A courtier persuades the queen that Manikanta must be killed, so her own son can become king.

The queen pretends to be ill, her doctor says, that only milk from a leopard can cure here. It is just before Manikanta's coronation, but he offers to get the leopard milk. The 12-year old Manikanta departs carrying a coconut [represents Shiva (Trinetra)].

The devas now ask Manikanta to do what has destined him, and kill Mahishi. Near the river Alasa there is a fight between the two. Manikanta kills Mahishi. Leela comes out of Mahishi's body and wants to marry Manikanta, but he refuses because he is a celibate. She is allowed to sit on his left side as his shakti under the name Panchambika. Riding a tiger Manikanta returns to his foster parents with the leopard milk. Manikanta informs them that his earthly avatar has ended, and he settles with them how he should be worshipped, and where his main temple must be build. He shoots an arrow into the air and where it lands, they must build a temple. To the left of it they must build a temple for Malikapurathamma (=Panchambika=Leela). Then Manikanta disappeared.

8. Manikanta kills Mahishi, who is thereby transformed into the human being, Leela. Leela wants to marry Manikanta. He refuses and becomes the god, Ayyappa. She becomes his shakti, Malikapurathamma.