CHAPTER VI

RELIGION

In considering Muthuvan religious beliefs and rituals we shall start with a few basic assumptions which might serve as a general introduction to the nature of Muthuvan beliefs and deities, and the function of religion in Muthuvan society.

Muthuvan religion is inseparably mixed with the pantheism of the Hindu religion of peninsular India. Its pattern and variety are much more typical of this larger and more diffused form of Hinduism, than of the localized myths and beliefs of indigenous tribal groups. This is understandable when we consider that the Muthuvans of Travancore are an immigrant group who originally belonged to the eastern plains of Tamilnad, and presumably formed part of the general rural population of the Tamil-speaking regions of peninsular India. The main body of religious beliefs of the Muthuvans is part of their total cultural heritage from the distant past. One may even assume that that part of Muthuvan religion which is recognisably Hindu in character (as opposed to the local and tribal), represents, more or less, the essential features of the religion of the Tamil-speaking peasant population of a bygone era. The non-Hindu or tribal part of Muthuvan religion represents

the later embellishments acquired through contact with the indigenous hill tribes of their land of refuge. In so highly receptive a religion as Hindusim there is room for an immense variety of beliefs ranging from the Vedic or Brahminical to the tribal and animistic. It is indeed well nigh impossible to draw lines of demarcation between the Hindu, semi-Hindu and tribal religion, although in a broad sense such descriptions might be valid. However, at their extremes, Hinduism of the higher and lower planes are so vastly different that they appear almost as unconnected sets of beliefs. In between these two extremes of higher and lower there is a broad middle plane in which lies the bulk of Hindu beliefs which are neither Brahminical nor tribal. The range of beliefs in this middle plane is as vast as the individual social groups that belong to it; it borders on the Brahminical at its higher end, and on the tribal at its lower end. Muthuvan religion could be spoken of as being on the border line between the middle and tribal groups.

In the course of its long existence Hinduism has had a large variety of local myths and beliefs grafted to it. Likewise, Muthuvan religion has also been enriched, or at least made more complicated, by the grafting of local myths, and the admixture of beliefs of other tribal groups with whom they came in contact in the course of their history.

Thus at the present day we find in Muthuvan religious beliefs the evidence of the influence of traditional Hinduism of peninsular India on the one hand, and of the religion of indigenous tribes on the other. To gain a proper perspective of Muthuvan religion it is necessary to look at it in the light of this background. (While on this point, it would be worthwhile to refer again to the quotation from Census of India, 1941, on p. 7-8 supra.

Religion plays an important part in the life of the Muthuvan. Every event in his personal life and in Nature around him is attributable to the will of a superior, non-material Being, or Beings, subject to feelings of pleasure and annoyance, likes and dislikes. The complex of Muthuvan religious beliefs embraces a variety of deities of varying potency and unequal spheres of influence.

The Muthuvan pantheon, so to say, consists of deities ranging from Subramanya, son of Shiva, who provides the closest link between Muthuvan religion and Sanskritic[1] Hinduism, down to the purely local deities like Kottamala Andavar and Sankudikki Amma. In between the Sanskritic or semi-Sanskritic, and the local or indigenous deities who stand, as it were, at the highest and lowest points respectively in Muthuvan deitary configuration, there are

1. See M.N.Srinivas, Religion and Society Among the Coorgs Of South India(Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1952), passim. Dr.Srinivas uses the term 'Sanskritic' to refer to the deities of All-India Hinduism, as well as to observances in accordance with Vedic rituals. Regional deities are referred to as 'semi-Sanskritic'.

numerous deities in a graduated order in repect of their relative connection with Hinduism at large. For instance, there is Madura Meenakshi, chief deity of the famous temple at Madura which bears her name, who is the consort of Lord Shiva in one of his manifestations, and is an important deity of peninsular Hinduism. Proceeding downwards one comes across an array of deities whose spheres of influence continue to be restricted in narrowing spatial circles until one reaches the local or village deities. Muthuvans themselves do not ascribe spatial or structural limitation to the power of deities, but the idea is suggested only to ecplain the position occupied by the different deities in relation to the total Hindu pantheon. It would seem, however, that Muthuvans attribute limitations to the operative powers of deities, or at least of some deities. Thus there are different deities who preside over particular activities or phenomena such as hunting, agriculture, rain and disease.

There are a few village deities to whom the Muthuvans themselves seem to attribute by implication, if not consciously, structural limitation of powers. They are like the lineage deities of the Nair tarawad[1] or the Coorg okka;[2] they are

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1 and 2. The tarawad and okka are generic names for the ancestral seats of joint families among the Nairs and Coorgs respectively. The tarawad is a matrilineal, matrilocal joint family, whereas the okka is a patrilineal, patrilocal joint family.

believed to be special guardians of the well-being of a village or a group of villages; they are part of the folklore and tradition of the group. Physical abodes in the shape of rocks, hills, rivers or glades are assigned to them, and it is also believed that they were human beings at one time. It is interesting that these guardian deities are, in nearly all cases, female deities.

Subramanya is the supreme deity of the Muthuvans; he is kadavul or God. The village temple is invariably called Subramanya kovil(temple of Subramanya). A picture of Subramania riding the peacock and holding the vel(the three-pronged spear or trident) in one hand, is seen in most kovils. Peacock feather and vel, being associated with Subramania, are sacred objects. In most parts of South India, Subramanya is a very popular deity, especially among the rural population. According to one authority, Subramanya is exclusively a South Indian village deity.

> There is not a village, however small, which does not possess a shrine for Subramanya. In fact the popularity of this deity with the South Indian is so great as to induce him to build shrines for him in all places such as towns, villages, gardens, mountain tops and other odd places. Strangely enough, Subramanya is less known and less worshipped in Northern India. In Bengal, it is stated that he is worshipped by disreputable women on certain occasions, while in the Bombay Presidency no sumangali(a woman whose husband is alive) would visit a temple of Karttikeyasvamin.[1] (Karttikeya or Karttikeyaswamin is another name for Subramanya. P.T.T.)

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1. T.A.Gopinatha Rao, Elements of Hindu Iconography (Madras: The Law Printing House), vol. ii, p. 415.

FIG. 33

A MUTHUVAN AT THE THRESHOLD OF THE SUBRAMANYA KOVIL (TEMPLE)

(Note that the Man has removed his Turban and Tied it Arround his Waist as a Mark of Veneration when Standing in Sanctified Precincts)

Subramanya is the son of Shiva and Parvati. He is therefore of divine origin and closely related to the Sanskritic pantheon - even bilogically as it were. Muthuvan worship of Subramanya is possibly a heritage from their bygone past in Tamilnad, because it is there that Subramanya is most popular. In Travancore, and in the Malabar coast generally, Subramanya is not worshipped. It may therefore be assumed that the Muthuvan Subramanya cult is a relic of their past.

It is important to note that while Subramanya is admittedly the omnipotent, omnipresent God Supreme, it is the lesser deities who are dreaded and more frequently propitiated. They control all phenomena of nature; they are capricious and near at hand, powerful and malevolent. In the various forms of tribal religion all over India, there are indigenous deities as well as Sanskritic deities, the latter being local versions of the classical originals. The Sanskritic deities have a prestige value, but for divine favours in day-to-day life the intimate, powerful tribal deities must be propitiated. This is so with Muthuvan religion too.

The individual Muthuvan's devotion to tribal deities is shrouded in secrecy. When talking to strangers about his religion, he usually confines himself to the better known Hindu deities of his pantheon so as to establish a unity

with the larger Hindu fold and thereby make his own religion appear respectable.

All Muthuvans hold Madura Meenakshi, or Goddess Meenakshi of Madura, in great affection and reverence, the more so by the eastern Muthuvans who are very articulate about their Tamilian culture and seek to identify themselves with Madura. According to one legend, Meenakshi was born as the daughter of an ancient King of Madura. She was so beautiful that the Lord Shiva Himself fell in love with her. In order to win her he assumed the form of Sundareswara, king of the Beautiful, and wooed her. In the end Meenakshi became his wife, and attained Godhead. The fabulous Madura temple was built in her honour. Meenakshi is an example of a semi-Sanskritic or regional deity. She is a mother figure for the whole tribe, and propitiated at times of particular stress. A pilgrimage to the temple of Meenakshi at Madura is the very acme of a Muthuvan's religious ambition. Her help may be sought in any difficulty or misfortune. Like Subramanya, Meenakshi stands as an intimate link with the past for present-day Muthuvans. Worship of this deity is practically confined to Tamilnad, and she is little known in the West Coast.

In common with all hill tribes in Travancore, and the entire Malayalam-speaking West Coast population in general, the Muthuvans worship Sasta or Ayyappa. He is one of the

chief deities in the West Coast, and is believed to reside in forests. The author of Hindu Iconography has the following to say about Sasta:

> The deity Arya, Sasta or Hariharaputra, so well-known to the Dravidas, is not familiar to the inhabitants of Northern India; even in the Dravida country, he is the favourite only of the Malayalam people. The country of the latter possesses as large a number of temples of Sasta as the Tamil country has of Subramanya, and it is an invariable rule in the Malayalam country that in every temple, be it of Siva or of Vishnu, there must be in its south-west corner a shrine for Sasta. He is considered by them as the guardian of the land and as such eight mountain tops along the Western Ghats are surmounted by eight temples in which are set up eight images of Sasta to protect the country on the west of the mountain ranges, inhabited by the Malayalis, from all external evils and misfortunes. In this country he is better known as Sasta than as Hariharaputra or Arya. In the Tamil country he is known by the name Hariharaputra or, more frequently, Ayyanar, a modification of Arya.[1]

It is a familiar phenomenon in respect of most deities that their name, function, personality and even parentage, change from place to place to suit local myths, and the caste and class of the worshippers. This phenomenon is characteristic of the process of Hinduization of tribals and lower castes. Deities originating in Sanskritic or Vedic Hinduism undergo various transformations in the course of being adapted to the beliefs and rituals of lower forms of religion. Local myths grow up purporting to show an intimate connection between the locality and some crisis in

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1. T.A.Gopinatha Rao, ibid., p. 485

the deity's existence such as birth or marriage, the performance of a miracle, or the vanguishing of a demon. The variations and mutilations that a deity undergoes in name, function, character, parentage etc. are, in fact, so great that ultimately the more far-fetched local versions bear little resemblance to the original. Ayyappa affords a typical illustration of the process of localization of deities who are otherwise of classical origin. As Hariharaputra, son of Shiva by Mohini, a female manifestation on Vishnu, Ayyappa is a Sanskritic deity, but in the later adaptations he has changed beyond recognition. In discussing the religion of the Coorgs, Dr.Srinivas writes:

> Ayyappa is a Sanskritic deity who is very popular with the Coorgs and it is clear that his character has changed in the process of becoming acceptable to his worshippers. In Sanskritic mythology he is Shasta, the son of Shiva and Mohini(feminine form temporarily assumed by Vishnu). Shasta is also referred to as Hariharaputra, or the son of Shiva and Vishnu, and he is a very popular deity all along the Malabar Coast.
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> In Coorg, Shasta is referred to as Ayyappa or Sartavu, and he inhabits the jungles in which he wanders at night with his favourite pack of dogs. At night in the jungle, he can be heard whistling to his pack.[1]

Perhaps the only common characteristic between the numerous regional manifestations of Ayyappa is that he is a deity of the forests. All forest-dwelling peoples, especially of the Malabar Coast, are worshippers of Ayyappa. The Kadar of Cochin[2], the Ullatans of the Ranni Reserve in

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1. M.N.Srinivas, op. cit., p. 223 et seq
2. See foot note on next page.

Travancore, the Uralis of Peermade, and the Vishavans of the Idiyara Valley, not to mention the Muthuvans themselves, are all worshippers of Sasta. Among the Kadar, the chief of the tribe is also the poojari(priest) of Ayyappa.

Some accounts mention only five Sasta temples, and these are believed to have been established by the legendary Parasurama who reclaimed Malabar Coast from the sea. The Sasta temples were erected along the eastern mountain barrier of the new country so that this deity of the wilds may protect the country from natural and human enemies. The most important Sasta temple is the one at Sabarimala a place which, for this reason, is the chief centre of pilgrimage in the region.

There is an interesting story about the Sasta of Sabarimala. He was the son(servant in one version) of an ancient Raja of Pandalam in Central Travancore. He had a step-mother(or royal mistress) who used to ill-treat him. One day she commanded him to go to the forest and bring her the milk of a tigress, hoping that in the process of fulfilling the strange and dangerous command the boywould be conveniently put out of the way by the beast. He forthwith went to the forest and returned home riding a tigress. The

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1. Fr.M.Hermanns, "Contributions to the Study of Kadan Religion", Man(London: The Royal Anthropologica Institute, Oct. 1955), vol. LV, p. 146.

(This foot note is for '2' of previous page)

awe-stricken people, convinced that such courage and power could belong only to a God, began worshipping him. Forsaking the palace, the divine boy betook himself to Sabarimala, the densest part of the forest, and resided there surrounded by his feline slaves. The Raja of Pandalam, owner of the Sabarimala hills, caused a temple to be built in the place in honour of the deity.

Ayyappa is traditionally depicted as wearing a tiger skin and riding a tiger. Muthuvan village temples are usually adorned with pictures of Ayyappa, along with those of other deities.

The eastern Muthuvans mention another Sastha, beside the Sabarimala Sastha, as one of their deities. This is Poonayattu Sastha. In the heyday of the Poonayattu Perumals (the Poonjar Chiefs), Muthuvans used to pay homage to them once or twice a year with presents of the choicest produce of the forests such as honey, malar (puffed cereals), elephant tusks, antlers of deer etc. During these visits they would also worship at the shrines of Poonayattu Sastha. Ever since the control of the Poonjar Chiefs over the hill tribes declined, these visits have been discontinued and hence the worship of Poonayattu Sastha is not prevalent at present. However, it may be worthwhile to record the legend about this deity.

The Pandyan prince who took refuge in Travancore, and

later founded the Poonjar principality, rested for a few days in the village of Karikattu near Poonjar, in the course of his harrowing sojourn. In the village was a temple dedicated to Karikattu Sastha where the prince used to worship daily. One day he went to the Poonjar river to bathe, keeping his palm leaf umbrella on the river bank. After bathing he prayed to the Sastha that he may be granted blessing to settle down in peace somewhere, without fear of persecution from enemies. Later, when he came to pick up his umbrella, he found that it was become heavy as stone. He thereupon sent for the prasnakkar(diviners, astrologers), and asked them to unravel the mystery of the heavy umbrella. They discovered that the Karikattu Sastha himself had entered the umbrella and that he desired that a temple be built for him at the spot. The prince did accordingly, and his prayer was granted by being enabled to settle in Poonjar and found a principality. Henceforth, the erstwhile Karikattu Sastha was known as Poonayattu Sastha.*

The worship of Kali and Mariamma is a common feature of tribal religion in peninsular India. Kali is a powerful, malevolent deity, propitiated with blood sacrifices. The cult of Kali worship is prevalent in parts of northern India too, particularly Bengal, where she is better known a Durga or Tara. She is believed to be the wife of Shiva, but this Sanskritic link tends to weaken and finally

* For this legend, I am indebted to Mr. Parameswaran Pillai of Poonjar, an old Sanskrit Scholar of repute.

disappear altogether in the process of localization. This phenomenon is much the same as in the case of Sastha, and of nearly all Sanskritic deities undergoing local adaptations, for that matter. Perhaps the only surviving factors of identity between the numerous local versions of Kali are her acknowledged power, fierceness, malevolence and thirst for blood. Among the Travancore tribes she is worshipped under different names such as Kali, Karinkali and Bhadrakali. It is difficult to say if all these deities are really one and the same, or different from each other. Certain sections of Pulayas worship two different deities known as Karinkali and Bhadrakali. In whatever guise she is worshipped blood sacrifice is an invariable feature. Traditionally, Kali is represented as a four-armed Goddess of dreadful countenance, wielding murderous weapons, and wearing the symbols of death and destruction such as human skulls around her neck. Muthuvans do not have any precise conception of the nature of Kali, or of her link with Sanskritic Hinduism; she is considered to be inherently malevolent, and tending to shower her wrath at the slightest provocation unless generously propitiated with the blood of fowls or goats.

Mariamma is an equally dreaded deity who is also propitiated with blood sacrifice. She is pre-eminently the Goddess of small-pox. There is a common belief that small-pox is a spirit-induced scourge. In southern India the

disease is universally associated with Mariamma, whose shrines are seen in many places, especially in the rural areas. Muthuvans dread small-pox. If anyone in a kudi is known to be suffering from this, the others immediately flee from the locality leaving the afflicted one behind to die or recover as Mariamma would have it, no matter how close the kinship or other relationship is between the victim and the rest. Not long ago, in one kudi a woman was known to have contracted small-pox. The others in the village decided to vacate the very next morning leaving the woman alone. Suspecting that the others might run away at day-break, at night she tied one end of her pudavai to her husband's mundu without his knowledge. In the small hours of the morning when the woman was still asleep the husband rose to depart, but the tug of his cloth awoke her and she clung to him desperately in a last bid to escape the horrible fate of being left alone to die. Eventually the woman was admitted to a hospital in the nearest town through the intervention of sympathisers among the townspeople. Two days later the woman died in the hospital and the husband disappeared without fuss.

During the festival of Thai pongal, fowls are cut in honour of Mariamma. If she is pleased, no one in the kudi will die of small-pox during the year. Certain hill tribes believe in a deity by the name of Chamundi who,

according to one writer on the subject, is the same as Kali or Mariamma.[1] Under one name or another, all hill tribes believe in a Goddess of small-pox.

The deities described so far are more or less common to peninsular Hinduism. With the possible exception of Mariamma, all these are directly of Sanskritic origin, or closely linked with one or other of the principal Sanskritic deities. This is a characteristic feature, not only of Muthuvan religion, but of the religion of most tribal groups in India. It is equally characteristic of tribal religion that the deities adapted from Sanskritic Hinduism are not considered vitally important to the well-being of the people, cattle or crops; those who really seem to matter are the indigenous deities of individual tribes who exercise powerful and immediate control over the land, wife, property and prosperity of their devotees. Nevertheless, the Sanskritic deities fulfil an important function in tribal religion; they serve, as already stated, to establish a link between tribal religion and Hinduism at large; they give a tint of respectability to tribal religion. This is why the suggestion was made earlier that Sanskritic deities in tribal religion are 'prestige deities'. The question may

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1. K.V.Viswambharan, "Some Hill Deities of Kerala" The Mathrubhumi Weekly (Calicut: May 10, 1953), vol. xxx, No. 8 p. 12

now be asked why, in that case, do the tribals not adapt the supreme deities like Shiva and Vishnu of Sanskritic Hinduism; for if the suggestion of 'prestige deity' is plausible, it must be that the higher the deity, the greater is the prestige. The answer to this is that the adaptation of deities bears a close relation to the group's culture contacts and status in caste heirarchy. One may find a parallel here to what Dr.Srinivas calls Sanskritization, a process of gradual ascent in the caste heirarchy of lower groups by adopting the beliefs and rituals of the next higher group.[1] The comparison is admittedly rather far-fetched because the process described by Dr.Srinivas takes place among those who can be classified as the middle group in caste heirarchy whose position and status, being indeterminate, afford certain facilities for them to rise to a higher level by Sanskritizing their rituals. It is possible, that a comparable process of social ascent takes place also among the lower castes and tribal groups, though in a much less organized form. The point is that when a low caste tries to assimilate the beliefs, deities and rituals of Hinduism of a higher plane, the model sought to be followed is the plane immediately higher, as opposed to one several steps higher. One cannot be far wrong if one were

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1. M.N.Srinivas, op. cit., passim.

to determine a particular group's position in caste heirarchy by equating it with the deities that the group worshipped. The Nayadis of Travancore, a nomadic tribe worshipping ancestor spirits in the shape of demons are among the very lowest groups in the State in relation to caste heirarchy. The Pulayas, who are also very low, but not so low as the Nayadis, worship the Sun, ancestor spirits, and certain specified demons like Karikutty, Chathan, Murthi and Kali Pey. Neither of these groups have deities of Sanskritic association. It is not suggested that there is a cause and effect relationship between low position in caste heirarchy and worship of sub-Sanskritic deities, but the association is significant. The Ullatans and Uralis, two forest-dwelling tribes who occupy a higher ritual position than Nayadis and Pulayas worship not only the ancestor spirits and sub-Sanskritic, indigenous deities, but also Sastha who may be described as a semi-Sanskritic deity. The Muthuvans, who are higher still than Ullatans and Uralis in social and ritual status, worship several semi-Sanskritic or Sanskritic deities like Sastha, Kali, Meenakshi and Subramanya, apart from indigenous deities. These facts seem to show that the nature of deities worshipped by a group is a determinant of the group's position in caste heirarchy.

Nor is this all. We have already seen that Sanskritic

deities assimilated in sub-Sanskritic forms of Hinduism tend to assume local colouration in varying degrees. The degree of change is sometimes so great as to make it difficult to recognise the original. The character of Sanskritic deities in nearly all sub-Sanskritic forms of Hinduism clearly exemplify this tendency. Two things happen in this process. On the one hand, the Sanskritic deity grafted to a sub-Sanskritic form of Hinduism undergoes some debasement in the course of becoming understandable and acceptable to its new votaries; on the other, the sub-Sanskritic religion to whose patheon is added a superior deity raises itself in ritual and social status by virtue of that addition.

We shall now turn to a consideration of the indigenous deities of the Muthuvans. By the very nature of their parochial origin and local associations, the indigenous deities vary, not only from one tribe to another, but even from one section to another of the same tribe. In the case of the Muthuvans, the eastern and western sections have different deities. These differences are not the result only of differences in the traditions of the two sections; they are partly also due to the social insularity of settlements. Where localities are widely separated by mountain ranges and wild forests, communication is virtually non-existent. In course of time local myths and legends

grow and are incorporated into the beliefs and rituals of each local group with little possibility of these being transmitted to other localities. Such insular traditions and beliefs are markedly present in isolated Muthuvan settlements. Deities of local origin are often associated with natural objects like hills, rocks, caves, rivers and glades, or with man-made objects like dolmens and menhirs many of which are still extant in parts of the Travancore forests. There is sometimes an episode, real or mythical, in the lore of the tribe that may be cited to account for the origin or discovery of a deity. As fairly representative illustrations of this, we shall consider a few deities about whom information is available.

The Muthuvans of the east believe in a female deity called Sankudikki Amma to whom great powers are attributed. She is known specially for her power over cattle and cultivation. The welfare and fertility of cattle and crops, the protection of cattle from the predatory tiger and of crops from the elephant and bison, are the direct dispensations of Sankudikki Amma. This Goddess is a virgin and a vegetarian. She is highly sensitive to pollution from the menstrual discharges of women, and the latter are therefore admonished to keep clear of the Goddess' abode, of cultivated fields, and of votive offerings to her, while they are in the state of pollution. Being a particularly

fastidions vegetarian, she abhors blood and all animal sacrifices. Hence in the festival of Thai pongal at which animal sacrifices are made to other deities, Sankudikki Amma is not invoked lest she, on appearing at the seene in response to the invocation, is angered by the sight and smell of meat and blood. She is believed to live on a small hillock, at the summit of which a slab of rock stands upright to mark the Sanctum sanctorum of her abode. Flowers, betel leaves, incense and coins are seen strewn at the foot of the rock. In front of it stands a vel, (the three-pronged spear or trident), familiar symbol of Subramanya, but, to the Muthuvan, the mark of a hallowed spot.

Sankudikki Amma was 'discovered' by the ancestors of the eastern Muthuvans when they first came to the Travancore forests from Madura. At that time she was living with her two brothers in a dolmen in the forest. Later on the brothers moved to the country beyond the hills and 'became Gods'. Muthuvans believe that shrines have been built at the places where the brothers attained Godhead. Sankudikki Amma was left alone in her present abode with instructions to look after the cattle and crops of the Muthuvans. Her votaries in Poopara Range speak of her as "our own Goddess". She is held in great respect and regard, and spoken with a noticeable feeling of affection and possessiveness.

The western Muthuvans have a comparable deity in

Ponganathu Bhagawati. Her haunt is a high hill called Soolamudi[1] rising majestically across the Makarachal river. She is the guardian and protector of the person of the Muthuvan. Her abode is supposed to be infested with tigers who constitute her bodyguard, for she is mistress of the wild animals. The favourite offering to this Goddess is iron which, whenever obtained, is hurled at the foot of Soolamudi hill with a prayer that it may be accepted and the giver protected from all harm. Whenever a Muthuvan of Kiliparambu, the settlement nearest to Soolamudi, gets a piece of iron, be it ever so small and worthless, he hurls it at the foot of the hill. When a Muthuvan is about to set out on a journey he prays to Ponganathu Bhagawati to protect him from all dangers during his journey forth and back. In answer to the supplication - so they believe - the Goddess commands one of her feline bodyguards to accompany the traveller to insure his safety during the journey. The beast follows him close on his heels like a faithful dog, but is invisible to mortal eye.

The western Muthuvans have another female deity called Santhiattu Bhagawati. She is even more powefful than

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1. Soolamudi, as the name indicates, has also a trident to crown it. Soolam in Malayalam means trident, the Tamil equivalent of which is vel. Mudi means a hill or, to be more precise, the conical top of a hill.

Ponganathu Bhagawati and reigns supreme over all minor deities. She may well be described as the Patron Goddess of the Western Muthuvans. The legend about Santhiattu Bhagawati has already been referred to in the first chapter as she is none other than Kannaki, the Goddess of Chastity who, in righteous anger at the unjust execution of her husband Kovalan by Nedun Jeliyan, the Pandyan King of Madura, consigned Madura City to flames. When her anger abated, she proceeded westward, accompanied by a band of admiring followers, until she came to the Malayalthu Desam (land of Malayalam) where she settled her followers and settled herself thereafter under the name of Santhiattu Bhagawati. Her followers were the ancestors of the present-day western Muthuvans. The eastern Muthuvans call her Malayalathu Bhagawati by virtue of her choice of the Malayalam-speaking region as her abode. The traditional Kannaki myth as related in the Tamil classic Silappadikaram is that after the burning of Madura, she was bodily carried to heaven by Indra, the king of Heaven, in his celestial chariot, and that ever after she was worshipped as the Goddess of Chastity. The western Muthuvans who claim to have been "brought to Malayalathu Desam by Santhiattu Bhagawati" do not worship her as the Goddess of Chastity, nor do they believe that she was carried bodily to heaven by Indra. To them she is the Patron Goddess, much alive and active on

1 See P.58

this earth, and having as her abode the Malayalam-speaking region.

It is significant that the female deities of the western Muthuvans have the suffix Bhagawati to their names, whereas the female deities of the eastern Muthuvans have the suffix Amma. This is characteristic of the cultural affiliation of the two sections. Bhagawati is a familiar Malayalam ending of Sanskritic origin for the name of a female deity, whereas Amma is a familiar Tamil ending. (Bhagawati itself literally means Goddess, its masculine gender being Bhagawan. Amma means mother in both Malayalam and Tamil, but it is only in the latter that it is used as the suffix to a female deity's name.) The western Muthuvans have tended to assimilate Malayali culture, whereas the eastern Muthuvans adhere to Tamil culture and traditions.

An important male deity of the western Muthuvans apart from Subramania and Ayyappa, who are common to both sections, is Karappuswami. He is an opium addict and hence the name, for, Karappu means opium. Needless to say, Karappuswami's favourite offering is opium. Being a deity of baser desires, he is fond of toddy(fermented palm juice) and fowl. The eastern Muthuvans also have a deity of a similar name, called Karappanaswami who is described as "a God of the forest". But in their imagery of the deity, he is not an opium addict; he is, however, fond of toddy and other

intoxicating drinks. Animal sacrifices are also made to him, generally a goat.

It is an interesting point that the indigenous deities often have some of the attributes of the votaries themselves. Karappuswami is a case in point. The western Muthuvans attribute to him a particular fondness for opium, and, the people themselves are addicted to opium. Likewise, the eastern Muthuvans attribute to Karappanaswami, their counterpart of Karappuswami, a love of toddy and arack. In this case, the people are also fond of toddy and arack, but addiction to opium is practically unknown among them.

Another indigenous deity of the eastern Muthuvans is Kottamala Andavar. As the name itself suggests, he reigns in the Kotta hill.[1] The Kottamala or Kotta hill is one of the hills in the High Ranges. The deity who resides in the hill is called Kottamala Andavar(he who reigns in Kottamala). He is propitiated with animal sacrifices, preferably a goat.

There are also minor deities like Nayammar and Soolapurammal, both female deities. Of these, the first is the Goddess of Hunting. There is no particular hill or forest associated with her; she is "of the forest." When an animal is trapped or shot, the heart and liver, or portions of these, are offered to Nayammar. Mr.Krishna Iyer confirms the practice of offering a portion of the meat to

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1. Mala means hill, and Andavar means he who reigns.

the deity of hunting, but does not mention the name of the deity. He writes:

> When a Muthuvan kills an animal, he takes the spoils of the game to the village. The carcass is suspended over fire for the removal of the hair. It is then washed and cut to pieces. In the case of a black monkey, the liver, hands and feet are cut into thin slices and are then pierced on five thin stakes. These are then roasted by being suspended over fire and are placed on a leaf. The following prayer is then made to the deity who presides over the hunt:- "Just as my parents, grand-parents and their ancestors went in quest of food and lived by the spoils of the chase, may I be blessed with the same luck. If I am lucky, I shall offer you a share of the spoils before they are tasted by anyone else." The slices are then equitably distributed among those present and the remaining portion of the carcass is divided equally among the village folk.[1]

Dolmens are seen in many parts of Travancore forests, especially in the High Ranges and Cardamom Hills. The eastern Muthuvans call them 'Pancha Pandava Madham' (house of the five Pandavas), because they believe that the Pandava brothers lived in these dolmens during their fourteen-year exile in the forests.[2] The Pandava brothers were sons of Pandu, and heroes of the ancient Indian epic Mahabharata. They were Aryan princes of the North. The eastern Muthuvans say, "We live in the forest just as the Pandavas lived before us; we are carrying on the Pandava tradition". It may be of interest to mention in this connection that historians connect the name Pandya, the ancient Madura dynasty, with

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1. L.A.Krishna Iyer, op. cit., p. 39
2. It is suggested that Pandavar Madham or Pandavar Kuli is a corruption of Mandavar — meaning pits of the dead. (Coimbatore District Gazetteer, 1933, p. 260.)

Pandu. At any rate there is a tradition that the Pandyan Kings were of the lineage of Pandu, or descendants of an ancient Rajput clan known as Pandus. The eastern Muthuvans, as we have already seen, claim to have been the subjects of the Pandyan Kings at Madura before they came into the Travancore hills. At one time, the eastern Muthuvans who live in the dolmen region, used to worship at the dolmens in the belief that they are haunts of the Pandavas. The practice does not seem to be in vogue now, and the reason given for its discontinuance is that there is no one among the present generation who knows the correct ritual of worship at the Pancha Pandava Madham. There is a story that one man who performed pooja at one of the madhams, some time ago, fell sick and died shortly afterwards because the pooja was not in the correct form.

Ancestor worship is an important feature of Muthuvan religion. Western Muthuvans refer to the ancestors by the Malayalam term for matrilineal ancestors, Karanavas, and the eastern Muthuvans refer to them as Moothakal. During the Thai pongal festival, a special pongal is offered to the ancestors. In death ceremonies, the ancestors are exclusively propitiated. Being a people of matrilineal descent, the Muthuvans worship their matrilineal ancestors. In Muthuvan ancestor worship there is no necessary cognizance of a personally known or a historical ancestor. It is a mystical

communion with a body of ancestors in all past generations. Female ancestors are also worshipped, although the term Karanavas refer only to matrilineal male ancestors. The term Moothakal, however, appears to include both male and female ancestors, without reference to sex.

Sun worship is also prevalent. Every morning the devout Muthuvan turns towards the rising sun and makes obeisance by bending his head and folding his hands at the chest. But sun-worship is not part of the religious ceremonies of Thai pongal. Sun is a benevolent deity, the giver of light and heat. He is more or less taken for granted, and it is not thought necessary to perform propitiatory rituals for him. In some Muthuvan kovils, a picture of the Sun God riding a chariot drawn by flaming horses can be seen.

Muthuvans have an unquestioning belief in the practical significance of dreams. Dream is the medium of communication of the dead with the living, and, on rare occasions, of Gods and Goddesses with mortals. Guidance in the conduct of one's affairs, predictions of the future, and warnings about dangers, are all communicated by the Moothakal through dreams. But all dreams are not good. Evil spirits, demons, and ghosts may also appear in dreams. The ghost of a newly-dead person, and of a person who died an unnatural death, are particularly feared, because both these are supposed to be inclined to return to the living through dreams and harass them.

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II

Muthuvans have a variety of religious rituals. The chief among these is the Thai Pongal. The ritual itself is called Pongal, and Thai Pongal means the Pongal in Thai month. Thai(capricon) is the first month according to Tamil almanac, and it falls between January and February. Thai Pongal is generally in the latter half of January. All over the Tamil-speaking region in South India, Thai is a month of festivities. The festivities are particularly important in the rural areas, because Thai is the harvest month and the Thai Pongal is not merely a harvest festival, but it is also the occasion for the collective religious ritual of the village. It combines the elements of thanks giving and propitiation.

A word must be said about 'Pongal' itself. Pongal, literally, is sweet rice, i.e., rice sweetened with molasses. The rice itself is cooked in milk for the occasion, whereas at other times it is cooked in water. In South India, it is customary to prepare Pongal on festive occasions; it is indispensible for the harvest festival in Thai. For the Muthuvans, Pongal is an object of ritual value; it is a sanctified offering to the deities. On all occasions of worship, whether it be as thanksgiving for favours received, or propitiation for favours desired, or expiation for misdemeanours, the ritual object is Pongal. On account of

the constant association between Pongal and ritual, all religious rituals themselves are called Pongal, and all Pongal offerings are of a ritual nature. Hence, in discussing Pongal, the word is sometimes used to mean the entire process of offering Pongal, and sometimes to mean the object itself.

The Pongal celebration takes place on the first Monday of Thai, or, failing this, on the second Monday. Preparations for Pongal begin several days in advance. The unmarried boys of the village repair and clean the kovil (village temple) and its surroundings. It is significant that a great many acts, the performance of which require ritual purity on the part of the performer, are performed by the unmarried boys. The unmarried male is in the state of highest degree of ritual purity. The kovil and its surroundings are necessarily in a state of ritual purity; but to elevate it to the highest degree of purity, its floor and forecourt are painted with fresh cowdung paste. Cowdung is an agent of ritual purification. Among some tribes, when a man is defiled in any manner, he cleanses himself of the defilement by drinking cowdung water. Mr.Krishna Iyer states that if a Paraya were polluted (by the proximity of a Nayadi), he would let out blood from his small finger or from his gum and drink three mouthfuls of

liquid cowdung.[1] To the Muthuvan the chief purifying agent is wild turmeric. Cowdung is only of secondary importance. It is mainly used in plastering the floor. On ritual occasions a fresh coating of cowdung paste is applied to the floor of huts and of the temple.

All work of repairing, cleaning and tidying of the temple premises is done by men only. Women are not allowed to go inside the temple. A woman, even in her normal ritual status is not sufficiently pure to enter a place of worship. But she may go up to the threshold and make obeisance to the deities inside.

Pongal is a collective celebration, all the households in a hamlet participating in it. The expenses of the occasion are borne by the families equally. The Kani (hamlet head-man) and other elders of the hamlet meet together and decide how much money they need for Pongal. The amount is divided equally among the individual households. This ensures a minimum, equal participation by all families in Pongal. However, a family or an individual wishing to make special offerings such as a quantity of Pongal, a fowl or cash, may do so. In point of fact, the total Pongal offerings are always more than the collective offerings on behalf of the hamlet. The contribution from each family

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1. L.A.Krishna Iyer, op. cit., p. 65.

may be in the form of paddy(unhusked rice) or money, or both.

Being a festive occasion, Pongal combines the ritual and social elements, or rather, the ritual element is accompanied by social festivity. Houses are tidied, old clothes are washed, and some new clothing is purchased. Muthuvans have no festival other than Pongal. The usual Hindu religious festivals of South India are unknown to most Muthuvans, and even if known, they are not celebrated. The one festival looked forward to with great expectation is Pongal. It sees the fulfilment of a year's votive undertakings, and the beginning of a new year. To the Muthuvan, Pongal is the chief event of the year.

On Pongal day everyone takes a bath and has a change of clothing. Husbands and wives refrain from sexual intercourse on the eve of Pongal. On the morning of Pongal day, the young women of the hamlet are assigned the task of pounding the paddy. These women must be ritually pure. But the ritual purity required of the paddy-pounding women is of the highest degree possible in a woman. Only those women who have not had the onset of menses between the first day of Thai month and the day of Pongal are selected as paddy-pounders. They must also be physically clean, having bathed and changed. Unmarried men, though intrinsically of a higher ritual status than women, are

not asked to pound paddy, because paddy-pounding is a woman's job.

The Pongal rice must be ritually pure. Rice that has already been dehusked, or rice that is purchased from the shop is polluted and therefore unsuitable for ritual purposes. The rice must be freshly dehusked, and it must be raw. A distinction is made between 'raw rice' and 'boiled rice'. Rice obtained from steamed paddy is called 'boiled rice', and rice from raw paddy is called 'raw rice'. Boiled rice is ritually impure, because it has already undergone a process similar to cooking.

The pounding of paddy for Pongal is done in the open air, and not in a house. The pounding site is levelled and beaten hard, and plastered with cowdung. A new bamboo mat is spread over the ground. The paddy is heaped in separate heaps according to the deity for whom it is offered. Then the women bring the pounding equipments - oral and olakka - and place them on the mat. Before stepping on to the mat they wash their hands and feet and make obeisance to the deities by bowing low. Paddy is put into the oral in small quantities at a time and as the young women and girls pound the paddy the older women stand around and give instructions. The girls are asked to stand erect without looking down so that their breath may not fall on the rice. Breath is a defiling agent. Even more defiling than breath is saliva.

The girls are constantly reminded not to talk or open their mouth lest in so doing particles of saliva should fall on the rice and defile it. When the pounding is over, the bran is separated from the rice by winnowing, and the rice collected in baskets. The bachelors take the baskets to the temple.

The cooking of Pongal is done in the forecourt of the kovil, by the head-man of the hamlet. He covers his nose and mouth with a strip of white linen tied across the face, so that no polluting substance may fall in the rice. The Pongal for each deity is cooked in a different vessel. As the head-man puts the rice into each vessel, he makes obeisance to the deity concerned and utters a prayer. When the cooking is over, the mouth of each vessel is covered with plantain leaves.

The climax of the ritual comes late in the afternoon. Plantain leaves are spread in front of each pot, and ritual articles such as betel leaves and arecanuts, flowers, cocoanuts, plantains and incense are placed on the leaves. A pot of turmeric water is also kept nearby. A portion of Pongal from each vessel is placed on the leaf in front of the vessel, as the deity's share. Pongals are offered to Subramanya, Meenakshi, Sasta, Kali and Mariamma, and any other deity to whom a Pongal is due on this occasion. Kottamala Andavar and Karappanaswami, the deities of the

hills and forest, are propitiated separately in the forest with goat sacrifice. Nayammar, the goddess of hunting is not specially propitiated with Pongal, but whenever an animal is caught a portion of the best meat is roasted for her. Sankudiki Amma, though one of the chief deities of the eastern Muthuvans, is not propitiated with Pongal along with other deities, because the fowl sacrifice that accompany Pongal is abhorrent to her. A special Pongal is offered to her in the cultivation site. The western Muthuvans offer Pongal to their local deities Santhiattu Bhagawati and Ponganathu Bhagawati besides the common deities like Subramanya, Meenakshi, Sasta, Kali and Mariamma. In addition to these, both sections of Muthuvans offer Pongal to the ancestors.

As soon as Pongal is offered to all the deities, the poojari(temple priest) begins a ritual dance. He holds a bunch of peacock feathers, the emblem of Subramanya, in one hand, and a bunch of canes in the other. Each cane represents one of the deities to whom the Pongal is offered, so there are as many canes as there are deities propitiated. Boys beat the drum. As the dance progresses the poojari becomes possessed. He dances more wildly and with faster movements than before, makes weird sounds, and beats himself with the canes. The deities who possess him speak to the people through him. When a deity speaks through

a medium, it is called arul(prophesy). The poojari may be possessed by several deities one after the other, or only by one. Sometimes a deity may possess one of the onlookers and he will start dancing and speaking the words of the deity who possessed him. Female deities, particularly Kali and Mariamma, are prone to possess females. The arul given by each deity is carefully listened to. One deity may speak of the transgressions of the hamlet and how these must be remedied; another diety may indicate the best site for the new hamlet which shall have to be set up soon; yet another deity may be displeased with the Pongal and say so. In that case a special Pongal will soon be performed for him. In case there has been no arul at all over a Pongal, it is an indication that the deity was not pleased with the Pongal, and this too will be rectified by offering another Pongal.

As the poojari and other possessed men dance around the Pongal, the boys of the hamlet decapitate the fowls and let the blood flow into the Pongal of the deities concerned. Each family would probably have promised one or more fowls to one or more deities, during the year, in anticipation of some favour, and these promises are fulfilled at Pongal. Besides the fowls from individual families, two or three fowls are cut on behalf of the hamlet as a whole, and for the health, welfare and prosperity of the people. Altogether

some ten to twenty fowls are cut at each Pongal. If, on decapitating a fowl, the blood comes gushing out in jets it is considered to be a good sign, for, it indicates that the deity is pleased and it portends a favourable arul. A possessed man crouches and eats the Pongal of the deity who possessed him, without touching the food with his fingers, and licks the blood of the fowls cut for that deity. In the case of a Pongal over which there was no arul, it is not eaten by anyone, but thrown away. The Pongal for moothakal(ancestors) is also treated in the same manner as the Pongal for a deity; one of the ancestors possesses someone, but if there has been no arul, the Pongal is thrown away and a fresh Pongal offered later.

Mr.L.A.Krishna Iyer calls the possession dance 'divination'. He says:

> One method by which the gods of the Muthuvans are believed to be prevailed on to intervene in human affairs is divination. During the frenzy into which diviners fall, they are believed to be inspired by Gods, and to reveal the causes of divine displeasure and the ways for averting it. Each diviner is believed to be inspired by one deity. The practice of divination plays an important part in festive occasions.

After about an hour's dancing, the possessed men relax and the state of possession gradually works itself out. In due course they return to the normal state. Sometimes a

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1. L.A.Krishna Iyer, op. cit., p. 30

possessed man may swoon and collapse due to sheer exhaustion. This is a good sign, because it indicates that the possession has been intense, and the degree of intensity of possession is a measure of the deity's pleasure.

The Pongal is divided equally among all the households in the kudi, after keeping apart a certain quantity from each pot for the guests. Anyone who visits the kudi on Pongal day must be fed. Usually there are several guests on this day. Men and women from nearby Muthuvan kudis visit to partake of the Pongal unless Pongal is being celebrated in those kudis themselves simultaneously. The decapitated fowls are taken home by the respective owners, and are cooked and eaten with the Pongal.

The Pongal described above is the chief collective religious ritual of the Muthuvans. Immediately after this the villagers make preparations to shift to a new hamlet site, the site being supposedly selected for them by the deities and revealed in arul during Pongal.

But Thai Pongal is by no means the only religious ritual. A variety of minor propitiatory rituals are performed during the course of the year. Important among these are the goat sacrifices to Karappanaswami, Kottamala Andavar, Kali and Sankudikki Amma. Ritual offerings to the first three are characterised by animal sacrifices, whereas offerings to the last consist only of Pongal without

meat, because the deity herdelf is believed to be a vegetarian. It will be observed that, as a rule, the malevolent deities are propitiated with animal sacrifices, whereas the benevolent deities are propitiated with Pongal. Kottamala Andavar, Karappanswami and Kali are malevolent deities. Pongal may be offered to them at Thai Pongal, and fowls cut for them; but it is necessary that a special animal sacrifice must be performed for each of them at least once during the course of the year. The most pleasing sacrifice for them is goat sacrifice, but occasionally the goat may be substituted by a fowl. The goat sacrifices to malevolent deities are communal acts. This is the essential difference between the animal sacrifices to these deities during Pongal, and the special sacrifices later. A fowl cut for, say Kali, at Thai Pongal is a votive offering by an individual or a family, although it is performed on a collective occasion. The benefits of such a sacrifice will accrue only to the individual or family that offered it. It does not necessarily dispose the deity favourably towards the kudi as a whole. Therefore, a special sacrifice, preferably a goat, must be offered on behalf of the whole kudi.

The goat sacrifices are performed in a secluded part of the forest, away from the habitation, and only the men of the kudi participate in it. The exclusion of women in

these sacrifices is necessary because the deities are particularly disposed to enter the feminine body and cause damage to its procreative powers. The female sex is a vulnerable group in relation to the malevolent deities. Another reason is that the appearance of these deities in arul is noisy and fearsome, and is likely to give fright to women.

Since the goat sacrifice is a communal act, all families that constitute the kudi are expected to bear an equal share of the expenses of the sacrifice. The headman collects each family's share and buys a goat. The goat must be male, young, uncastrated, and black in colour. It must not have any physical deformity. Some families rear a couple of goats or so, and if a goat that fulfils the requirements is available in the kudi itself, that goat is sacrificed. The other families in the kudi give to the owner of the goat their share of the price of the animal.

On the day of sacrifice, the men bathe and put on clean clothing. They remain celibate on the eve of the adu vettu (lit. goat-cutting). At noon they proceed to a secluded part of the forest, leading the goat, and carrying with them a quantity of rice and condiments sufficient to feast the whole party. The goat is washed and rendered ritually pure by sprinkling turmeric water on it. It may be cut by any man who volunteers to do so. After saying

the appropriate prayers, he cuts the goat's neck with one stroke. It is most important that the animal dies with the first stroke. Otherwise, it is considered to signify that the deity is not well pleased. If the head is completely severed with the first stroke, it is considered best of all. As soon as the goat falls dead, the deity possesses the man who cut the goat and he dances in a frenzy, and utters the arul. When the arul is over, the goat is skinned and the meat cooked in the forest itself, along with the rice, and eaten. No part of the meat or rice is taken home, lest the women and children partake of it and displease the deities.

Kottamala Andavar protects the people from dangers in the forest; Karappanaswami causes rainfall; Kali is the goddess of disease and death. The three goat sacrifices of the year are in propitiation of these three deities. If the harvest was poor, and people are in stringent circumstances, one or two fowls may be cut instead of a goat.

The Pongal for Sankudikki Amma is generally performed in the cultivation site, because she is primarily the goddess of cultivation. On the eve of forest-clearing, sowing and harvesting, separate Pongals are offered. These Pongals are also collective offerings, but they are relatively minor affairs. In addition to these, individual Muthuvans may offer Pongals to Sankudikki Amma within their own plots of ragi or paddy at all important phases in cultivation. A

more common practice, however, is for a man to make a propitiatory cash offering of four annas or eight annas to Sankudikki Amma, with a supplication for protecting the crop from wild animals and for blessing for a rich harvest. The money is wrapped in a piece of clean linen and hidden in the branches of a tree in the man's plot, or under a stone. It is important that the place of hiding is kept secret as otherwise some enemy may remove it. It is equally important that the offering is not defiled by the proximity of women in pollution. So the man informs his wife the place of hiding of the cash offering so that if she happens to pass by the cultivated plot during her pollution period, she may keep away from the sacred spot. If, through inadvertence, the offering is defiled, the defilement must be expiated by making a fresh offering of a large amount. Otherwise, the crop will be eaten by wild animals. The removal of the offering by an enemy has also a similar consequence.

Muthuvan belief in after-life is very vague, and some even deny the possibility of existence after death. But this is manifestly in conflict with the belief in communion with ancestors, and the fear of the near dead reappearing in dreams. Belief in after-life, therefore, is an implied one as corroborated by other beliefs, and not a consciously formulated one. Furthermore, the Muthuvan have no conception of reward in after-life for one's good deeds in the present

life, or of punishments for one's evil deeds.

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On the basis of the fore-going observations on Muthuvan religion, it may be worthwhile to examine briefly some of the existing generalisations on primitive religion. Tylor's concept of animism as an explanation of primitive religion, is only too well-known. It has gained considerable popular usage. In India, the tribal population are usually classified as Animists in the Census Reports. But this is certainly a misnomer, or the result of too liberal an interpretation of animism. For, animism, as the doctrine of the anima mundi (that phenomena of animal life are produced by an immaterial soul, or, the attribution of living soul to inanimate objects and natural phenomena) is rarely, if ever, found to be a characteristic of tribal religion in India. This holds true of Muthuvan religion too. The Muthuvan do have deities associated with natural and inanimate objects; but in all such instances, the objects themselves are of no significance except as abodes of the deities concerned. The deities themselves are spiritual beings with existences independent of their physical abodes. But by virtue of the divine association of these spiritual abodes, they are venerated. In truth, Muthuvan religion is only one of the manifestations of Hinduism of a lower order wherein one meets with a variety of deities from the purely local or

indigenous to the semi-Sanskritic and Sanskritic. It is indeed characteristic of the genius of tribal religion that it is highly receptive, and permissive of a large degree of adaptations and even transplantations of deities. The extreme fluidity and easy adaptability of Muthuvan religion, and, possibly, of most of the simpler societies, is borne out further by the indigenous origins of deities and religious rituals, and the consequent regional variations in beliefs in consonance with the myths and traditions of the people of the region. It would seem that there is an attempt towards some logical explanations of deities and beliefs. Such explanations fulfil an inestimable subjective value by sanctifying traditions and, at the same time, rendering the reality of divinities personal and intimate. In essence, however, the implicitness of belief itself is so strong that it transcends the rigours of logic.

In the Henry Myers lecture at the Royal Anthropological Institute (1948), Professor Raymond Firth said that the range of religious belief can be expected to vary according to the range of possible social situations.[1] Although the statement seems to have been made in relation to the range of belief of the individual, it remains true even as applied to groups.

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1. Raymond Firth, "Religious Belief and Personal Adjustment", Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (London: 1948)LXXVIII.

Individual variations within given situations are possible, but this seems to be less so among the Muthuvan than among some other simple societies such as, for instance, the Crow Indians among whom the dominant element in religion is the element of mysticism.[1] The mystic element in Muthuvan religion is of little significance except in the case of ancestor worship in which a mystic communion with ancestors is sought. This paucity of mysticism would seem to account for the comparative rigidity of belief in so far as the individual Muthuvan is concerned.

This brings us directly to the question of the individual versus the social as aspects of primitive religion. According to Robertson Smith, primitive religion is essentially an affair or the community rather than of individuals. Durkheim also seems to have held more or less the same view, although expressed in altogether different terms. For, after an analysis of primitive tribal festivities and seasonal ceremonies of the Central Australians, he tried to establish that Society is the raw-material of God-head, and that the religious idea is born out of "the great collective effervescence during the periods of concentration."[2]

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1. Cf. Robert Lowie, Primitive Religion (London: George Routledge, 1936), pp. 1-32

2. See, Malinowski, Magic, Science and Religion (Glencoe, The Free Press: 1948), p. 39.

It may be conceded that this might be true of the totemic clans of the Central Australian tribes, for, Durkheim was led to his conclusions by the study of totemism, which he believed to be the most primitive form of religion in which, "the God of the clan ...can be nothing else than the clan itself."[1] But in the case of a non-totemic tribe like the Muthuvan, for instance, it is doubtful if its religious ideas are born out of the "collective effervescence." On the other hand, the exact reverse would seem to be the appropriate explanation in this case, namely, that the great "collective effervescence" during the periods of concentration, is born out of the religious idea. The annual religious ceremony of the pongal of the Muthuvan is essentially a festival of the fulfilment of offerings promised in anticipation of certain divine favours. It is obvious that in a situation like this, the reality of divine dispensation is presupposed. Nevertheless, it may be said that the "collective effervescence" during the periods of concentration give rise to states of mind in the individual participants, that may be described as one of intense religiosity, which manifests itself in overt behaviour as spirit-possession. In this we see a necessary relationship between the religious or spirit-animated state of mind, and social behaviour. An individual

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1. Ibid., 5.

does not become spirit-animated in solitude, or at odd moments. It is only during occasion of "collective effevescence," be it the ritual of the pongal, the goat sacrifice, or any other religious event of common concern, that an individual attains a state of spirit-possession.

Malinowski criticised the Durkheimian view for four reasons: "First of all, in primitive societies religion arises to a great extent from purely individual sources. Secondly, society as a crowd is by no means always given to the production of religious beliefs or even to religious states of mind, while collective effervescence is often of an entirely secular nature. Thirdly, tradition, the sum total of certain rules and cultural achievements, embraces, and in primitive societies keeps in a tight grip, both Profane and Sacred. Finally, the personification of society, the conception of a "collective soul", is without any foundation in fact, and is against the sound method of social science." It is clear from the foregoing discussion of Muthuvan religion that Malinowski's objections to viewing primitive religion as a purely social phenomenon cannot be taken as having general validity. In so far as the basic mental processes that produce the religious state of mind are concerned, it might be possible to discover generalities;

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1. Ibid., 41.

but in respect of the specific manifestations of religions in a tribe or community, generalisations often rest on slippery ground. To take Muthuvan religion as a case in point, there is no indication at all to warrant the assumption that religion arises to a great extent from purely individual sources. As for Malinowski's second point, it may readily be agreed that society as a crowd is by no means always (italics mine) given to the production of religious beliefs, or to religious states of mind; but at the same time, it is not true to say that collective effervescence is often of an entirely secular nature. Among the Muthuvan, the occasions of "collective effervescence" are nearly always of a religious character, or are at least closely linked with religion. The fact is, that for the primitive man, no clear-cut distinctions exist between the religious and the secular. Malinowski's third point itself lends support to this when he says that "tradition ... embraces, and in primitive societies keeps in a tight grip, both Profane and Sacred."