`DOI 10.17939/hushss2018..59.001

# Gods of the Soil:

# An Exploration into the Origins of the Folk Deities of Tamil Nadu

**Mohan Doss***

## <Abstract>

The paper, after making a few preliminary observations and briefly spelling out the relationship between classical and folk religious traditions in India, describes some of the salient features of folk religion as an "otherness." The second part of the paper analyzes religious narratives about the origins of village/folk deities, particularly in South Tamil Nadu, a southern state in India. It is shown that most of the folk deities are women who as human beings met untimely and/or unnatural deaths. The victims of unjust social structures, they metamorphosed into spirits of extraordinary power who in their divinized incarnations became powerful guardians of their communities capable of alleviating the hardships of their devotees. The paper concludes that religious stories of folk deities often serve as border zones in which a transition from the social world of humans to the mythical realm of deities takes place in the textual and oral space of mutual interaction.

**[Keywords]**: *Folk Religion, Folk Deities, Tamil Folk Deities, Origins of Folk Cults, Cultural Anthropology, Village Deities*

* Doss, Mohan SVD **(Email:** mohansvd@hotmail.com**)**

**Ph.D. earned at:** Albert Ludwig University of Freiburg, Germany

**Affiliation:** Dean of the Faculty of Theology, Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune, India

**Received:** 20 February 2018 **Accepted:** 27 May 2018



www.kci.go.kr

# 토지의 신들

Mohan Doss

## <국문요약>

이 논문은 인도에서의 고전종교와 민속 종교 전통의 관계에 대한 예비고찰을 간략하게 설명하고 난 후에, "타자"로서 민속종교의 두드러진 특징을 서술한다. 논문의 두번째 부분은 인도의 남부지역, 특히 South Tamil Nadu 안에서의 마을/부족신들의 기원에 대한 종교적 서술을 분석한다. 대부분의 민속 신들은 인간으로서 때에 맞지 않는 또는 부자연스러운 죽음을 만난 여성들인 것으로 나타난다. 그들은 부당한 사회 구조의 희생자들을, 신격화된 육화를 통해 그들의 추종자들의 노고를 덜 수 있는 사회의 강한 보호자, 비범한 힘의 정신으로 변화시켰다. 논문은 민속 신들의 종교적 이야기가 인간의 사회세계에서 신들의 신화적 영역으로 전환이 이루어져서 상호작용을 통해 문헌학적이고 구두적인 공간에서 발생하여 하나의 경계지역으로서 작용한다고 결론 내린다.

**[주제어]** *민속 종교, 민속 신들, 타밀 민속 신, 민속 문화의 기원, 문화 인류학, 마을 신들*



www.kci.go.kr

## I. Introduction

India is home for diversities in language, culture, ethnicity, and religion that have existed from antiquity. It has rightly been observed, “The composite fabric of Indian civilization has been woven with strands and shades of varying textures and colors” (Pande 2015). Nevertheless, its status as a composite fabric is equally important, for across these varieties a fundamental unity of ideas, themes and values can also be perceived. The linguistic expressions are varied, but the spirit and basic pattern in most aspects of folk culture is fundamentally the same. The folk cultural tradition in India, like the classical one, has an all India character. “The folk culture too has a wider universalistic aspect. It is neither confined to small area nor is it parochial in nature.” The majority of the Indian population throughout history, especially the women of the subcontinent, have been bearers of the folk tradition (Sharma 2003, 81, 82).

The objective of this paper is to explore the salient features of one crucial area of folk culture, folk religion, by investigating religious narratives about folk deities in Tamil Nadu, a state in south India. There is a consensus among scholars that while certain features in the worship of folk deities can be called as pan-Indian, a few are regional, found, for instance, in Tamil Nadu alone (Chellaperumal 2004, 135). The paper spells out the salient characteristics of folk religion in order to show its otherness in comparison to classical religion. It then analyses religious narratives describing the earthly origin of folk deities to explain how they came to be divinized.

## II. Folk Religion and Its Salient Features

Scholars vary greatly in their views on the relationship between Indian classical and folk religious traditions. Some have argued that the classical and folk religious traditions are not antithetical to each other as they have been in Europe (Coomarasamy 1936). To some they are two different expressions of the same tradition, even complementary, while others consider them as opposed to each other, with folk religion playing a “counter cultural” role (Muthiah 1998). Milton Singer and Mckim Marriott speak of non-brahminical religious traditions in India as the Little Tradition, while W.T. Elmore, N.L.Whitehead, and Krishna Shastri call it the Dravidian Tradition. Kancha Illaiah refers non-brahminical tradition as Dalit Bahujan Tradition, whereas Edgar Thurson, M.N. Srinivas, Louis Dumont, Saurabh Dube, and D.D. Kosambi accord to the local traditions their independent identities (Rani and Chakraani 2009, 12). Sharma (2003, 82) is of the view that the boundaries between the classical and folk religious traditions may be blurred at times, because “the bearers of the folk and the classical cultural traditions may live in close proximity, sometimes within the same family. Sometimes the same individual is a carrier of both the traditions. The major difference between the two traditions lies in the degree of sophistication, systematization, and specialized training and practice.”



www.kci.go.kr

In isolating some of the fundamental characteristics of folk religion in India, it is important first to note that many ethnographers argue that folk deities originated in a spatio-temporal-conflicting historical context. They were originally historical persons who hailed from or identified themselves with people of lower strata and challenged the oppressive structures like casteism and landlordism for the cause of their community or love. The socio-cultural situations of conflict seem to be very potent contexts for their emergence. On that account they were victims of unjust social structures and metamorphosed into spirits of extraordinary power. They were attributed trans-human powers and progressively got divinized in their particular socio-cultural contexts. For instance, the practice of *Nadukal* worship – worship of a stone erected vertically in commemoration of a hero in the past – is referenced in the Tamil *Sangam* literature in Tamil Nadu. Also folk deities such as *Kaathavarayan, Muthupatten, Madurai Veeran, Chinna Naadan* and others who are popular in Tamil folk world emerged from socio-cultural contexts of conflict where casteism and landlordism claimed the lives of the people. Since such heroic persons in the past sacrificed their lives either for the sake of their community or for their love, they were easily incorporated into the practice of ancestor worship, since as Lourdu (1997, 401) points out, a *Kula Deivam* (family deity) was generally one of the family ancestors.

W. T. Elmore (1984 [1915]) observes that the socio-religio-cultural context in South India has been fertile ground for the emergence of feminine folk deities. Women who were killed or died prematurely due to violence or untimely death were easily divinized. They are worshipped as deities and believed to have come back with all vengeance for the harm done to them or to the members of their community. It is interesting to note that unlike the classical female deities, the female folk deities have their worth in themselves and not through their allegiance to male deities (Ponniah 2006, 9-10).

Chellaperumal (2004, 137) has argued that the folk did not worship Brahman, Shiva and Vishnu directly because they were universal essences beyond mundane happenings. As a result, folk religion localized the three gods. For instance, *Sudalaimadan,* a male folk deity, is said to be a form of Shiva. An awareness of this sort of localization is very important for the proper understanding of folk deities. The male folk deities of Tamil Nadu are described as having connection with Shiva in one way or the other, whereas in the villages of Odisha, a state in North India, Chellaperumal observes (2004, 139), all male deities are considered as images of Vishnu. Moreover, in Tamil Nadu male deities are considered as guardians of female deities, but *Aiyyanar,* a male folk deity worshipped in Tamil Nadu, is an exception to it (Ramasamy 2008, 17-18). Vishnu is considered as the guardian of *Mariamman,* a female folk deity worshipped in Tamil Nadu (Chellaperumal 2004, 140).

Mainstream Hinduism is based on the patriarchal hierarchy with heroes like *Indra, Soma* and *Varuna* of the Vedic period


www.kci.go.kr

progressing to the *Trimurthi* and the incarnations of later times. But contrary to this, folk religious traditions represent a matriarchal order with powerful female deities in the majority (Rani and Chakrapani 2009, 15).

Most folk deities are given commoners' names. In some cases the names are connected with the places in which they are worshipped. They are mundane in that sense. For example, in Devnampattinam, a village near Cuddalore in Tamil Nadu, there is a temple for *Meenakshi*, a female deity worshipped in Tamil Nadu. This female deity's name is not connected with the famous *Meenaskshi* temple in Madurai, a famous city in Tamil Nadu. She is called so because she is the deity of the local fishing community. The fishing community is called in Tamil language *Meenavargal* (Ramasamy 2002, 18-19).

Folk religions and their deities are regional in their outlook and impact whereas the classical ones are pan-national and trans-national. The classical deities are believed to reside in a separate celestial abode, and are set to come down on an universal mission, whereas the folk deities are born in the local socio-cultural context, and even after their deification, they are believed to live in this world along with human beings. The very names of the deities indicate to their regional character. They are by and large personal names rather than abstract names, for example *Karuppasamy, Munisamy, Sangli Karuppan, Solaiamman,* and *Angaala Parameswari* (Ponniah 2006, 11).

Any attempt to classify folk deities in more detail would not be an easy task. The classification may often appear to be inadequate, misleading and simplistic. However, Chellaperumal (2004, 144) notes, they can be often be classified in the following groups: localized deities, village deities, family deities, and specialized deities (such as the ones associated with certain diseases).

## III.External Manifestations and Worship of Folk Deities

Folk deities are anthropomorphically represented as "rustic, rude, fearful and even loathsome" to the outsider. Some of the common features include "unkempt hair, ball-shaped eyes, protruding teeth, unproportionate breasts, stretched out tongues." Some of them are depicted as carrying weapons – swords, sickles, spears and the like – that signify their thirst for blood sacrifices (Ponniah 2006, 10).

Most of the folk deities in India, especially in South India, are female deities associated with the fertility of the land. Most of the folk deities are unmarried young virgins, while the classical ones are mostly married and motherly. A. K. Ramanujan divides the female deities into two groups, "tooth goddesses" and "breast goddesses," with the former typically connoting folk deities and the latter more classical divinities (Ponniah 2006, 11).

The external appearances of the folk deities correspond to the roles and activities



www.kci.go.kr

attributed to them. They can be presented as ferocious and malevolent, or as benevolent and protective. While the classical deities are relatively more refined and domesticated, the folk deities are unrefined and undomesticated. The role and activities of the classical deities "could be defined and predicted," while the folk deities are said to be "volatile and unpredictable" (Ponniah 2006, 11).

Interaction with folk deities differs from worship of mainstream gods, since the very idea of a temple is foreign to folk religions. Originally, most folk deities are believed to have been spirits, and consequently idols or pictures of them were absent in their religious and cultic spaces. It is believed that folk deities reside in rough shadowy places, trees, stones, waterways, tanks, rivers, water sources, fields, wood, mountains, hills, burial or cremation ground etc. For instance, seven bricks placed in an open space or under a tree represent the Seven Sisters, a group of seven female deities known as Seven Sisters, in South India. But as a village improves in its economic status, idols are made and a shrine/temple is constructed for folk deities (Chellaperumal 2004, 13).

The deities of classical tradition are always household deities and their temples will be at the center of a village or within the village limits. The folk deities are known as *Shaktis* (powers), protectors, and guardians. They are often placed outside the village boundaries, at the periphery, on borders, and are brought into village only on special occasions (Rani and Chakrapani 2009, 14). Their shrines are generally very crude and simple, but over the course of time the deities have in some places assumed a greater role and been accorded large temples, for instance, the famous temple in Samayapuram near Thiruchirappalli in Tamil Nadu.

Chellaperumal (2004, 141) describes the cultic space and power of the classical and folk deities in the following way: "The temples of classical deities are mostly symbols of the cosmic universe. These temples are huge and have been built according to the scriptures with a way around the *sanctum sanctorum*, tower, the place for the consecrated idol, and the like. The place for the consecrated idol is believed to be the *axis mundi*." He explains further that the classical deities are "beyond time and space, but folk deities function in particular places during particular days or time. They have been conceived as deities within the bounds of time and space." While the classical deities have power over all people, animate and inanimate things in the universe, the power of folk deities is circumscribed within the boundaries of their jurisdiction, namely, within a particular local area or amidst the worshippers of a given deity.

Classical temples can be constructed anywhere, provided the members of the community or the devotees have the necessary financial resources, after following certain religious ritual observances. On the other hand, a new shrine for a folk deity can typically be placed and constructed by following certain ritual practices. For example, often the deity has to be brought to the place where the shrine


www.kci.go.kr

is to be constructed. Thus before a new temple for *Angaala Parameswari* can to be built, “a fistful of mud” from Melacherry in the Villupuram district in Tamil Nadu, which is believed to be the oldest shrine for the deity, has to be brought to the chosen site as the symbol of the deity. A related practice is the transfer of a small live coal from the walking-on-fire event usually celebrated near an existing temple of *Draupathiamman,* a female deity worshipped in Tamil Nadu, to the site of where a new temple for her is to be built (Chellaperumal 2004, 142). Other practices facilitating a new place of worship include a message to build a new temple in a given place communicated by the deity to a devotee in a dream or vision, and the sudden miraculous appearance of an idol of the deity in a place where the temple is to be built. In the latter case the deity is called *swayambu* (appearing on its own miraculously), and the deity is believed to be a very powerful one.

The concept of priesthood as a sacerdotal caste for leading the worship of the folk deities is alien to folk religions. As a general rule, rituals are led or shared by different people in the worship of folk deities. As Alfred North Whitehead observed in 1921 (quoted in Rani and Chakrapani 2009, 13), “In the worship of the village deities the *pujaris* (priests) are drawn from the lower castes indiscriminately,” which creates a sharp contrast with brahminical religious traditions in India in which a priest must be a Brahmin or brahminized individual. Priests of folk religions are less monopolistic and controlling than their classical counterparts (Rani and Chakrapani 2009, 16).

The feasts of folk deities are preceded by a preparation that lasts for three, seven, or nine days. The devotees take various types of vows either as a sign of gratitude or as a plea for favors. The celebrations of festivals for the male deities are usually on Tuesdays, whereas for female deities worship often including fertility rituals occur typically on Fridays. Festivals are marked by religio-cultural performances. *Karakaattam, Therukuuthu, Kaavadi aattam, Villupaattu,* and *Kummiyattam* around *Mulaipaari* are some of the folk socio-religio-cultural performances generally performed during the festivals of folk deities in Tamil Nadu.

The celebrations and festivals of folk deities are noisy. During eventless or ordinary days, the folk deities are believed to have no power. Only during festivals, the possessed-dancer-priest makes them functional. Worship is neither regular nor defined on other days. One of the striking features of folk worship is that it is collective, congregational and communitarian. The devotees participate, without caste distinctions, by their very presence in the site of the shrine/cult. They listen to stories of the presiding deities. Some attain a state of “divine possession,” an important element of folk religion, that temporarily reverses their social status and role (Ponniah 2006, 12; Ponniah 2011).

In the Indian classical religious traditions sacrificial offerings are mostly bloodless, whereas folk religious practices include, especially in earlier times, blood sacrifices



www.kci.go.kr

(Rani and Chakrapani, 2009, 15). While sacrifices remain an important dimension in folk worship, blood sacrifice is gradually being replaced in some places by an offering of a broken pumpkin or sliced lemon smeared with red powder to recall blood (Ponniah 2006, 12).

In classical traditions deities are related to auspicious, life-cycle rituals like weddings, births, pregnancies and good fortunes. On the other hand, the folk deities are "crisis-deities" and "are invoked when life-cycles are disrupted and are seen as inflicting as well as removing epidemics, famine etc." Unlike the classical religious traditions, folk religious tradition appears "to be simple, open and inclusive. The rites and rituals are much less complicated" (Rani and Chakrapani 2009, 15, 18).

No single classification would comprehensively include all the worshippers of folk deities. Folk deity worshippers are primarily agricultural peasants in villages that are the mainstay of folk religions. However, due to the amalgamation of villages and migration from them, shrines of folk deities and their worship gradually have become an urban phenomenon. A.K. Sharma (2003, 82) writes: "The folk culture is not confined to villages even though the bulk of the villages are bearers of the folk tradition. In the towns also the lower castes and classes are generally the bearers of the folk tradition. Thus, the folk tradition has had a very wide coverage".

Since the followers of folk religious traditions hail from lower strata of the society, "Economic backwardness, deprivation, and exploitation are the main traits of the life-experience of these people….Social discrimination, marginalization and oppression are other marks of folk worshippers….Social inequality, untouchability, and indignity were their predominant life-experiences. Illiteracy or under-literacy is another general characteristic of the folk worshippers. This makes them a people living within the ambience of orality" (Ponniah 2006, 14).

Although in the contemporary context illiteracy can no longer be assumed to be a general characteristic of folk worshippers, the oral character of their interaction with deities has not changed. Folk religions are essentially oral traditions. The "context-sensitive" spoken word, infused with local sentiments and emotions, suits well the psycho-religious dynamics of folk religions. The "collectivizing" character of the oral word corresponds well with the social mechanism of the folk world that easily coheres and congregates (Ong 2015). Folk tales that narrate the ventures of the deities abound in folk religions, while folk songs and dances play important roles in the festivals of folk deities.

Ponniah (2006, 15) highlights the social significance of folk deities and this-worldly concern of folk religion in the following way: "The context-sensitive oral genres, associated with folk deities, equip the folk religions with enormous social sentiment. Folk religions are evidently this-worldly…. This becomes clear from the nature of its deities, nature of its worship, and the content of the deity-related stories. Folk deities originate and operate within this world, and primarily within the social


www.kci.go.kr

relationships." Thus folk worship, impressively illustrated through the folk stories and tales, aims at resolving contextual crisis and a liberated life here and now, even if working within a realm of its own, unlike the worship of classical deities that aim at life in the supernatural or transcendental world.

## IV. An Exploration into the Origins of Folk Deities

Considerable research on South Indian folk religions has been published in both English and Tamil over the last five decades. These works have also given considerable attention to the emergence or origin of folk deities. An analysis of the accounts that explain the origin of folk deities in the publications of the past shows that more than two hundred stories are narrated by the worshippers to explain the origin of their deities in South Tamil Nadu. These stories serve as treasure-houses to explore among other things the history of the people and their social contexts and the way a cult has transformed itself in the course of time.

The stories of folk deities can be classified into two broad categories: a). stories or songs that are transmitted in written forms, and b). stories and songs that are orally transmitted. The former category includes *Villupaattu* (English: Bow song), which is an ancient form of musical story-telling that is more popular in southern part of Tamil and in some parts of Kerala, another state in south India. The narration is interspersed with music in this form of story-telling. It consists of simple tunes and verses that could be easily understood by villagers. The *Villu* (bow) is used as a primary musical instrument for the *Villupaattu* artists. Other instruments used as supplementary to the *Villu* include the *Uddukku,* a small drum with a slender middle portion that is held in the left hand and play by the fingers of the right hand, and the *Kudam* (pot). The performers narrate stories ranging from mythological and social realms. The folk songs sung in *Villupaattu* mostly praise a deity or tell a story on social themes, typically during temple festivals in villages in which folk deities' origins and lives are narrated. These story-telling performances enable the devotees to perpetuate the cult and as well to spread it to other places.

The stories sung in praise of the folk deities narrate not only about their origins but describe also their external manifestations, qualities, powers, and manner of cultic worship. These stories play a significant role in regulating the day to day life of the people. The written version of these stories seems to have been influenced to a certain extent by Brahminic Hinduism.

The stories that are still orally transmitted are less influenced by Brahminic Hinduism. Scholars are of the view that these stories might have originated before three or four centuries and the versions that emerged in the last fifty or more years have also been incorporated into the earlier versions. These stories about the folk deities provide also information and descriptions about their origins, development of their cult, and the


www.kci.go.kr

history of the people and of their shrines or temples.

A.K. Perumal (1997, 133-135), who analyzed many stories of folk deities of Tamil Nadu that are narrated through *Villu Pattu*, classifies the origin of folk deities into three categories: emerging from premature death of some individuals, who were either murdered or committed suicide; emerging from sacrifices performed by either divine beings (*Devas*) or humans; or emerging in other ways, namely either through *Shiva* and *Shakti* (feminine partner) or through *Devas* and *Asuras* (Evil yet powerful beings).However, it must be noted that Perumal's classification is not an exclusive division, but mutually inclusive and inter-penetrative in some narratives.

Gnanasekaran (1992) presents a collection of 94 stories on folk deities popular in and around Madurai, a famous city in south Tamil Nadu. These stories are collected from 57 villages and narrate about 116 deities out of which 112 are related to the origin of folk deities which fall under the following four categories:

a) Deities that were considered to have been born with divine power.

b) Deities that were transferred from the original shrines or temples by bringing from there a fistful of mud to the present place. These stories explain the geographical origin of the cult of a deity in a given place, rather than about the actual origin of the deity.

c). Deities that were discovered from the earth, from a box or in a river. These are given usually a prefix "*swaymbu*" (meaning: emerged on its own) and are believed to be more powerful ones. These stories do not actually address the origin of a given deity but only indicate how the cult associated with the deity might have been resurrected or rediscovered, because these deities probably existed somewhere or sometime in the past.

d) Deities that emerge from death. Some people who died or were killed in the past for a noble cause or for love of their community or their partner were gradually divinized after their death by their community.

A vast majority of folk deities fall under the fourth category. Some of the deities who fall under the first three could also have had their origin in this way, and the actual stories of their origin might have been lost in the course of time. The stories of eighty-two folk deities in Gnanasekaran's collection come under this category.

An analysis of these stories leads one to a further classification based on the nature of their death: murder, suicide, accident and natural death (Ramanathan 2006, 64-65). Ramanathan (65-67) notes that twenty-four of the folk deities in the Gnanasekaran collection had a murder or other violent death at the hands of another behind the origin of their cult. Among the murdered folk deities, two-thirds (sixteen) had been male, and the other third female. These stories attribute several reasons for their death: some died in battle, while others were killed because they had been mischaracterized as thieves, magicians, or even divine beings. Women might have been killed due to an inter-caste marriage or a refusal to accept a forced marriage. In one of the stories a


www.kci.go.kr

woman was murdered because she had mentally desired another man other than her husband.

The origins of the folk deities in a majority of the stories, forty two of them, narrate suicide as the original cause of the cult. The reasons cited for suicide in these stories are the following: Due to unbearable illness, to excruciating pain experienced at the murder of some one very dear to, to falling into fire or immolating oneself for admirable reasons such as a commitment to protecting one's virginity, to a desire to escape from a forced marriage, to the murder of a spouse who hailed from another caste, to the natural death of one's husband, to a prohibition from entering the temple due to an inter-caste marriage, to guilt over being a cause for a communal conflict due to one's inter-caste love affair, to shame at entering one's village with torn clothes, to a woman's status of barrenness, and to a refusal by the temple priests to honor someone in ways proper and rightful for her. It is revealing to note that out of forty two such instances of suicides narrated in the stories, thirty eight, the majority, are women.

Accident is another cause of death of some people who were later on accepted as folk deities. Some of these types of death are attributed to snakebite, being drowned in water, fire accident, and stampede in a religious festival. Out of eleven accounts narrated, the majority, eight are women. There are also stories which ascribe a natural death to some people who were divinized as folk deities later, for instance, a hermit or *guru* who had some kind of natural death, someone who died of sickness, and another who died during child-birth. Out of the six stories which speak of natural death of people who later on divinized as folk deities, three are pertaining to women (Ramanathan 2006, 66).

## V. Implications of the Origins of Folk Religion Deities

There are many female folk deities whose cultic origin is attributed to their unnatural or untimely death. Women who died prematurely or in an unnatural way could be divinized by their communities after their death. The emergence of a cult after their death could also be due to a popular belief that the spirit of those who met an unnatural death would roam around in the world until the ones who caused their death were punished; and that if the spirits of the dead were placated by worshipping them by the people who caused their death, they could escape from punishment. Ramanathan (2006, 70-71) is of the view that this popular belief could be a foundation for the origin of many folk deities. He cites folk stories suggesting that the cult of these folk deities stemmed from a belief that the spirits of humans who had met an unnatural death could show their power and divine nature to people in dreams, or communicate through dreams that they should be worshipped at a particular place so that the dreamer might escape from punishment or win protection, or be responsible for the suffering and pain of a villager.



www.kci.go.kr

The origin of the cult of the male folk deities tends to revolve around death in war or fights, the murder of someone due to their entering into an inter-caste marriage or due to a superstitious belief, or some misunderstanding about one's identity or one's actions, while the patriarchal structure and spirit seem to be a predominant reason, in most of the stories, for the unnatural death of women who were divinized as folk deities after their death. Women who were murdered or committed suicide due to entering into an inter-caste marriage or love affair have been raised to the status of folk deities either by their own communities as their guardian deities or by the aggressors as guardian deities either for protection from dangers in the future or to escape from the punishment of the spirit of the dead ones.

The stories of the origin of the folk deities thus shed light on some of the customs, habits, beliefs, caste-conflicts, and the dominance of patriarchy and comparably oppressive structures in the life of the people and their society. Of course these factors would have affected all inhabitants of South India, not just the relative handful who became folk deities. After all, many people's lives ended abruptly due to unnatural and untimely deaths. Here then, a question may be raised as to why only a few among the many are divinized as folk deities. It seems likely that individuals who were in one or the other way related to the victim of murder or suicide or else the ones who were directly involved or instrumental to the death underwent certain mental disturbances, experienced some difficulties or illness, or saw the dead person in their dreams. Such experiences could lead to divinizing the dead persons as folk deities.

However, care must be taken when these stories of origin of the folk deities are taken as data for tracing historical or religious information on a given religion or temple or even the nature of the society of a given time. The stories of the origin of folk deities are a part of the cult of a given folk deity. Social scientists or anthropologists should take into account also the iconographical details of a given folk deity, the religious rituals performed, the location and the architecture of the temple or shrine dedicated to the deity, legends that are associated with the deity of the temple/shrine, opinions of the worshippers, owners and caretakers of the temple/shrine, as well as views of the people from different caste groups, genders and the people from neighboring villages. A comparative study with other similar folk deities would also bring in greater clarity about the origin and the socio-religious significance of a given deity.

Many versions of a given story may be current in the same place or different places. The different versions of a story about a folk deity brings to fore the development of its cult during the course of the time. For instance, a story narrates that a young woman lived with an unmarried elderly person and when he died she immolated herself on her husband's pyre. She was worshipped initially as *Tiippaincamman* (deity who immolated herself). Another variant of the story tells that the elderly man took care of her as his very daughter and


www.kci.go.kr

that their relations worshipped her as their family deity. But after 1973 the same shrine has been developed into a Vaishnaite shrine, drawing on one of the major traditions within Hinduism; it is known today as the *Tiippainca Nachiyar* Temple in Poodhankudi in Cuddalore district of Tamil Nadu (Saravanakumaran 2009, 45-48).

The stories of the origin of the folk deities also a contain often a motif that the ornaments or dress they wore or lemons they seemed to have held in their hands did not burn with them in the process of cremation, and these were preserved and worshipped in the shrines/temples (Ramanathan 2006, 72). Some of the stories of the folk deities indicate also how some shrines of low caste people as they developed in the course of time became popular and came to be possessed and governed by other high castes groups (Ramanathan 2006, 72). Thus when the stories of the origin of the folk deities are analyzed carefully along with the history of the shrines, religious rituals that are performed to the deities, the priests and practices connected with the shrine or the folk deities, they seem to help unearthing the history of the people connected with the cult of a particular folk deity (Ramanathan 2006, 72).

## VI. Conclusion

The distinctive features of folk religion strongly affirm their distinctive otherness, independence and uniqueness. However, the presence of syncretistic tendency does not look alien to the folk religious context. The religious narratives – stories, legends, and memorates - about folk deities narrate various dimensions of their cult, and one such dimension is the very origin of the cult of a given deity. These religious narratives are important for understanding the spiritual life of the people, their social psychology historically as well as from the perspective of the contemporary social functions and the historical process of the transformation of the cult itself. Among the many dimensions that are embedded in the religious narratives/stories about folk deities, the second part of the paper focused on one dimension, namely the origin or emergence of folk deities. The analysis of the folk stories shows that many of the folk deities are women who met an untimely or unnatural death. On that account they were victims of unjust social structures. After their death they were divinized as powerful guardians of their communities or families and destroyers of hardships of the devotees. Thus religious narratives about folk deities serve as border zones in which a transition from the social world of humans to the mythical realm of deities takes place in the textual and oral space of mutual interaction.



www.kci.go.kr

## References


Chellaperumal, A. 2004. "A Few Characteristic Features of Folk Deities in Tamil Nadu." *South Indian Folklorist* 7: 135-144.

Coomarasamy, Ananda K. 1936. "The Nature of 'Folklore' and Popular Art." *Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society* 27: 1-12.

Elmore, Wilder Theodore. 1984 (1915). *Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism: A Study of the Local and Village Deities of southern India*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services.

Gnanasekaran, T. 1992. *Nayyakkar Kaalam: Nattar Theyvakkadhaigal* (Tamil). Madurai: Query Publications.

Lourdu, D. 1997 [1913]. *Nattar Vazhakkaattiyeal: Sila Adipadaikal* (Tamil). Palayamkottai: FRRC.

Muthaiah, E. 1998. *The Tradition of Folk Culture: Alternative Tradition*. Madurai: Arasu Publication.

Ong, Walter. 2015 [1982]. *Orality and Literacy*. New York: Routledge.

Pande, Rekha. 2015. "Interaction of Islamic and Indian Culture." www.academia.edu/3760946/Interaction_of_Islamic_and_Indian_culture, accessed on 10 January 2015.

Perumal, A. K. 1997. "*Vilvisai Kathai Padalkallil Nattar Deivangal." Thannanae, Nattuppuraviylukkikkana Kalandithazh* (Tamil). Banglore: Kaviya.

Ponniah, James K. 2006. "*Folk Religiosity in India: Theological Significance. Notes and Study Materials*." Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Institute of Philosophy and Religion: Pune.

_____. 2011. *The Dynamics of Folk Religion in Society: Pericentralisation as Deconstruction of Sanskritisation*. New Delhi: Serials Publications.

Ramanathan, R. 2006. *Thamizhar Vazhipattu Marabhugal: Nattupura Deiva Vazhipattu Aaivu* (Tamil). Chidambaram: Meyyappan Pathipagam.

Ramasamy, Thulasi. 2002. *Nattuppura Deivam* (Tamil). Chennai: Vizhigal.

Rani, Suneetha and Ganjha Chakrapani. "Dalit Religious Tradition and the Village Deities." In *Dalits and Religion*, edited by Murali Manohar, 9-18. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers.

Saravanakumaran, N. A. 2009. *Thamizhar Kaaval Deivangal* (Tamil). Chennai: Azhagu Pathipagam.

Sharma, Amit Kumar. 2003. "Elements in Indian Civilisation: A Sociological Perspective." *Indian Anthropologist* 33 (1): 71-92.




www.kci.go.kr