

ÜLO VALK

*University of Tartu  
Tartu, Estonia*

S. LOURDUSAMY

*Centre for Dialogue and Communication  
Hyderabad, India*

# Village Deities of Tamil Nadu in Myths and Legends The Narrated Experience

## **Abstract**

The article discusses religious narratives about the village deities of North Tamil Nadu that can be conceptualized as myths, legends, and memorates according to a folkloristic taxonomy of genres. These narratives confirm the power of deities to assist people in hardships and give warning examples of supernatural sanctions that follow the breaking of norms. Village priests (*pujaris*) are the religious authorities who control both deities and oral traditions (*aideegam*) about them. There is a widespread belief in the studied region about encountering the deities at night, when they ride around their territory to protect it from evil powers. Such experiences are narrated both in legend and memorate form. Religious folklore genres thus form the border zone in which the social world of humans and mythical realm of deities are merged into one textual space of mutual interaction.

**Keywords:** folk religion—Tamil Nadu—village deities—temple priests—narrative—genres—myth—legend—memorate

THE HISTORY of Hinduism in India has been dominated by such powerful pan-Indian gods as Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, who figure in religious texts in Sanskrit and are controlled and mediated by Brahmins, the religious elite of the society.\* Scholarly understanding of Hinduism as a systematic religion is likewise shaped by endeavors to construct a uniform, coherent system of beliefs and religious practices. However, the Hinduism of the scriptures is different from the vernacular forms of the religion that are expressed, practiced, and narrated by ordinary people, the majority of whom live in the countryside.

The aim of the present article is to explore the religious narratives of Tamil folklore in their social context. It claims that temple priests are the main authorities who control traditional beliefs and stories relating to the village deities that appear in different genres. Birth stories of gods and primordial events are narrated in myths that establish the world order on a cosmic scale. Legends about the interaction between gods and humans are set in the mundane reality of historical time, providing models of religious and social behavior. One of the main functions of legends is to link social reality with the supernatural sphere and to affirm the active participation of deities in the everyday life of villages.

Tamil Nadu (“Tamil land”) is a state in southeastern India with a population of over sixty-two million people, most of whom speak the Tamil language that belongs to the Dravidian group. Tamil is a classical language with literature dating back more than two thousand years. About ninety percent of the population of Tamil Nadu is Hindu; about five percent are Christians, and about five percent Muslims. Shiva is widely worshipped in temples but various forms of the Goddess (Tamil: *Amman* “mother”)—often interpreted as consorts of Shiva—are popular in the countryside, where people also worship male guardian deities, such as Aiyandar and many others. Rural Tamil Nadu is mainly involved in agriculture—growing rice, sugar cane, coffee, corn, and other crops.

This article discusses narratives about local deities in the villages of northern Tamil Nadu: Agaram, Sadaikatti, Velakulam, Kodukapattu, Athipakkam (near Tirukkovilur), Viruduvilanginan, Kalleri, and Pavithiram—all in one region on the borderlands between Viluppuram and Tiruvannamalai districts.

Fieldwork there started in February 2006, when both authors of this article visited the region, and was later continued by S. Lourdasamy. Most informants were men and belonged to the following castes: Udaiyar, Vanniyar, Reddiar (all farmers), Vellalar, Mudaliar (both agricultural landlords), Shettiars (well diggers), Sakliers (leather workers), Konars (shepherds), and Dalits (untouchables and agricultural laborers).

#### THE TEXTUAL AND GENERIC WORLD OF FOLK RELIGION

Village temples of Tamil Nadu attract the attention of travelers with their colorful statues representing gods and goddesses, their guardians and mounts—usually white horses, sometimes elephants. The expressive visuality of these statues is striking and their iconography can reveal the status of featured deities, their membership in the Shaiva or Vaishnava lineages, their relationships, marital status, even names and nature, ranging from a benevolent mildness to a fierce bloodthirstiness that is satisfied with regular sacrifices—goats, pigs, and chickens. However, even more knowledge about the deities is spread orally and remains latent in the memory of the villagers until it is expressed in either ritualistic behavior or verbal form. Without conducting interviews with the local people we could only guess at the role of deities in their worldview and the web of beliefs that influences their daily life. The primary realm of deities and their living environment is not physical (that is, the sacred space of temples and statues), but textual—the narrative world that includes sacred myths about the origin of the world and more mundane stories about supernatural interventions of deities in the lives of the villagers, whose daily well-being depends on the deities' benevolence or anger. This narrative realm does not form a uniform, homogeneous mass of verbal expression, but it can be conceptualized as a system of diverse genres with their own poetic features, temporal scales, functions, and connections with specific tradition groups, such as the priests (*pujaris*) and lay people, castes, families, and whole villages. Some narratives derive from pan-Indian or Tamil literary traditions; others have never reached the written culture and circulate in oral communication only.

Traditional stories, songs, beliefs about deities, and the relevant customs and rites are called *aideegam* in the studied region. This refers to religious lore in the broadest sense, including all tradition groups, from the untouchable Dalits who can serve as temple priests to the learned Brahmins. *Aideegam* is a synthetic concept, covering and blending expressive forms that can be differentiated as distinct genres if we take an etic and analytical point of view. The vernacular terminology of Tamil folklore is rich and identifies many clear-cut genres and types of performances, such as the *terukkūttu* ("street folk theatre"), *vilpāttu* ("bow song"—epical songs about deified local heroes and heroines), *udukkai pāttu*—legends or

local epics that are performed to the accompaniment of a hand drum, and many others (LOURDU 2003). Ethnic terminology of genres and analytical categories that have been developed in folkloristics offer two complementary approaches towards understanding folklore. In this article we follow the analytic scheme of differentiation between myths, legends and folktales conceptualized by William BASCOM (1984) and elaborated by other folklorists, such as Lauri HONKO (1989a).

Imaginative folktales (*katai*) in Tamil folklore start with the opening formula “in a certain place” (*oru ūrilē*), which refers to the narrative world of fiction (BLACKBURN 2001, 266). Unlike folktales, “true” stories about village deities are often framed by physical and social surroundings well known to the narrators and their audience. These narratives correspond to the analytical term “legend,” used in folkloristics to denote a “traditional (mono)episodic, highly ecotypified, localized, historicized narrative of past events told as believable in a conversational mode” (TANGHERLINI 2007, 8). Memorates are legends that are told in the first person about the narrator’s supernatural encounters (HONKO 1989b). They are reported as true stories about extraordinary or numinous experiences, narrated by the witnesses themselves. Because of their different temporal settings, both legends and memorates can be distinguished from myths—“prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past” (BASCOM 1984, 9). Myths and folktales belong to the most thoroughly studied folklore genres in India. Until now very little research has been done on Indian legends (BHATTACHARJEE 2007, 3), but this generic category has the potential to be a remarkable source for generating new knowledge about narrating and transmitting belief in religious communities.

#### GENEALOGIES AND HIERARCHIES: CREATING UNITY IN DIVERSITY

The names and genealogies of village deities blend into a huge pool of motifs and narrative plots. Seeking for the beginnings of the world and thus establishing etiologies and cosmic order is a generic trait of myths. Focusing on the ancestral figure provides the narrator with a leading thread in the complex network of oral traditions that lacks any editorial or Brahmanic control.

The interviews reveal that the ultimate principle and the creator is not God but the Goddess (*Amman* “Mother”): “Amman is the original *shakti* [female power] and from her are created Ishvaran [Shiva], Vishnu, and Brahman. She takes various Avatars [incarnations, appearances] and is worshipped in different places under different names, such as Kamakshiamman, Draupadiamman, Kalamman, and Parashakti.”<sup>1</sup> Another informant also noted the feminine nature of the divine and the unity of goddesses but referred to other names: “Mariamman, Pachaiyamman, Ellaipidari, Durga, Samundiamman, Kali, and others are all the same *shakti*. Their names differ according to the Avatar in

which they appear in different times and places to different people. All of them put together are the Ishvari (goddess) who is the origin of all Avatars.”<sup>2</sup>

There is a certain distance in Hinduism between the great gods with powers over the cosmos on the one hand and ordinary people on the other hand, whose problems seem too mundane to bring them to the attention of the supreme deities (FULLER 1992, 36). The position of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva in Brahmanic theology is much more prominent than in folk narratives that express people’s affection for local deities who guard their villages. Vadivel, the *pujari* of Munieshvaran and Amman temples in Pavithiram, said: “Every village has temples for Munieshvaran, Aiyanar, Mariamman, and Murugan, but there will be no temple for Brahman, because he is the one who writes down our destiny. Therefore he is like a killer and people do not build temples for him.”

Although the great gods tend to remain in the background in the cult, they appear in creation myths that provide village deities with noble family lineages and high positions in divine hierarchies:

In the beginning there existed Adiparashakti. She had a dangerous look, long and prolonged teeth and uncombed, unwashed hair. She was the first being in the world, where she used to roam around. Once she wanted to drink, so she came to a pool of water and looked into it. She saw her face and body in the water. She thought that there was another being besides her and so she jumped into the water. Inside the water all the dirt on her body came off and formed life. Then she realized that she had the power to create. She had desire [*kama*] and wanted to have a male companion. With the help of mantras she created Shiva. Another tradition says that first she created Munieshvaran (Munnal [i.e., the first or the one before]). According to this tradition Vinayagar was created after Munieshvaran, and then Mahavishnu and Shivaperuman were created.<sup>3</sup>

Vinayagar can be identified with Shiva’s elephant-headed son who is known as Ganesha or Ganapati in other parts of India. Munieshvaran is one of the most popular deities in the region and is identified with Aiyanar by several informants. Let us also consider the birth story of Aiyanar, who like many other village deities is provided with parents of high rank. Aiyanar’s birth from Shiva and Vishnu, who takes the female form of Mohini, is widespread in the villages and appears in multiple versions.<sup>4</sup> The following myth expresses the endless rivalry between gods (*deva*) and *asuras*—semi-gods or demons of high rank, whose generic context is in myths, not in legends.

Once Padmasuran asked Ishvaran [Shiva] for a boon. The boon was that anyone whose head he touched should be burnt to ashes. Ishvaran granted

the boon. But Padmasuran wanted to test it and tried to put his hand on the head of Ishvaran himself. Ishvaran tried to escape from him. He ran from place to place and finally turned himself into Aivelangai [a seeded fruit that goats eat] and Padmasuran turned himself into a goat to eat it. Mahavishnu, the brother-in-law of Ishvaran, saw this, took the form of a beautiful girl Mohini, and appeared to Padmasuran. When Padmasuran saw this beauty, he lost interest in running after Ishvaran. Instead, he became infatuated with Mohini and wanted to join in union with her. Then Mohini told him that he was dirty and filthy and should take a bath. Only afterwards, when he came back, would she accept him. But Mahavishnu made it dry everywhere so that there was no water left for bathing. Not finding water, Padmasuran came back to report to Mohini. Mohini said that if he found at least enough water to fill a cow's hoof print, this would be enough for a bath. Padmasuran did so. He took the water, placed it on his head and was burnt to ashes.

Then Mahavishnu went to the forest and called Ishvaran who was hiding himself because he was afraid of Padmasuran. When he came to know that he was already dead, Ishvaran asked Mahavishnu, how he managed to destroy Padmasuran. Then Mahavishnu narrated what had happened. Ishvaran wanted to see him in the form of Mohini and Mahavishnu agreed. When Ishvaran saw Mohini, he became passionate and his semen came out. Mahavishnu wanted to prevent it falling on the ground and took it in his hand. Out of this union in hand and from Ishvaran's semen Aiyanar was born. This is a very special birth and therefore Aiyanar is a deity.<sup>5</sup>

Establishing the family lineages of deities also means fixing their hierarchies, as the divine parents tend to be more prominent than their children. In the first myth Adiparashakti and Shiva formed the parental couple; in the second myth Shiva and Vishnu gave life to the village deity Aiyanar (who corresponds to Shiva's and Parvati's son Skanda elsewhere in India).

Temple premises usually include images of many deities but never in random combinations. The subordination of deities and their ranks also create order in complex mythologies with hundreds of names and distinct identities: "Each deity has a Kaval Deivam [guardian deity]: Murugan has Kadamban, Mariamman has Kathavarayan, Periyayī has Pavadairayan and Munieshvaran is the guardian deity of Ishvaran. In the first place, all the people of our village believe in Mariamman, and then in Murugan."<sup>6</sup>

Guardianship thus has two meanings. First, all deities guard the village and protect the believers who worship them in rituals. Secondly, some deities are subordinate to the others and serve them as their guardians.



FIGURE 1. Amman temple at the road to Pavithiram village. Photo by Ü. Valk, Feb. 2006.



FIGURE 2. Statue of Vakkira Kāliamman on the roadside near Sithan Nagar village. Photo by Ü. Valk, Feb. 2006.



FIGURE 3. Munieshvaran and his wives in their temple in Sadaikatti village. Photo by S. Lourdasamy, summer 2006.



FIGURE 4. Pujari Vadivel in front of Amman statue in the temple in Pavithiram. Photo by S. Lourdasamy, summer 2006.



FIGURE 5. Pujari Sakkara in Aiyanar temple, Agaram village. Photo by S. Lourdasamy, summer 2006.



FIGURE 6. Pujari Sakkara, Agaram village. Photo by S. Lourdasamy, summer 2006.



FIGURE 7. Temple in Kalleri village. From the right Vīranar, his wife Vīri, their guru Ishvara, whose nightly rides were described by Darman and Ramasamy. Photo by Ū. Valk, 6 Feb. 2006.



FIGURE 8. Statues in the temple in Kalleri have been repainted. Photo by S. Lourdasamy, summer 2006.



FIGURE 9. Mounts of Viranar and other deities in the temple in Kalleri. Photo by Ü. Valk, 6 Feb. 2006.



FIGURE 10. Mounts of deities in the temple in Kalleri have been repainted. Photo by S. Lourdasamy, summer 2006.

## PUJARIS AS RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES

Whereas everybody in the village is to some extent familiar with mythologies and other religious traditions about local deities, the temple priests are the greatest specialists of *aideegam*. They are called *pujari* or *koil pusari* (“temple priest”), and usually belong to non-Brahmanic castes and Dalits. These temple priests are particularly close to the deity and are responsible for his or her well-being (MASILAMANI-MEYER 2004, 35). They are religious authorities whose positions are usually hereditary and can be connected with the history of the temple.

Pichchandi is a seventy-six-year-old Dalit from Athipakkam who serves as a priest in the temples of Mariamman and Viranar, and who told a family legend about the origin of the latter temple. His grandfather had brought the sacred stone, representing Viranar, in his hand from the village Irumbilikuchi Madambattu, where Viranar originally resided. Because his wife had no success in bearing children, he went to that village, took the statue of Viranar, gave it a ritual bath on the way in Pennaiyar River, and brought it home. Since the informant’s grandfather had carried the Viranar image in his hand (*kai*) he gave it the name Kaiveriviran (“Viran who was brought in the hand”). During the following year the informant’s father was born and was named Viran. Since then, Viranar has been worshiped in the village with a special feast. Transferring deities to villages by conveying them in substances, such as trees or handfuls of earth, is a common tradition in Tamil Nadu (MINES 2003, 245).

The latter narrative about the *pujari*’s family history explains his personal connection with the deity. Genre-analytically it is important to note a shift in the temporal scale of narratives. From the primordial age of myths we have reached the historical time of legends. The *pujari*’s personal link with Viranar continues until the present day and endows him with special powers to control the deity:

The deity listens to me and people come to me for help in various ways. For instance, it happened once that people got frightened of the banyan tree near the main road because Viranar used to reside in the tree. Then I lighted camphor, told Viranar about the people’s fear, and asked him to leave the place. On the next day he went away from there.

Recently someone built a house in a place that was haunted by the deity. The owner of the house told me about the fear that people have because of the sounds of the deity’s movements, and hence he asked me to do something. So I went there, lit camphor, and prayed to Viranar, asking him to avoid that place. Viranar promised me to do it. Since then, the people have no fear.

It is a generic trait of legends to locate their events within the geographical and social context of the daily life of traditional communities. Gods can be frightening and troublesome, as the latter stories show, but more often they have

a particular reason to be angry with people. Legends offer warning examples of the misbehavior of villagers, followed by a supernatural punishment. Thus they confirm the norms of proper conduct and establish the rules of people's interaction with deities. Sakkara is the *pujari* of Aiyanar temple in the village of Agaram. He is forty-five years old and belongs to Kaundar caste. The following passage from his interview shows him as a specialist of ritual who knows how to deal with the deities and avoid troubles:

A few years ago, a Dalit came to the temple and tried his magic inside the premises. But Aiyanar did not spare him, because he does not like impure people and people with evil intentions. The man died a few days later.

When someone loses things or money, it is a custom to write on a piece of thin copper sheet that he wants to get them back and to add the names of the suspects. The sheet is hidden in the temple premises. Usually people are frightened to go near that sheet, let alone to check what is written on it. In his goodness, Aiyanar helps to recover the lost things. If the person does not return to thank the deity, Aiyanar does not spare him. Either he falls sick or some misfortunes take place in his family. He punishes those who are arrogant.

We had the statue of the main deity in the temple premises. One day someone broke the head of the statue. At that time we did not know who the person was, but the man who did it is by now destroyed along with his whole family.

Such narratives construct the sacred space of temples where “certain purity rules have to be followed” (MASILAMANI-MEYER 2004, 89). Public opinion condemns Dalits who dare to enter the temple premises, and people with evil intentions—black magicians and thieves—who all deserve punishment. Obviously legends about “true” events provide convincing examples that endorse the belief in the powers of deities to control the social sphere. As “there is no absolute distinction between an image and its corresponding deity” (FULLER 1992, 61), breaking or damaging the statues in temples is not only a sacrilege but a physical attack on the gods they represent. Interdictions are normally violated in folktales but seldom punished; in legends, however, the breaking of behavioral norms is always followed by a supernatural sanction.<sup>7</sup> Narratives confirm that, even if one doubts the existence of deities, provoking and challenging them is a serious wrongdoing. Let us consider the following story, told by Kasi Visvanatha Gurukul, a thirty-five-year-old Brahman and the *pujari* of Ishvaran temple in the village of Velakulam.

As a child I lived with my grandparents in the village called Thirudigai near Panruti. The village had no big temple, but there was a small one,

known as Adi Munieshvaran. There is a canal-like pool there that looks quite natural. Once a year people of the village used to go to the temple site at night, light oil lamps, and throw boiled rice for the deity.

My grandfather used to tell us stories about Adi Munieshvaran, who was honored in the temple. He said that Munieshvaran was very tall, very fair in color with long hair, had *vipūti* [sacred ash] on his forehead, and wore footwear and a spotless white *dhoti*. He used to come to the pond on Ammavasai night to wash his clothes. If anyone was sleeping or sitting in his way he would turn and look at him, and the look was very frightening. [...] My grandfather also said that the Muni is Shaivam; he likes only rice and that is what is offered to him. He said that when the Muni goes to the pond to wash his clothes and take a bath at midnight, and comes up from the pond after the bath, if anyone should throw cooked rice onto his path he will catch that rice in the air and eat it. Our school teacher also used to speak about the visit of the Muni on new-moon nights. To add to these fears about the Muni, my grandmother used to frighten me by saying that we should not go to the temple of Adi Munieshvaran because he would carry the children away. I was fearful, because every day I was told to avoid the temple and the nearby place.

When I grew up, I had the courage to try to see what Adi Munieshvaran looked like and determine whether the stories about him were true. I was sixteen years old. During vacation, we boys used to gather in my grandparents' village. Once four of us decided to go to the temple to see if the Muni would be washing clothes and eat the rice thrown up in the air. The oldest among us was my uncle Sarvesuran, who was about twenty-one or twenty-two years old. We took cooked rice and went to the temple site and sat near the pond. At midnight we heard the sound of washing clothes, but we could not see anybody. Then we heard how the sound of wooden footwear was coming up from the pond towards the temple. Since we were four together, we were not afraid. We thought that at least one of us should see the deity and we proceeded towards the sound of the footwear. Suddenly the container with rice jumped out of Sarvesuran's hand and the rice spilt on the ground. We saw nothing, but we were happy to have heard the sound, and returned home. When we returned home, our people scolded us and warned us not to go there again. Thus, the adventure was over and in fact we forgot about it for some time.

However, something happened to Sarvesuran, out of whose hands the rice container fell down. Although the rest of us forgot the event, he could not forget it. Thoughts about the rice that was spilt from his hand were haunting him. He lived only for another sixteen days. From that day an unknown malady started; his semen began to come out without his control.

It went on for days. People took him to the doctor, but I do not know what the doctor said. He could not be cured, and his own people said that it is the Munieshvaran who caught him face to face, and that is why he was punished with such a sickness. Finally, he died on the day after the full moon. He was twenty-one years old.

We have applied the analytic genre category of legend and its cognate memorate to conceptualize such religious narratives. Bill Nicolaisen has described the structure of legend on the basis of William Labov's analysis of personal experience narratives. He notes that the triad: orientation–complicating action–result, is normally the narrative core of the legend (NICOLAISEN 1987, 69). Obviously the above narrative, told in the Tamil language about a personal experience, can hardly be influenced by similar stories of Western folklore. However, what we find here is the same basic structure of legends. First, the setting and participating persons are introduced with references to other relevant information (orientation), then follows the main event—the dramatic encounter in the darkness (complicating action) that leads to the death of the young man (result or resolution). Although the end of the story seems to be here, the interview continues with an evaluation, which is another structural element of narratives about personal experience, described by Labov and Nicolaisen. Brahmin Kasi Visvanatha Gurukal says: “In those days I did not know how to handle such events with mantras. Now I do. I have the protection of deities (*devarakshayam*) on my forehead. This will help me to feel if deities cross my path. Besides, it will protect me from others' *mantram-tantram* and *pilli* [magic and witchcraft].” Thus, the above narrative illustrates the validity of the folkloristic theory of legend structure in Indian oral traditions.

The narrator's evaluation also reminds us of the authority of the priest in the village. His professional knowledge and close relationship with the deity enable him to handle supernatural matters that are dangerous for laymen. What Kasi Visvanatha Gurukal did not know in his youth, he now knows as a practicing *pujari*, moreover a Brahmin. Although sad and unwanted, Sarvesuran's death is far from meaningless if interpreted within the generic context of legends. This narrative warns the younger generation and others who foolishly want to challenge the power of the ruling authorities in the village—the deity Munieshvaran on one hand and the elderly people on the other—who represent traditional knowledge, the wisdom of *aideegam*.

#### NARRATED EXPERIENCES: DEITIES ON HORSES

As we saw, one of the main functions of narratives about deities is to control the social sphere of the village and to provide convincing examples of supernatural

reward and punishment. In religious communities with rich oral traditions the change of perspective from the third person of legends to the first person of memorates easily occurs. Deities can appear to believers in daily life and in dreams that are often blended in narratives:<sup>8</sup>

One day, when I was studying in the fifth standard, I knocked down the knife from the hand of Munieshvaran in the temple. That night I had a terrible dream. Munieshvaran looked very much like the statue in the temple but he was huge. He was going on *sari* [riding tour]. Ahead of him went a procession of about five drumming men. Lighted oil lamps were there. Then I saw Munieshvaran chasing me. I was trying to escape and hid myself under the bullock cart. He looked frightening.

The next day I had a heavy fever. Then I prayed to the deity and told him that I had made a mistake unknowingly and asked him to forgive me. I offered him coconut and camphor. Since then, he has not done any harm to me, and I am fine. God exists but some people do not believe and do not go to the temple. But I believe in god.<sup>9</sup>

Several researchers have mentioned the lively oral tradition about village deities who are mounted on horses and guard their territory at night. Henry Whitehead, in his classical study *The Village Gods of South India*, notes that “in almost every Tamil village there is a shrine of Iyengar [Aiyandar], who is regarded as the watchman of the village, and is supposed to patrol every night, mounted on a ghostly steed, a terrible sight to behold, scaring away the evil spirits (WHITEHEAD 1999, 33). Eveline Masilamani-Meyer also heard these legends about the riding deities during her fieldwork in Tamil Nadu from 1989 to 1991: “Aiyanaṅ, on the white horse, and Karuppar, on the brown horse (sometimes he too has a white horse), are said to ride around at night. Some old priests claimed that they could hear the sound of their horses” (MASILAMANI-MEYER 2004, 21). She also writes that a deity “might make use of the cement horse standing in the temple courtyard when he protects the surrounding area at night” (81) and that “in the olden days people used to see the god mounted on his horse and riding around the area with his entourage” (87).

Fieldwork interviews from the studied region reveal a lively oral tradition about the deities’ nightly rides, called *sari*. Vadivel is fifty years old and is the *pujari* of Munieshvaran and Amman temple in the village of Pavithiram. Vadivel was interviewed together with the above informant, Kumar, whose frightening encounter with the deity reminded Vadivel of his own experience:

When the deity goes on *sari* his face and feet cannot be seen. He wears a yellow sari-like dress. At that time, if anyone stands on the side or passes by

from the side nothing will happen to them. But if they go facing the deity, he will kill them. Nothing will happen to the cattle if they go facing him. The deities do not go every night.

I had seen him [Munieshvaran] on his *sari* while I was keeping a night watch in my field. Once all of a sudden I heard the sounds of bells that are usually tied to bulls. I wondered who could come at this time of the night with bulls. Since I had a lamp tied to a pole near the place where I was sleeping, I could see the yellow clothes of the deity, and from this I understood that it was the deity on *sari*. He went so fast that I could not even ask anything. So I did not open my mouth to find out if it were someone else. That was the only time I have seen him. This happened about ten years ago.

People express different opinions in interviews, regarding whether the deities go on their tours every night, a couple of times each week, or only once in a while, but they generally agree upon the danger of the experience. Unlike *pujaris*, whose close relationship with the deities makes them immune to visual and physical encounters, the other villagers are more vulnerable in such situations. Sugumar Udaiyar is fifty-two years old and the leader of the Udaiyar community in Athipakkam. He explained the consequences of such frightening experiences as follows: “People say that if we go facing the deities they will harm us. We can’t say that the deities really do it, but it is the fear of seeing the deity suddenly that makes people sick. On such occasions, one may get a heart attack or high blood pressure or the heart may stop functioning.”

Darman is fifty-five years old and the *pujari* of Panjammal and Vīranar temple in Kalleri village. He and his elder brother Ramasamy, both Dalits, confirmed in a joint interview having seen the deities on their nightly tours. It is not clear whether or not the brothers claim to have had a collective supernatural experience, but it is more important to note how the collective religious tradition influences individual belief, as both agree upon the basic facts—or legend motifs, if seen from a folkloristic perspective. Also, it seems that the brothers feel no urge to use the memorate form, as there is no doubt about the night rides of the deities and there is no need to convince anyone who thinks otherwise.

We have seen the deities going riding at night. At such times there will be plenty of handheld oil lamps. The dogs in chain go first, then the police, and then Vīranar goes on the horse, followed by the other deities. We have two horses, and so two or three of them get on one horse. Policemen with guns guard the deities. They are guards in the sense that they keep people away. If one does not obey the police then the deity himself will punish the offenders. The entire entourage goes riding around twelve at night. We can feel the smell of flowers, candles, and incense during their *sari*. If we

get these smells, we have to stop on the spot and step aside even if it rains. After half an hour all the smells disappear. Only then can we cross over to the other side. At this time Viranar holds a knife in his hand. The deities go every day without exception.

By making nightly riding tours, deities control their territory. They defend village borders from demons, witchcraft, and evil powers that threaten people from outside. As stealing and robbing is a major concern for the villagers, the deities also turn their fierceness against those criminal intruders who act under the cover of darkness. According to Darman and Ramasamy, the deities of the neighborhood form a social community, like a governing body that is in charge of the whole region:

Why do they [the deities] go only at night? They go at night just like we get together to talk about all that happens. So all the deities in the neighborhood get together and talk among themselves about who did what, about the people who were favored and who were punished, how people look after them and what kind of *puja* people did for them, and what each one did for the people.

When they gather together at night, they all report to Ishvaran [Shiva], who is the Guru of all deities. He asks everyone about their mistakes. Ishvaran tells them not to do any harm to the people, and they obey him, because they all are his children. That is why the deities listen to us and do what we ask them. There are so many deities in the neighborhood, but they have no enmity among themselves, because they all come together and listen to Ishvaran. They all cooperate and do things together.

Thus, the deities have their social life, arranged according to the principles of hierarchical order, similar to the system of castes and varnas in human society. Ishvaran (Shiva) here represents the ultimate authority, the ideal king, who is the supreme guardian of law and order. Even the fierce deities, who are “unpredictable and unstable” (MINES 2003, 242), become cool and protective under his control. As an ideal divine community the deities also set a peaceful model for the village, where misunderstandings, tensions, and conflicts are a part of the mundane reality. In the beginning of the article we saw how the great pan-Hindu deities function in myths as principles of unity, order, and hierarchical arrangement of the worldview. Something similar happens in legends on a different level—this genre stabilizes the social order by presenting unifying norms to be followed in social life.

Stuart Blackburn has noted that most popular Tamil folktales “are tales which make firm ethical judgments” (BLACKBURN 2001, 276). As narratives

about crimes and punishments they are moral fictions, providing people with models of proper and improper behavior. Legends that were discussed in the current article also make prescriptions for daily life and give warning examples about misdeeds and their consequences. Remarkably, offenders are punished not through the moral law of karma, a doctrine that is developed in Hindu philosophy, but through the immediate intervention of village deities who have complete control over their territory and its inhabitants.

However, not every narrative can be reduced to the simple doctrine that each crime is followed by supernatural sanction. The generic world of deities in Tamil Nadu is diverse and complex, as there are many narratives that cannot be conceptualized as folk legends. Let us consider one more example that also discusses religious experience and the relationship between god and believer:

Eripathi Nāyanār had a habit of throwing stones at Shiva Lingam when he got up from bed. He used to do it every day. If he did not do it, he couldn't sleep properly and his work was unsuccessful. Shiva had injuries all over his body due to the hits from the stones. There were no more places to receive the stones. He was bleeding all over his body. Someone asked Shiva about the bleeding, and Shiva said that one man hit him every day with a stone. Then the neighbor asked Shiva, why do you keep silent, why don't you do something to stop him? Then Shiva said that the man who threw stones at him was very sincere in doing it and he never missed even a single day. Therefore, Shiva wanted to know if he did it correctly and regularly, and once he proved to do so, Shiva would take possession of him.

One day there were no stones at all in the vicinity. This was the trick done by Shiva. The man got angry. Then he said to himself "There are no stones; I have to go to work urgently. I won't be happy unless I throw stones at Shiva, and I will beat him at any cost today." Saying this he hit his head against the Shiva Lingam. Normally the head should break, but it did not happen. Instead, Shiva appeared to the man, saying that what he wanted to do should be done properly and regularly without risking his job or time.

Although the deity is identified with its image (here a stone lingam) just as in the warning legends about the village temples, the nature of Shiva here differs essentially from the folkloric Ishvaran who is the supreme guardian of villages in Darman's and Ramasamy's story. The contrast between the last narrative and legends about the revenge of gods who punish sacrilege in their temples is striking. The generic and textual world of deities is heterogeneous. Different messages are conveyed in different genres (HONKO 1989a), and legends about village deities do not suit the mystical doctrine of *bhakti* (devotion), expressed in stories about Tamil Shaiva saints, such as the Nāyanārs (see HUDSON 1989). The

last story was told by Brahman Kasi Visvanatha Gurukal, who also related his personal experience with the wrathful Munieshvaran, providing evidence of his generic competence. As Brahman Gurukal is well read and trained in religious affairs, the story about Eripathi probably derives from Tamil literature. There seems to be a connection between the high social status of the learned narrator and the religious moral of his story, which is more subtle and philosophical than legends about the village deities. It is also remarkable that the plot is not linked with contemporary rural settings but rather a remote world of fiction and myth. The protagonist is not an ordinary man from “our village” but a saint.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Gods and goddesses are present in the villages in the form of statues in shrines, but their power is revealed in genres of religious folklore that depict them as guardians of justice and ritual purity. Legends form the border zone in which the social world of humans and the mythical realm of deities are merged into one textual space of interaction.

As protagonists of narratives, the deities—fierce guardians of order and morals—become participants in village life. Their contrast with weak and sinful humans creates narrative tension, expressed in stories about frightening encounters with them. As a distinct genre, legend provides the traditional community with a special outlook on the world and orientation in reality (VALK 2007).

Legends and memorates share the generic core as narratives about experiences, told by true witnesses, and have a great rhetorical power to make moral statements and convince the audience about the validity of religious truths. There is no reason to doubt that in religious communities, plots of such narratives get actualized in experiences of daily life, perceived and interpreted according to the cultural models provided by oral tradition. Tamil deities are not encountered only as statues in village shrines but may also appear to the members of religious communities all over the territories they guard. However, religious beliefs are not rooted in such encounters with the supernatural; rather, oral traditions model the perceptions of witnesses and the ways they report their experiences. Narrated encounters do not derive from true events but follow the generic patterns that shape the narration. Likewise, the supernatural power of gods to help, protect, and punish the believers flows from the narrative tradition that affirms such powers and conveys the necessary evidence. Thus, in order to understand the role of deities in religious communities it is not sufficient to study the construction and structure of shrines, temple art, rituals, and the holy scripts relating to them. We also need to consider folklore and study its expressive forms and religious genres, which cannot be done without giving word to the representatives of religious communities—priests and lay members holding

different positions and social roles. So let us here stress the importance of their story realm—magical, powerful, and overwhelming—that brings humans and deities together as partners and cohabitants of one social space.

## NOTES

\* This article has been supported by the Estonian Science Foundation (grant no. 6518).

1. Recorded from Sugumar Udaiyar, who is fifty-two years old and is the leader of the Udaiyar community in Athipakkam village.

2. Recorded in Viruduvilanginan village from Kannayiram Naikar, who is sixty-eight years old, is the director of street theatre, and belongs to the Mudaliar caste.

3. This story was told by Shivanesan, who is thirty years old, belongs to the Mudaliar caste, and is the *pujari* of Munieshvaran temple in Kodukapattu village.

4. For other versions of the myth, see MASILAMANI-MEYER 2004, 19–22.

5. Told by Sakkara, a forty-five-year-old *pujari* of Aiyanar temple in Agaram village.

6. Recorded from Sugumar Udaiyar.

7. Regular violation of interdictions in folktales has been noted by Vladimir Propp. Different genres thus offer alternative models of action that are relevant to their generic context. Fictional folktales allow fantasy games but socially oriented legends demonstrate the sad consequences of misbehavior and breaking the norms.

8. Many legends of Tamil Nadu tell about the appearance of deities in dreams—sometimes with a special message to establish a temple or to warn somebody about the ramifications of their thoughtless plans (for examples see MASILAMANI-MEYER 2004, 25, 30, 45).

9. This story was told by Kumar, who is thirty years old, lives in Pavithiram village, and belongs to the Nathaman Udaiyar caste.

## REFERENCES CITED

BASCOM, William

1984 The forms of folklore: Prose narratives. In *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*, ed. Alan Dundes, 5–29. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.

BHATTACHARJEE, Kishore

2007 The legend: Conceptual issues and pragmatics of telling. *Indian Folklife. A Quarterly Newsletter from National Folklore Support Centre*. Serial no. 25. January: 3–4.

BLACKBURN, Stuart

2001 *Moral Fictions: Tamil Folktales from Oral Tradition*. FF Communications no. 278. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica.

FULLER, Christopher John

1992 *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

HONKO, Lauri

1989a Folkloristic theories of genre. In *Studies in Oral Narrative*, ed. Anna-Leena Siikala, 13–28. Studia Fennica 33. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society.

1989b Memorates and the study of folk belief. *Nordic Folklore: Recent Studies*, ed.

- Reimund Kvideland and Henning K. Sehmsdorf, 100–109. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- HUDSON, Dennis D.  
 1989 Violent and fanatical devotion among the Nāyanārs: A study in the Periya Purānam of Cēkkilār. *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees: Essays on the Guardians of Popular Hinduism*, ed. Alf Hiltebeitel, 373–404. New York: State University of New York Press.
- LOURDU, S. D.  
 2003 Tamil Nadu. In *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Margaret A. Mills, Peter J. Claus, and Sarah Diamond, 591–93. New York, London: Routledge.
- MASILAMANI-MEYER, Eveline  
 2004 *Guardians of Tamil Nadu: Folk Deities, Folk Religion, Hindu Themes*. Neue Hallesche Berichte. Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte und Gegenwart Südindiens, Band 5. Halle: Verlag der Franckeschen Stiftungen zu Halle.
- MINES, Diane P.  
 2003 The Hindu gods in a south Indian village. In *Everyday Life in South Asia*, ed. Diane P. Mines and Sarah Lamb, 236–48. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- NICOLAISEN, Bill  
 1987 The linguistic structure of legends. In *Perspectives on Contemporary Legend Vol. 2*, ed. Gillian Bennett, Paul Smith, and J. D. A. Widdowson, 61–76. Sheffield: CECTAL/Sheffield Academic Press.
- TANGHERLINI, Timothy  
 2007 Rhetoric, truth and performance: Politics and the interpretation of legend. *Indian Folklife: A Quarterly Newsletter from National Folklore Support Centre*. Serial no. 25. January, 8–12.
- VALK, Ülo  
 2007 Eyes of legend: Thoughts about genres of belief. *Indian Folklife: A Quarterly Newsletter from National Folklore Support Centre*. Serial no. 25. January: 12–14.
- WHITEHEAD, Henry  
 1999 *The Village Gods of South India*. New Delhi, Madras: Asian Educational Services. First published 1921.