

The Many Faces of Murukan
The History and Meaning of a South Indian God



Religion and Society 6

GENERAL EDITORS

Leo Laeyendecker, *University of Leyden*

Jacques Waardenburg, *University of Utrecht*

The Many Faces of Murukan

*The History and Meaning
of a South Indian God*

FRED W. CLOTHEY

University of Pittsburgh

*With the Poem
Prayers to Lord Murukan
by A. K. Ramanujan*

Jacket photo by Rijks museum voor Volken kunde, Leyden
Murukan riding on a peacock, bronze statue from South India.

ISBN: 90 279 7632 5

© 1978, Mouton Publishers, The Hague, The Netherlands

Photoset and printed in Malta by Interprint (Malta) Ltd

For Ann
who has shared
the pleasure and pain
of this venture throughout

Acknowledgements

This book has been more years in the making than I am happy to confess. Most of its data, however, has been gathered during two separate visits to India. Most important was the research I was able to do in 1966–67 under the auspices of the American Institute for Indian Studies. Then in 1971–72 while serving as resident co-ordinator in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, for the Great Lakes Colleges Association's Year in India program, I was able to update my data and enlarge its scope.

Yet this study has been evolving over the course of many years starting long before 1966 and lasting to the present. More people have helped to shape it and me than can be mentioned in a single paragraph. Not least of those to whom I owe much are my parents who made it possible for me to spend a boyhood in India. I am especially indebted to several teachers, colleagues, and friends: Kamil Zvelebil, who first sparked my interest in Murukan; S. Agasthalingam Pillai who made the study of Tamil pleasurable; A. K. Ramanujan who gently disciplined by enthusiasm for things South Indian; Mircea Eliade, Charles Long, and Joseph Kitagawa who conveyed the excitement of studying things religious phenomenologically; V. Raghavan who was patient and exceedingly generous in advising me in much of my research.

Among those who have read this manuscript in whole or in part and have made helpful suggestions are Kees Bolle, K. V. Raman, A. S. Gnanasambandan, and N. S. Subrahmaniam. Another host of people has helped me in the preparation of the text. Of these special thanks is due Ms. Virginia Cassell Buckley who pared and reworded the manuscript to relative readability. And, of course, in the last analysis, the manuscript would not have been completed had not my wife, Ann, not only typed it more times than either of us like to remember, but also been adaptable and supportive especially in the early stages of the study. To all these some credit is due for whatever of merit appears in this book. Of course, I, not they, bear responsibility for any of its misstatements.

VIII *Acknowledgements*

A word on abbreviations is in order. Classical Sanskrit and Tamil works are often abbreviated when mentioned in the bibliographical references. While Sanskrit works will be recognized by most readers, the following listing should clarify the less familiar abbreviations used for Tamil sources :

Ainku <u>ṛu</u> .	Ainku <u>ṛu</u> nū <u>ṛu</u>	Pari.	Paripā <u>ṭa</u> l
Aka.	Akanānū <u>ṛu</u>	Pu <u>ṛa</u> .	Pu <u>ṛa</u> nānū <u>ṛu</u>
Cila.	Cilappatikāram	Tiru. <i>or</i>	Tirumurukka <u>ṛ</u> -
Ku <u>ṛu</u> n.	Ku <u>ṛu</u> ntokai	Tirumuru	ruppatai
Ku <u>ṛi</u> ñci.	Ku <u>ṛi</u> ñcipāṭṭu	Tirup.	Tiruppukal
Narr.	Narrinai	Tol.	Tolkāppiyam

Transliterations from the Tamil follow the Tamil Lexicon, except for some names of persons and places which have commonly accepted Anglicized forms.

Fred W. Clothey
Pittsburgh, Pa.

Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	VII
POEM 'PRAYERS TO LORD MURUKAN', BY A. K. RAMANUJAN. . . .	XI
1. INTRODUCTION: MURUKAN AS AN EXPRESSION OF TAMIL RELIGION	1
1. Contemporary Tamil religion	1
2. The history of man in South India	4
3. Divinity in Tamil India	10
2. MURUKAN IN THE EARLY SOUTH	15
1. The early context of South India: a cultural sequence . . .	15
2. The early Murukan	23
3. An hypothesis about the early Tamil development of Murukan	35
3. THE EARLY SANSKRITIC TRADITION AND THE SOUTHERN SEQUEL	45
1. Vedic and post-Vedic motifs	45
2. The development of Skanda-Kumāra in Sanskrit literature .	49
3. The Southern coalescence	62
4. THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD	73
1. Period of transition	73
2. Proliferation and concretization	77
3. The 'Tamilness' of Murukan	106
5. LORD OF SPACE AND TIME: EXPRESSIONS OF MURUKAN IN THE CONTEMPORARY CULTUS	113
1. The resurgence of Murukan	113
2. Tamil Nadu as Murukan's domain	116
3. Murukan's moments in the cultic life	131

6. THE MANY FACETS OF MURUKAN	149
1. Symbol, persistence and change	149
2. Murukan and his relationships	152
3. Murukan and his symbols	173
4. Some concluding questions	194
NOTES	205
REFERENCES	239
INDEX	249

Prayers to Lord Murukan*

I

*Lord of new arrivals
lovers and rivals:
arrive*

*at once with cockfight and banner
dance till on this and the next three
hills*

*women's hands and the garlands
on the chests of men will turn like
chariotwheels*

*O where are the cockscombs and where
the beaks glinting with new knives
at crossroads*

*when will orange banners burn
among blue trumpet flowers and the shade
of trees*

waiting for lightnings?

* Reprinted with permission from A. K. Ramanujan, *Selected Poems* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press).

II

*Twelve etched arrowheads
for eyes and six unforeseen
faces, and you were not
embarrassed.*

*Unlike other gods
you found work
for every face,
and made*

*eyes at only one
woman. And your arms
are like faces with proper
names.*

III

*Lord of green
growing things, give us
a hand*

*in our fight
with the fruit fly.
Tell us,*

*will the red flower ever
come to the branches
of the blueprint
city?*

IV

*Lord of great changes and small
cells: exchange our painted grey
pottery*

*for iron copper the leap of stone horses
our yellow grass and lily seed
for rams'*

*flesh and scarlet rice for the carnivals
on rivers O dawn of nightmare virgins
bring us*

*your white-haired witches who wear
three colors even in sleep.*

V

*Lord of the spoor of the tigress,
outside our town hyenas
and civet cats live
on the kills of leopards
and tigers*

*too weak to finish what's begun.
Rajahs stand in photographs
over ninefoot silken tigresses
that sycophants have shot.
Sleeping under country fans*

*hearts are worm cans
turning over continually
for the great shadows
of fish in the open
waters.*

*We eat legends and leavings,
remember the ivory, the apes,
the peacocks we sent in the Bible
to Solomon, the medicines for smallpox,
the similes*

*for muslin: wavering snakeskins,
a cloud of steam.
Ever-rehearsing astronauts,
we purify and return
our urine*

*to the circling body
and burn our faeces
for fuel to reach the moon
through the sky behind
the navel.*

VI

*Master of red bloodstains,
our blood is brown;
our collars white.*

*Other lives and sixty
four rumoured arts
tingle,*

*pins and needles
at amputees' fingertips
in phantom muscle.*

VII

*Lord of the twelve right hands
why are we your mirror men
with the two left hands*

*capable only of casting
reflections? Lord
of faces,*

*find us the face
we lost early
this morning.*

VIII

*Lord of headlines,
help us read
the small print.*

*Lord of the sixth sense,
give us back
our five senses.*

*Lord of solutions
teach us to dissolve
and not to drown.*

IX

*Deliver us O presence
from proxies
and absences*

*from sanskrit and the mythologies
of night and the several
roundtable mornings*

*of London and return
the future to what
it was.*

X

*Lord, return us.
Bring us back
to a litter*

*of six new pigs in a slum
and a sudden quarter
of harvest.*

*Lord of the last-born
give us
birth.*

XI

*Lord of lost travelers,
find us. Hunt us
down.*

*Lord of answers
cure us at once
of prayers.*

Introduction

Murukaṇ as an Expression of Tamil Religion

Murukaṇ is a name which evokes many images for Tamil Hindus. Though a celibate, he is the husband of two consorts. He has been hunter, warrior, philosopher. He is teacher and inspiration for literature and the arts. He is the eternal child, as old as time itself, yet as young as every new beginning. He is the handsome hero and lover, the Wise, Primordial One. His exploits have been extolled in both Sanskrit and Tamil literature, including the mythology of Epic India and the oldest known Tamil poetry. Known and loved in early Tamil civilization, he has adapted to virtually every significant cultural change in South India, even to the present day, so that his history reflects in large measure the history of South India itself. Known also by such names as Skanda, Kumāra, Subrahmaṇya, Kārttikeya, and Vēlaṇ, Murukaṇ is one of the most persistent and significant deities of South India.

1. CONTEMPORARY TAMIL RELIGION

Even the most casual observers of Tamil Nadu, India's southernmost state, are struck by the current popularity of Murukaṇ. Three of the six busiest and wealthiest temples in Tamil India are dedicated to Murukaṇ. Each of these temples has an annual income of over one million rupees and at least half a dozen others have an annual income of over a half million rupees.¹ Countless other temples dedicated to the god, on hilltops and in villages and cities throughout the state, attract huge numbers of worshippers for auspicious occasions. In addition, the name Murukaṇ has been adopted by a variety of commercial agencies and the god has become the subject of several popular songs and at least one highly popular film, entitled *Kantaṇ Karuṇai*, 'The Grace of Skanda'.

It is clear that the cult of Murukaṇ reflects, in significant measure, the mood of contemporary Tamil Nadu, even in the face of change and

2 Introduction

encroaching secularism. There are several reasons why this is so, not the least of which is that the god is riding the crest of a Tamil self-consciousness which has come to new focus in the minds of many Tamilians, at least since Bishop Caldwell's publication of a comparative Dravidian grammar in 1856. This self-consciousness has been fed by a variety of factors: the discovery of early non-Āryan cultures in India; the rediscovery of classical Tamil poetry of considerable literary merit, and the regional and cultural pride of such Tamil poets of this century as Subramanya Bharathi. The cult of Murukan̄ is, in some respects, an expression of Tamil self-consciousness, for many Tamilians recognize that Murukan̄ has been identified with the Tamil cultural heritage for centuries and feel he is an embodiment of their heritage. To be sure, to speak of a 'purely Tamil' Murukan̄ is a fiction, yet it cannot be denied that the god has been a part of Tamil history for centuries.

The celebration of Murukan̄'s divinity is consistent, therefore, particularly in the minds of some Tamil purists, with an increasingly strident and proud regionalism. In the god's regional mythology, Tamil Nadu is seen as the god's domain; his major pilgrimage centers, said to be six in number, are, in effect, *cakras* which sacralize the region. Some of his devotees find in stressing Murukan̄'s Tamil heritage something of their own identity as Tamilians. The god embodies not a few of the aspirations of religious Tamilians both for themselves and for their region – eternal youthfulness, productivity, unconditional freedom. In a similar way, the deity epitomizes the Tamilian's growing image of his own Tamil culture – its age, its persistence, its relative sovereignty in the face of accretions and modifications from non-Tamil sources, and its vigorous and youthful potentiality. In short, the Murukan̄ cultus helps many Tamil adherents answer the question: 'Who are we?'

But Murukan̄ is not a purely Tamil god. His cult is an eclectic one, which suggests another reason the cult is popular in Tamil Nadu and reflects the contemporary Tamil mood. The cult's syncretic nature is such that Tamilians of varying perspectives can be comfortable in its ranks. It is an eclecticism that makes the cultus a prism reflecting the cultural, historical, and sociological facets that comprise Tamil Nadu.

The cultus shares in the mythological and ritual heritage of classical Śaivism and in that philosophy's pre-suppositions, to the extent that traditional Śaivites accept the cultus as an authentic expression of Hindu orthodoxy. As a son of Śiva, Skanda-Murukan̄ is a young and concrete embodiment

of many of the powers, attributes, and motifs which characterize Divinity in the Śaiva tradition. In addition to embodying Śaiva motifs, Murukaṇ has been linked in certain ways with the Vaiṣṇava tradition. In the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* XI. 4. 17, for example, Skanda is said to be an incarnation of Viṣṇu. In the *Skanda-Purāṇa*, he is depicted as the son-in-law of Viṣṇu for his consorts, Devasenā and Valli, were said to have been daughters of Viṣṇu in a previous life. Moreover, a number of motifs commonly associated with Viṣṇu – for example, motifs, of celestial warrior, kingship, and divinely-initiated grace – can be found in the mythos of Murukaṇ. Thus, Skanda serves to integrate and bring into focus important aspects of both these religious traditions in South India. There is, in fact, an occasional point where the Murukaṇ cultus has accommodated itself to Muslims. A case in point is the pilgrimage center of Tirupparaṅkuraṁ, one of the ‘six’ important ones of the cultus, where, on top of a hill associated with the temple, Muslim pilgrims visit a shrine to ‘Sekunder’, whom Muslims equate in a still obscure way to Murukaṇ.

While Tamil purists insist upon Murukaṇ’s Tamil character, it is evident that the god was extolled in Sanskrit literature fully as much as in Tamil literature, and that he was worshipped in city-states of North India; in fact, much of his mythology is derived in large measure from Epic sources. Moreover, the ritual life of the cultus is so varied as to attract worshippers from all walks of Tamil life. The orthodox and the thoughtful may participate in traditional forms of *pūjā* and meditation. For urban folk there is an occasional accommodation, such as a New Year’s Eve musical convention at Tiruttani. At the same time, the rural and the illiterate are present in the Murukaṇ temples in large numbers participating in spontaneous and colorful expressions of folk worship from the *Kāvaṭi* dance to the fire-walking ceremony. The cultus’ symbolism is rich and multifaceted. It reflects aspects of generic Tamil and Sanskrit symbolism together with diversified local nuances. The symbol-system has accrued meanings from most of the cultural sources that comprise Tamil civilization. So even though the cultus of Murukaṇ finds itself in the middle of the Tamil-Sanskrit, brāhmaṇ-non-brāhmaṇ disputes, there is a sense in which the cultus is truly democratic and attractive to a significant cross section of Tamil life. The integration and democratization represented in the cultus of Murukaṇ appears to be of fundamental concern for a number of Tamilians today. This concern has come to focus as part of the Tamil Self Respect movement

4 *Introduction*

during the last fifty years and represents the coalescence of a variety of influences: the attempt to recover early Tamil social stratification which is believed to be based on occupational differences rather than caste; the influence of such men as Thomas Paine, Karl Marx, and the nineteenth century American free thinker Robert Ingersoll (Irschick 1969:345); and the whole emergence of the common man seeking self-expression. An increasing number of Tamilians are committed to some process of democratization. The Murukan̄ cultus, in its own way, reflects something of that commitment.

To a summary of the reasons why this cultus is significant as a contemporary South Indian phenomenon, one may add only that there is something self-affirming about participating in the religious life of this cultus. The cultus is a celebration of man's humanness. It has an appeal to the totality of the devotee's person – his emotional and intellectual self, his highly private and his social instincts, his mytho-poetic and his conceptual modes of expression. This is true, of course, of much genuine religion. The Murukan̄ cultus, for its part, affords some meaning to the life of many participants who are otherwise still groping for purpose. The cultus gives to many devotees a sense of identity with their own Tamilness, on the one hand, and, on the other, a sense of participation both in the past and in the Indian whole. The apparent paradox between provincialism and nationhood is in some measure resolved in the person of Murukan̄.

2. THE HISTORY OF MAN IN SOUTH INDIA

2.1 *History and the Tamil consciousness*

There are dimensions to the study of the god Murukan̄ that go far beyond its significance for understanding something of the contemporary religious mood in Tamil Nadu. Murukan̄ is also a god of no little historical significance. Indeed, as we have suggested, part of the reason Murukan̄ reflects the contemporary Tamil mood is that he also reflects the history of Tamil culture. We are fortunate in Murukan̄ to have a god, who in at least a rudimentary form, was worshipped in very early strata of Tamil society prior to any brāhmanization of the South, but who at the same time persists

and changes through virtually all the cultural changes that occur in the South. The symbol system and ritual life of the god reflect a long history of cultural change and religious modification that is consistent with the history of Tamil religion itself. In fact, it would be inadequate and misleading to describe and pretend to understand the cultus from the standpoint of what can be seen in the present, without having any sense of the historical context from which present interpretations of this cultus are drawn. In the history of this cultus are illustrated some aspects of the historical process by which religion persists and changes in Indian history. Also, in the history of Murukan are a few clues as to the ways religion is a creative language of the human spirit, related in significant measure to other creative expressions of man in history.

Because we shall detail some of the implications to which the history of Murukan has led us in later discussion, it will be enough, in this context, to make one or two preliminary suggestions. In the first place, it is important for the cultus that its contemporary character and identity be linked to an *arché*, an ancient past. On the one hand, Tamil chauvinists – those who are wont to see little or no valuable Sanskritic influence in Tamil culture and religion – popularly see Murukan as having existed from the oldest known Tamil moment – the period of the so-called *Caṅkam* literature – which, in legend, though not in actual fact, is said to be primordial. In a similar way, some orthodox brāhmaṇs who, in contrast, are inclined to see the Murukan cultus as almost entirely Sanskritic, insist that Murukan has Vedic roots, even though, as we shall argue, Skanda is more nearly a product of the Epic period and is only *post facto* ascribed Vedic attributes. Relating the contemporary cultus to an original moment, whether on the basis of fact or fancy, gives the cultus a sense of authenticity and eternity.

This is not to say that Murukan cultus is now all it was believed to be in that original moment. But the community of Murukan devotees understands itself to have derived from some primordial moment – from *illo tempore*. This presumed antiquity – and the older the better in the popular imagination – gives a sense of identity and authority to Murukan's devotees in a manner that is consistent with the mood of contemporary Tamil Nadu. In present day Tamil India the conviction is widely shared that history, be it actual or mythical, gives meaning and is authenticating. Much that is meaningful for Tamil religion now, therefore, must have some explicit link to the past.

6 Introduction

A case might be made that this is true not only for the Murukan̐ cultus but also for some of the apparently non-religious movements of contemporary Tamil Nadu. The *Tiraviṭa Mun̐nera Kalakam*, for example, the party which came to majority political power in the state in recent years, and which epitomized much of the Tamil self-respect movement, in no small measure, stressed the degree to which it (the DMK) recovered the significance of early Tamil culture and language in all its alleged pre-Sanskritic pristinity. The DMK adopted a language as free as possible from Sanskritizations and a symbol-system that frequently borrowed from early Tamil poetry. Like the Murukan̐ cultus, the DMK associated itself with an authenticating *arché*, for that is part of the mood of the contemporary Tamil movement.

2.2 Religion in history

Even if our research does not permit us to conclude that Murukan̐ is as old as the cultus chooses to believe, the history of the god is important for other reasons. Most importantly, perhaps, it enables us to trace the process by which a religion may survive and adapt itself to a series of cultural changes. The cultus of Murukan̐ is an apt illustration of the history of symbol-systems, a history which suggests something of how man's symbols serve, at the least, as commentaries on the human condition. There are a number of symbols in the Murukan̐ cultus which illustrate this phenomenon – and we shall examine several of them – but, of course, the most central and basic of all such symbols is that of the god Murukan̐ himself. The history of the god epitomizes the flow of religion in history and the process by which history changes religion and is changed by it. This interaction between the development of a god and the history of culture is one that has interested historians of religions at least from the time of those nineteenth century anthropologists who sought for the 'origins of religion'. There is neither the space nor the need to review here the train of scholars who have offered either monographs or general hypotheses on the subject. It is enough to note that research in recent years illustrates both the importance of the problem and its complexity. The work of Raphael Pettazzoni and Mircea Eliade, in particular, demonstrates how the history of gods significantly reflects the history and culture of man's eco-systems.

Pettazzoni made important studies into the kinds of gods that occur in hunting, agricultural, and pastoral societies. He affirmed the presence of a lord of animals and of a sky creator-god amongst many hunter societies, past and present. On the other hand, it was amongst agriculturalists that goddesses most frequently appeared, representative both of the ambivalence of the cosmos and the fertility and cyclicity of the agricultural process. Moreover, pastoralists tended to worship sky gods who were generally omniscient and able to know and affect the cosmic process from on high (Pettazzoni 1956:441ff.). Pettazzoni believed monotheism to be a later development which resulted from the reaction of reformers to polytheistic milieu. For him, the gods of a people reflected largely their existential situation—they were personalizations of man's understanding of himself and his cosmos. Pettazzoni's method and conviction is illustrated in his comparison of the gods of agriculturalists and of pastoralists:

The sky is extended equally over all the peoples of the world, but the sacral experience of the sky is profoundly different where the sky is conceived as a cosmic complement of earth or eventually generated by the earth (Ouranos in Hesiod), from where the heavens are felt as a diffuse, immanent presence that intrudes on man in every place and in every instant, without escape or refuge from an all seeing eye. The earth is always and everywhere the theater of human life; but the sacral experience of earth is different where the earth tilled by man is the Mother, the nurturer, the giver of fruits and flowers for man's sustenance and joy; from the experience of the earth where it is sterile, the boundless extension of steppe whose fascination has inspired in modern times the narratives of Chekhov (*The Steppe*), the music of Borodin, and indirectly the poetry of Leopardi . . . (1959:66).

Considerably indebted to Pettazzoni, Mircea Eliade added certain dimensions to this discussion about the history of gods. In his discussion of sky gods (1964:40ff.), it is clear that for Eliade the history of gods is not unilinear or evolutionary as Pettazzoni tended to believe, but more complex and dynamic. If there is a discernible process involved, it is a movement from the remote to the concrete, from the old to the new, from the irrelevant to the relevant.

Gods tend to reflect the cultural milieu of man, as Pettazzoni argued, and when the cultural context changes, the imageries by which gods are under-

stood change. Thus a god, like the *urheber* of the early hunters, can become 'otiose' or useless as a change in the cultural context causes a change in the religious vision and imagery of man. Sky gods themselves could reflect differing cultural situations: for agriculturalists and some post-agricultural societies the sky god was frequently a fertility god, virile storm god and consort to the mother goddess. Such was the case, Eliade suggests, with such gods as the Babylonian Marduk and the Mesopotamian deities El, Min, Baal, Bel. On the other hand, in certain pastoral contexts the sky god was often a sovereign god responsible for the conduct of the cosmic order. Such was the case with the Vedic Varuṇa. In those instances where these two types of sky god coalesced, the gods often tended to persist and become supreme; otherwise, they were replaced by more concrete gods, younger in the national consciousness but often having ancient roots in the folk elements of the society. The functions of these 'new' gods tended to subsume the functions of many of the gods which preceded them. Thus, Eliade tends to see the cycle of Varuṇa, Indra, and Viṣṇu or Śiva in India as a series of 'younger', more concrete and dynamic gods, each in turn rooted in ancient strata of folk society and/or literature, but each coming to prominence largely because of the exigencies of cultural change. In succession, each god replaces the gods of earlier generations in importance and in function.²

These theories shed some light on the various faces of Murukan, but do not tell the whole story, for the god reflects no single culture. Rather, his history illustrates the history of the human spirit in South India, and suggests something of how a god can reflect many of the forces – cultural and psychic – that make religious man what he is in history. Why, how and to what extent the god's character in the various periods of his history reflects the total cultural-historical milieu through which Tamil India has passed are questions which will be explored in greater detail in ensuing chapters.

For now, it is enough to record a preliminary – and perhaps even self-evident-hypothesis: a god, at the least, is a commentary on the nature and condition of man. The ways in which a people apprehend the divine is in large measure a statement about the way they see themselves and their context in a given moment. It follows then that the gods which are most persistent are those that have been adapted to changing cultural or historical situations and are in some measure understood in terms of that change. As

the present cannot be divorced from the past, the god of a particular cultural moment is not unrelated to nor discontinuous with the gods of earlier cultural-historical moments. It seems more nearly true that the imageries of a god are informed not only by the mood of a particular cultural moment but by the history that precedes that moment. There is, in short, an historical process—or perhaps more accurately, several historical processes—operative in the development of any god. At certain times in the Murukan tradition, myth-makers and interpreters consciously adapt the god to changing cultural circumstances while, at the same time, seeking to link him to an authenticating past either of his own or of other gods from whom he inherits authority and power. At other times, the shift of imageries appears to be more nearly unconscious.

While it may be impossible to know for certain what factors contribute to the historical persistence (and concomitant transformation) of gods, our study suggests several possibilities. One is surely the similarity of vision which arises in cultural/ecological situations which, though separated in time (and sometimes in space) nonetheless share certain common realities; for example, warriors of one period may find meaningful and revivify the religious symbolism which was operative for warriors of an earlier time or another place. In all likelihood, a similarity of symbolism is encouraged by the commonality and limitedness of man's emotional and intellectual possibilities. There may be a similarity of human need, and of psychic response to those dimensions that transcend man yet which impinge upon him.

Whatever the factors in this historical process or processes, it is clear in the history of Murukan that there is a certain basic persistence to the god which even cultural change does not disrupt. Of course, at still other times and often at the same time, the historical process includes the adaptation and change, otiosity and decay of many old symbols and beliefs and the rise of new ones. For example, in the mythos of Murukan, the lance evokes for medieval philosophers a different sort of religious understanding than it did for warriors or hunters in earlier moments of the god's history. Though the processes are complex, the conviction that grows from the study of Murukan's history is that the god is not entirely understood in any one historical moment (including the present one) if that moment is not seen in the context of the whole historical process. Murukan, then, is a suggestive statement about the history of man in South India.

3. DIVINITY IN TAMIL INDIA

Murukan, then, is a many-faceted symbol. He is a commentary on history and the human condition. He has integrated in his own person a variety of polarities: lover and celibate, Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava attributes, etc. As visual theology, he embodies most of the cultural and religious whole that comprises South Indian Śaivism. As with all symbols, in fact, he conveys more than is easily summarized in word, analogy, or rational interpretation.

Not the least important of Murukan's symbolic roles is that he represents Divinity and man's attempt to comprehend and relate to it. It goes without saying that those for whom Murukan is god are religious persons; the god gives form to their faith and meaning to their values. He embodies at various levels of apprehension some aspect of Ultimacy or Otherness, and makes possible for his devotees the kind of understanding and relationship which are central to man's being religious. It is this Otherness that appears to religious man to be the true 'stuff' of the world – its creative source, its order, its ultimate meaning. We cannot give this Otherness a single name which speaks for all men, for in the history of human society it has received many names – or none. Yet historians of religions have used varying terms to identify it: Rudolph Otto speaks of it as *numen*; van der Leeuw speaks of a 'Somewhat'; Joachim Wach of the 'Ultimate Reality'; and Mircea Eliade of the 'Sacred'. It has of course, been debated whether this dimension exists at all. However, devotees of Murukan throughout history have assumed that such a Reality exists, that Murukan is a manifestation of it, and that to relate to him is to relate in some way, however unarticulated, to the Ultimate Ground of one's existence.

The ways in which this Dimension is apprehended are, of course, varied, in Tamil India as elsewhere. In Tamil literature and thought several terms are used that illuminate different modes of understanding the Divine available to Tamilians. Four terms, in particular, illustrate the variety of forms as well as levels of abstraction and concreteness through which the divine is believed to be manifest. These terms suggest the various ways in which Murukan himself is apprehended and the symbolic levels of abstraction and concreteness at which he is meaningful to his devotees.

One Tamil term descriptive of the Divine Dimension is *teyvam*. This is a somewhat abstract neuter word, embodying all that constitutes Divinity. It is Otto's *numen*, except that it is not limited to the moment it is

experienced. It is the Sacred; all other forms of divinity are manifestations of it.

The term is clearly borrowed from the Sanskrit (*div* – to shine), and therefore we can assume it was not current prior to the Sanskritization of Tamil. Nevertheless, it does appear at least nine times in the *Caṅkam* poetry, the earliest body of Tamil literature, where it connotes ‘divinity’ or ‘a divinity’. Later, in the *Tirukkural* (619:1), a work of perhaps the fourth or fifth century, the term seems to convey the idea of fate or destiny (N. Subrahmaniam 1966:452), and in literature of the fifth to eighth centuries, it is used sparingly to indicate that specific gods embody *teyvam*.³

It appears that *teyvam*, though it is used for quite concrete deities in early Tamil literature, became the most comprehensive and conceptual term denoting divinity in later Tamil literature. There is little indication that there were any serious attempts to conceptualize divinity in abstract terms in pre-Sanskritic Tamil literature, for the *Caṅkam* literature generally tends to be concrete and earthy rather than abstract and philosophical. The term *teyvam*, therefore, is more nearly apropos to the theological discussions of the medieval period, when in the context of Śaiva Siddhānta, for example, divinity is seen in philosophic and aniconic terms. But even in early Tamil religion, as I shall argue later, there is an awareness of Otherness, not so much in a transcendent, ethereal sense as in a sense of a mystique or power inhering in the land and the cosmic process itself. In that sense, *teyvam* already implies an awareness of ‘more-than-ness’ in early Tamil religion as the Divine Dimension to which religious man responds.

Teyvam is embodied in the god *Murukan*, explicitly, in certain passages of the second century (cf. Kalitokai 39:26) and in such traditions as Śaiva Siddhānta, and, implicitly, in the understanding of most devotees. Even more appropriately, *teyvam* is embodied in *muruku*, the abstract, neuter term associated with *Murukan*. *Muruku* connotes much that describes divinity in Tamil Nadu – beauty, fragrance, eternal youthfulness, and even Divinity itself. *Muruku* is *Teyvam*.

A second Tamil term connoting divinity is *Kaṭavuḷ*. Literally, *kaṭavuḷ* means ‘beyond the mind’ (*kaṭa* – to pass, cross; *uḷ* – the within). It is a Dravidian term, slightly less abstract than *teyvam*. *Kaṭavuḷ* tends to be personalized, connoting the god above gods or the totality of Godhood. The term appears in over thirty senses in Tamil literature before the seventh century A.D. Its most common usage in the *Caṅkam* literature is to denote

the 'transcendent god' (Subrahmaniam 1966:199). At least three times in early literature *Kaṭavul* connotes Divinity in the abstract (Aka 125:14; Kurun 252:4; Pari 4:63). In several instances, the term refers to the god resident in the hillside or in particular trees.⁴ Five times *kaṭavul* is associated with *Murukaṇ* by name; four times with Śiva; once with Tirumāl; and four with a goddess.⁵ Elsewhere the term is given even more concrete connotation as the god in stone or iron, a village god, a domestic god, and a demon.

Murukaṇ is appropriately designated *Kaṭavul* in the *Caṅkam* literature, for he is the 'supreme' deity for the *kurin̄ci* in the hill tract (or *tiṇai*) even as a different deity serves as the *kaṭavul* for other of the five poetic modes. Later *Murukaṇ* is *Kaṭavul* in another sense, for he is ascribed attributes of many other gods and becomes for members of his cultus, at least, the supreme god of all, *Kaṭavul*.

A third Tamil term for divinity is *tēvaṇ*, which is derived from the same root as *teyvam* and connotes not an abstract neuter reality, but a specific masculine deity. The term appears late in Tamil literature. In fact, prior to the seventh century, it appears only in the two Tamil epics; twice in the *Cilappatikāram* where it means simply a 'god', and again in the Buddhist epic *Manimēkalai* where the term seems to mean 'supreme god' (Subrahmaniam 1966:461, citing Cila 6:12 and 10:180).⁶ *Tēvaṇ* generally connotes a particular god who has specific functions and embodies specific manifestations of the Divine Reality. Like the Sanskrit *deva* and the Greek *theos*, the Tamil *Tēvaṇ* is any particular god who has meaningful symbolic significance for a particular community. *Murukaṇ* is a *Tēvaṇ* insofar as he embodies aspects of divinity meaningful to the community of his devotees.

A final term signifying Divinity in its most concrete form is the term *iraivaṭivam*. A Dravidian term, *iraivaṭivam* literally means a concrete form of the Divine (*irai* – the divine; *vaṭivam* – form, shape). The *iraivaṭivam* is an hierophany, a visual theology, and refers to the whole range of iconography and theological art. An *iraivaṭivam* is a manifestation of the Sacred in a concrete but symbolic medium. It might be noted incidentally that the term *irai* itself means the Divine only in a derivative sense. In its earlier usage, the word seems to have connoted kingship, or simply dignity, greatness, or chieftainship (*A Dictionary Tamil and English* 1933:94). But *iraivaṭivam* comes to denote any apparently ordinary object in which the Divine is manifest. As such, Divinity has many *iraivaṭivankaḷ*; and all deities have their *iraivaṭivankaḷ*. *Murukaṇ*'s *iraivaṭivankaḷ*, apart from his