

**Reimagining Mardévirin:
The Memory of Forgotten Religion in Postcolonial Mauritius**

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Abstract

This research is a contribution to the study of diasporic Hinduism. It draws on historical documentation and ethnographic fieldwork, focusing on the evolution of the cult of deity Mardévirin/Maduraivīraṇ, between South India where it originates and Mauritius Island, one of nineteenth-century plantation societies where it was transplanted following indenture. My research is an attempt to write a cultural history around the cult of Mardévirin. I first locate the latter's origins in precolonial South India, in order to map out important themes - such as political symbolism, moral ambiguity and antinomian religiosity - that are mirrored and subverted on Mauritius Island. In the second part of the thesis, I argue that the colonial period was fertile ground for Mardévirin's growing popularity, as the god's legendary narrative and worship echoed the indentured plantation's world and social reality. Under the influence of Indian religious nationalisms and the arrival of Mauritian independence, Mardévirin worship lost ground, the deity's figure failing to fit in with the religious sensitivities of a new, nascent, "global" order. Finally, mainly through fieldwork, I have inquired about what subsists of Mardévirin in today's Mauritius. I found that although the worship is now marginal and residual, Mardévirin is still remembered as a symbol of subaltern religious identity. Globally, this research insists, through the figure of Mardévirin, on the importance that guardian deity worship played in the liminal religious life that connected South India and colonial Mauritius Island. It also highlights the way the religious economy was radically transformed by postcolonial modernity.

Résumé

Cette recherche entend contribuer à l'étude de l'hindouisme en diaspora. Elle s'appuie sur une documentation historique et un travail de terrain de caractère ethnographique. Elle est centrée sur l'évolution du culte de la divinité Mardévirin/Maduraivīraṇ entre l'Inde du Sud où il prend naissance et l'île Maurice, une des sociétés de plantation du XIX^e siècle où l'a amené l'engagisme. Ma recherche m'a conduit à une étude parallèle de l'histoire culturelle des communautés pratiquant le culte de Mardévirin. J'ai d'abord replacé les origines de ce culte dans l'Inde précoloniale afin de pouvoir situer certains thèmes importants, tels que le symbolisme politique, l'ambiguïté morale et l'antinomisme religieux, thèmes reproduits et subvertis à l'île Maurice. Dans un deuxième temps, j'ai exploré le développement et le déclin du culte dans leurs contextes politiques et religieux respectifs. Je soutiens que la période coloniale a été un terrain fertile pour la popularité de Mardévirin, sa légende et son culte faisant écho aux réalités sociales de l'époque. Avec l'influence des nationalismes religieux indiens et l'arrivée de l'indépendance mauricienne, le culte de Mardévirin perd de sa popularité, n'étant plus compatible avec la sensibilité religieuse du nouvel ordre « mondial ». Finalement, principalement à travers un travail de terrain, j'ai enquêté sur ce qui subsiste du culte dans l'île Maurice d'aujourd'hui. J'avance que même s'il n'est plus que marginal et résiduel, la figure de Mardévirin est rappelée comme un symbole d'identité religieuse subalterne. Globalement, cette recherche insiste, à travers Mardévirin, sur l'importance des divinités gardiennes entre l'Inde de l'engagisme et l'île Maurice coloniale. Est aussi mise en avant la transformation radicale de cette économie religieuse par la modernité postcoloniale.

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Introduction

Who is Mardévirin? If the question were asked on the twin Indian Ocean islands of Mauritius and Réunion, the answers may vary: “a spirit,” “a demon,” “a saint,” “a God.” Mardévirin is inextricably linked to Tamil communities on these two islands, the name “Mardévirin” being derivative of the name of the preindenture Tamil village deity Maturaivīraṇ (“Hero of the City of Madurai”). In his catechism entitled *Le Symbolisme dans l’Hindouisme*, influential Mauritian educationist and Tamil Hindu reformer Mootoocomaren Sangeelee (1987) mentions Mardévirin under the heading “minor god.”

Il y a quelques autres dieux qu’on appelle dieux mineurs ou même dieux méchants (doushta dévatha). Ce sont principalement, Maduréi Vīren (Mardévirin), Mounsvaren (Minisprin), Câttéri et Pétchai. Ces dieux sont reconnus surtout par les tamouls.

Les esprits simples s’adressent à eux, soit pour être protégés contre le mal que voudraient leur faire les autres, soit pour faire du mal à leurs ennemis.

Ce sont des dieux des temps primitifs, à qui on sacrifie des animaux. Les sages conseillent fortement de ne pas les adorer.

Ces dieux-là ne trouvent pas de place à l’intérieur des temples. On les loge généralement dans de misérables petits sanctuaires construits contre le mur d’enclos où on expose leurs images en plein air. Câttéri et Pétchai sont généralement représentées par une pierre noire entourée d’un bout de toile.

A Maurice, le culte de ces dieux a considérablement diminué. Il est évident que dans un avenir non lointain, ces dieux-là auront été oubliés. (Sangeelee 1994, 87)¹.

¹ There are some other gods which are called minor gods or even malevolent gods (dousthta devatha). They are principally Madurei Virên (Mardévirin), Mounsvaren (Minisprin), Catterer and Petchai. These gods are acknowledged mainly by Tamilians.

Simple minded people turn to them, either to be protected from the evil which others want to inflict upon them, either to deal evil upon their enemies.

These are gods of primitive times, to which animals are sacrificed. The wise strongly advise to refrain from worshipping them.

These gods find no place inside temples. They are usually placed in miserable small sanctuaries built against the enclosure wall where their images are exposed in open air. Catterer and Petchai are usually represented by a black stone wrapped in a piece of cloth.

In Mauritius, these gods’ cult has considerably diminished. It is obvious that in a not so far future, these gods will have been forgotten. (Sangeelee, 1994, 87)

Sangeelee's words reflect the official Mauritian representation of Mardévirin and of the other guardian deities of Tamil origin. Many of the themes that the reformer mentions in his rather dismissive appraisal of the role of the "minor gods" are central themes in my study, namely the gods' ambivalent if not malevolent status, as well as rites of animal sacrifice, and deity possession. Having been raised in the Créole community of Mauritius, I had only a vague idea of who Mardévirin was, usually encountering him as a frightening boogeyman mentioned by older relatives. It was only much later, while reading about the creolization of the Hindu pantheon in Réunion, that I understood that he was the postindenture manifestation of the Tamil village deity Maturaivīraṇ.

Intrigued by Sangeelee's five short paragraphs, I embarked on a research that led me, as from May 2014 to July 2015, to commute between South India and its Indian Ocean diaspora on Mauritius Island. This thesis is an attempt to unpack the dense and complex historical and cultural narratives that contribute in the making of a Tamil deity in a "créole" milieu. My work proposes a religious history of Mauritian Tamil Hinduism through the lens of a cultural biography of Mardévirin and his cultic/cultural afterlives, enabling us to map the complex changes in Tamil Hinduism in Mauritius over the past two hundred years.

Creole diasporic Hinduism itself has received little scholarly attention.

Concerning the "French" creole insular societies of the Caribbean and Indian Ocean in particular, there has been only a handful of studies dedicated to the religious traditions of people of South Indian descent.² All are faithfully indebted to Jean Benoist's "field-naming" text *Hindouismes Créoles* (1998). In my opinion, this scholarship arguably suffers from important shortcomings that obfuscate a thorough and critical study of

² This scholarship includes the works of Christian Barat (1989), Monique Desroches (1996), Pierre Singaravelou (1975) and Gerry L'Etang (2004).

Creole Hinduisms. From broad to specific, four main issues appear as the most problematic, and these form the primary signposts of my work.

(1) As a framework, this scholarship argues for the reproduction of the doctrinal and ritual structures of “Hinduism”, understood as the indelible marker of *Indianité* (“Indianness”) in a creole context.³ This relies on the twice-flawed concept of Hinduism as a homogenous structure and as a religion that cannot be disassociated from the locus of its origin.⁴ Protean “Indian-turned-creole” religious experiences hold many layers of self-referentiality that do not necessarily make sense vis-à-vis a classical conception of Hinduism as a structured faith-system.

(2) Although a permanent reference to India through the Hinduized *Indianité* might be problematic, it is nonetheless important to take critically into account Indian religious history to understand the evolution of these re-rooted cults. Extant scholarship neglects the preindenture religious history of figures - such as Mardévirin - necessary to accurately evaluate the continuities and ruptures at play. While some scholars have noted the influence of modern India on the dynamics of religion in Mauritius and Réunion, they usually reiterate a return to “ancestral values” internal to the insular borders, rather than critically approaching the complex global flows of modern religious politics between India and the diaspora.

(3) Another important issue is the way these works approach the interaction between “Creole Hinduism” and Christianity under colonialism. Taking solely into account the latter’s (undeniable) marginalizing official discourse, it opposes two religious worlds constructed as impermeable and antagonistic. While it correctly sees

³ For a discussion of the concept of Hinduized *Indianité*, see the works of Pierre Singaravelou (1975), Jean Benoist (1998), Monique Desroches (1996), Christian Barat (1989), Vinesh Hookoomsigh (2000), Gerry L’Etang (2004) and Catherine Servan-Schreiber (2014).

⁴ For a discussion of this issue, see Vasudha Narayanan (2000).

postcolonial Hindu discourse as a sign of emancipation from the dominant imperial discourse, it fails to understand that this emancipation can itself be understood as a *reception* of the dominant framework. Furthermore, the scholarship overlooks if not downplays the large presence of creole Catholicism next to and within Hindu religious lives, treating it as peripheral “syncretism.”

(4) When it comes to analyzing the cults of Hindu gods in the creole context, the scholarship focuses mostly on the recognizable deities of pan-Indian Hinduism from canonically sanctioned Purāṇic and epic traditions. Giving exclusive voice to the emic dominant religious discourse - as we see in Sangeelee’s words on Mardévirin - largely neglects the deities labeled “minor gods” which have arguably played a central role in popular religion in both India and créole society.

Through the case study of Mardévirin, I hope to re-address these four issues and nuance the discourse on Tamil religion in this region. By focusing specifically on a minor deity as the thematic centre of the research, these issues can be gradually tackled from “bottom up.” I am indebted to the historical-anthropological framework laid out by Jacques Le Goff in *Saint Louis* (1996), his study of the saint in the context of the European Middle-Ages. Le Goff draws a comprehensive social history of thirteenth-century France through a biography of Saint Louis that takes primarily into account the representations and legends of him and around him, rather than his recorded life events. This work foregrounds the interface between the collective imagination and social reality.⁵ Contextualized historically, the carriers of imagination - oral and textual tradition, imagery and memory - become analytical tools that enable us to make critical sense of culture. Since in our context a sacred figure synthesizes these carriers, Le Goff

⁵ See Le Goff’s *La civilisation de l’Occident médiéval* (1964), *Faire de l’Histoire* (1974, with Nora) and *Saint Louis* (1996).

argues that it is a perfect site for studying religious history, as it simultaneously threads together both imaginary and tangible elements of culture and memory.⁶ Assembling folk songs, religious images, and ethnographic testimonies featuring Mardévirin, I have at my disposal a multi-sited archive which I can read critically alongside historical sources.⁷

Although my study focuses on the worship of Mardévirin in the Indian Ocean, I dedicate my first chapter to the historicization of his cult in preindenture eighteenth-century South India. As I mentioned previously with reference to issue (2) above, this is necessary to understand the prominent tropes and themes that underlie Mardévirin's mythology and worship. The second and third chapters focus on the colonial and post-independence periods respectively. Although Mauritius is the central focus, comparisons will be made with the more documented religious universe of neighboring Réunion Island, as the religious histories of both places have been deeply interconnected. Moreover, the thesis relies on ethnographic data. The religious history I chart is continually "made alive" through polyphonous memories and experiences within the Tamil religious community of Mauritius. Not only does the fourth chapter sample this current "afterlife" of the cult, but the thesis will be punctuated by testimonies and anecdotal narratives of interlocutors illustrating and enlivening my arguments.

The first chapter historically locates the literary and religious origins of Mardévirin in Early Modern South India, preceding the period of Indenture. The second

⁶ See Le Goff (1996).

⁷ These historical sources include academic monographs on the history of Mauritius, as well as first-hand documents gathered at the Mauritian National Library and the Centre Sainte-Anne's library in Saint-Denis, Réunion island. These documents include the travel writings of Pierre-Edmond Pulvenis (1996) and the memoirs of Frederick North-Coombes (1993).

chapter retraces the reproduction and evolution of Tamil cults in colonial Mauritius Island, arguing for their status as an original religious life with Mardévirin standing at its centre. In the third chapter, I attempted to understand the demise of guardian deity worship in postcolonial Mauritius, carried away by the ideologies of nationalism and institutional religious normativity. Before the final concluding remarks, the last chapter reflects my fieldwork and interrogates the multiple memories of guardian deity-based religion in contemporary Mauritius.

As a subject, the history of Mardévirin worship in Mauritius illustrates the religious evolution of the island and the dynamics of diasporic Hinduism, and as such this thesis focuses on a number of important themes in the study of religion, such as religion under colonialism, the concept of “minor deity,” the interplay between nationalism and religion, and the analysis of somatic practices such as possession and animal sacrifice.

In order to write a deity’s “biography”, one needs to turn to the realm of religious imagination. Borrowed from Le Goff, the notion of “*imaginaire*” will be a recurring term in my thesis, albeit with reference to its Tamil or insular manifestation. To use Le Goff’s own definition, the *imaginaire* is the realm of three crucial modes of consciousness: (1) representation, “...all mental translation of a perceived exterior reality. Representation is tied to the abstraction process.” (Le Goff 1999, 425); (2) the symbolic, when the representation is a moral and ideal signifier; and (3) the ideological that fills the *imaginaire* with vested interests, “often crafted by the ruling orthodoxies” (Le Goff 1999, 424). This manifold imagination further relies on its interactive reflection, the material “image,” a key tool for the researcher (Le Goff 1999).

Coming to my language and spelling choices, it is important to make some clarifications. To begin with, some confusion may arise with the use and meaning of the word “créole,” often heard to refer to postcolonial societies born of colonization and slavery, from Louisiana to Macao. In Mauritius, “créole” as an ethnic term refers solely to the Christian component of the island, of partial or dominant African ancestry. To avoid confusions, I will use the English term *creole* to refer to a generic postcolonial insular culture. The title “Créole” refers to a community in Mauritius and “Kreol” to the language on the island.⁸ Moreover, as in Mauritius the choices of pronunciation and formulation carry themselves cultural histories, I wanted to reflect as much as I could this reality by reproducing the transliteration of their Tamil/Kreol/French sonorities even when they designate a single entity such as Maduraivīraṇ/Mardévirin/Madouré Virène⁹. For many of the Kreol sonorities I have indicated their recognizable Tamil and/or Sanskrit root words in parentheses. For example, with the Kreol term *pousari* (Tam. *pūcāri*; Skt. *pūjāri*).

As a subject, the history of Mardévirin worship in Mauritius illustrates the religious evolution of the island and particular dynamics of diasporic Hinduism. As such this thesis focuses on a number of important themes in the study of religion, such as religion under colonialism, the concept of “minor deity,” the interplay between nationalism and religion as well as the analysis of practices such as possession and animal sacrifice. Mootoomaren Sangeelee wished the cult of Mardévirin to be “forgotten”, and its historical memory undoubtedly bears the mark of an imposed forgetfulness today. Not only does this thesis address the various memories of the

⁸ This is the official spelling, from the *Diksioner Morisien* published by the University of Mauritius.

⁹ *Madourai Virène* or *Mourouga* reflect the Kreol pronunciation of these deities’ names.

forgotten religion; it is also an academic attempt to provide a historical memory to a lost ritual universe.

Chapter 1

Horseman and Avenger: Maturaivīraṇ in the Early Modern Tamil World

Mardévirin is beyond any doubt identified with the Tamil folk deity Maturaivīraṇ who was the object of a sustained religious cult in South Indian Tamil villages. Throughout the nineteenth-century, colonial indenture brought to the Caribbean and the Mascarenes South Indian villagers who practiced a complex and composite religion, the representation of which was vastly oversimplified under the sign of “popular Hinduism.” The preceding century had been a richly complex time of social transformations and the history of Maturaivīraṇ sheds light on the changing religious landscape of early modern Tamil-speaking India. It sketches a larger picture of regional religious life and its diverse influences. The religion practised by indentured labourers who found themselves in the diaspora bore witness to all these changes. As this picture cuts across confessional, sectarian, social or moral borders, it will challenge the modern Indian characterizations of Maturaivīraṇ as a “low-caste” figure or an “evil” Hindu deity. Observations from early Creole Hinduism and the early diaspora provide insights not only on the place of origin of the early indentured migrants, but also with a kind of “snapshot” of cultural and religious practices that had ceased in India by the mid-twentieth century.

Game of Darbārs: Pālaiyakkārars and Vīraṇs in Early Modern Tamilnadu

Eighteenth-century Tamil South India lived under the sign of change and transformation: political reconfiguration, social mutations, and religious restructuring. By the last decade of the seventeenth-century, the Tamil South had been deeply marked politically and socially by the rule of Nāyaka overlords from their capitals in Madurai,

Senji Fort and Thanjavur. But the erosion of their three-century rule had opened the way for the Mughals into Tamil politics. The northern empire, still powerful, commanded at that time the nominal allegiance of many South Indian princes across the Nāyaka realms.

The early 1700s were marked by a series of court intrigues and rebellions which rocked the crumbling Nāyaka and Mughal political powers (Shulman, Subrahmanyam and Rao, 1994). With these superposed overlordships collapsing, the vacant and fragmented political order was prey to many would-be rulers from various communities. This instability allowed the reshaping, from inside, of caste groups taking advantage of the new order (Bayly, 1999). It was equally a favourable context for the settlement, from the outside, of European powers in the socio-cultural landscape. To quote Joanne Waghorne, “borders, both social and political, were fluid [...] Hindu Rajas proudly wore the badges of honor given by Muslim, British, French and indigenous rulers. This was a time when freebooter Muslims, Hindus and tribals became kings [...] and when the commandment of one place was not taken so seriously either theologically or politically.” (Waghorne 408, 1989).

Soldiers tried to become kings through money and rebellion, while established monarchs struggled to hold on to power through the help of soldiers seeking land (if not a kingdom) in return, turning much of South India into a large game of political one-upmanship (Dirks, 1987). This period represented a rather chaotic cycle of military and political alliances, favoring the rise of marginal mercenaries and “service people”. Hailing from Marava and Kaḷḷar castes, hired commanders and generals known as *pālaiyakkārars* (“soldier”, anglicized as *poligars*) rose as powerful village protectors and “small kings”, owing the recognition of their legal status to “service Brahmins”

employed for the religious legitimization of their rule (Dirks 1987, Bayly 1999). It is in this moving and uncertain social universe that the cult of Maturaivīraṇ evolved.

In *Genealogie der malabarischen Götter*¹⁰, his description of Tamil rural religion in the early 1710, Lutheran pietist missionary Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg insists on the popularity of God Aiyaṇār in villages and small towns (Ziegenbalg 2005). In his overlordship of *grāmadevatās* (“village deities”) and villagers as well, I would argue that the kingly and martial Aiyaṇār was the local personification of Nāyaka power. Sometimes identified as the Sanskritic Hariharaputra¹¹, Aiyaṇār appears to perfectly embody the symbiosis attempted by Nāyaka religious policies.¹² To the point of becoming Aiyaṇār’s metonymic representation in village worship, his mount, the horse, invests him with the highest attributes of kingship and military power.¹³ The shrines of the *grāmadevatās* he presides over may be reminiscent of the lavish courts of Nāyaka cities, the gargantuan offerings of sacrificial meat and alcohol mentioned by Ziegenbalg appearing as a mimesis of the legendary festive life in the overlords’ palaces. The soldiers called *vīraṇs* made up an important constituent of these “courts”. The *vīraṇ* appellation meant “heroes” or “paladins” (Skt. *vīra*). *Vīraṇs* refer to characters of South India’s narrative lore, finding a noted cultic presence as Aiyaṇār’s subordinate deities in his shrines, from then on until today. Ziegenbalg describes *vīraṇs* as the God’s *pālaiyakkārars*. The rich *vīraṇ* universe of early modern South India appears indeed to have been the mythical pendant of the growing mercenary rule across the Tamil

¹⁰ *Genealogy of the South-Indian gods : a manual of the mythology and religion of the people of southern India, including a description of popular Hinduism* by Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, Wilhelm Germann, G. J. Metzger (1713)

¹¹ According to many Purāṇic legends, Hariharaputra is recognized as the son born of the union of Śiva and Viṣṇu, the latter in the persona of the nymph Mohinī.

¹² The nominally Vaiṣṇava Nāyakas, especially under Tirumalai Nāyaka (r. 1623-1659), conducted a religious policy of conciliation with the more Śaiva Tamil country they ruled.

¹³ The horse was an important part of Nāyaka imageries of kingship and warfare (Shulman, Subrahmanyam and Rao, 1994). Aiyaṇār is never represented without his horse, on which he defends the country in the night, with devotees seeking his protection with offerings of clay horses.

country.¹⁴ While most of these heroes were likely to be characters of long-spread legends and tales, their cults were established by *zamīndārs* and small lords who patronized village shrines of the *vīraṇs* on their fiefdoms, while summoning bards and storytellers to compose songs and panegyrics to the hero-deities that would evolve as *katais* (“ballads”).¹⁵ The genre of bardic *katai* composition was enriched by the literary scholars present in the most affluent courtly milieus. *Katai* ballads are precious testimonies of the literary self-representation of early-modern “Tamilnadu” through the making of a colourful, albeit formulaic, mythical *imaginaire*. Far from being an ill-defined *illo tempore* realm, the country described by *katais* really mirrored the cosmopolitan outlook of post-Nāyaka Tamil South India, with the presence of social archetypes such as Telegu intendants and Muslim mercenaries. The eighteenth-century Tamil kingdoms were indeed the stage for the dramas of movement and change, marked by many deep social and religious transformations. This time of transformation appears to find a perfect metaphoric correspondence in the ubiquitous presence of the theme of metamorphosis in the *katais*. Mirroring a shattered caste hierarchy, *katais* depict either the rise to fame of a lowborn hero or the tragic downfall of a Brahmin or noble person. While blessings, curses and omens elevate or downgrade the characters, the *katais*’ upstart heroes often show up with a set of various magic skills. The latter include the power of shape-shifting, serving as a metaphoric *mise en abîme* of their social ascension from the status of marginal figures within society. This magic side in the universe of Tamil *katais* always goes hand-in-hand with parallel themes - brutally

¹⁴ I use the term “early modern” to describe seventeenth and eighteenth century South India, since this period shares various literary and musical dynamics with the European “Golden Age,” and also contains many of the cultural seeds of South India’s unique nineteenth-century “modernity.”

¹⁵ *Katais* are poetic formulaic epics popularized in the seventeenth-century. They are codified retellings of oral lore, reshaped by the early modern evolution of the older oral narratives themselves and the genre’s stylistic structures (Arunachalam 1976; Vanamamalai 2010). A heroic *katai* such as the *Maturaicuvāmikatai* is therefore more a whole narrative corpus than a single composition.

violent, less awe-inspiring than the primary themes that permeate the story. Torn between the ambitions of imperial rulers and the self-serving interests of mercenaries or petty kings, early modern Tamil South India was a ferocious place, with cities always threatened of being besieged and villages ransacked, roads and forests left prey to disbanded soldiers turned bandits (Vanamamalai 2010). This permanently lurking danger is reflected in the *katais*’ indulgent depictions of gory, arbitrary murders and massacres from battlefield to household, revealing to the modern reader the rampant “structural violence” of eighteenth-century South India. As peripheral and sometimes central figures, female characters find themselves in storylines of rape, incest and honor killings (Vanamamalai 2010), echoing the sexualized violence targeting women in periods of war. *Katais* remain the songs of a male-ruled epic universe as exalted by *vīraṇ*-centered ballads, the latter providing the best evocation of *poligar* prominence in early modern “Tamilnadu.”

Below I present the major points of the stereotypic plot of the hero-oriented *katai* texts.¹⁶ Born and raised in a poor low-caste community, an awesome man with herculean powers makes his way to glory by becoming a skilled warrior. Attaching himself to an eminent suzerain and often protected by the parental love of a deity, this “high-on-his-luck” hero triumphs of all obstacles and enemies to attain a high position in the realm. But fate cruelly catches the darling of the gods when the *vīraṇ* meets an unavoidable gruesome death for having challenged the social order. Under the influence and power of his patron-deity, the murdered hero undergoes an apotheosis through which he becomes a potent god serving as the vigilante of the downtrodden. A

¹⁶ The *katai* texts I have examined include the full versions of the *Cinṇatampikatai* and the *Kurukkulancikatai* compiled by the Institute of Asian Studies (Mourougan, 1987), Eveline Masilamini-Meyer’s translation of the *Kattavarayankatai* (2004) and Vanamamalai’s summarizations of the *Kathiyavurvīrankatai*, *Panchapandiyarkadai*, *Tesinkurajankadai*, *Khansahebcitami*, *Muttupatankatai* and *Iverrajakkalkatai* (Vanamamalai 2010).

crossover between figures like Robin-Hood and Heracles, the *vīraṇ* is extremely ambiguous from a moral standpoint and always implacable with his enemies. He is not necessarily noble in the treatment of the subalterns under his protection. This is in line with the *Pālaiyakkārars*' own questionable "royal status" as a group of former band leaders and "bandits" amidst the violent anarchy that dominated poligar South India. The heroes' unquestioned brutal "ravishing" of women and representations of these women's subsequent intense feelings of love for their abductors, infuse *vīraṇ katais* with hypermasculine patriarchal fantasies. Generally, in the texts, such women are considered no more than the bounty plundered by the ambitious lord. Apotheosized *vīraṇs* maintained in their cultic afterlives the largely ambivalent auras they had acquired earlier on. Portrayed as rogues with exaggerated, fearful physical features, as well as recipients of profusely bloody sacrifices, *vīraṇs* earned the appellation of "devils" in the words of Ziegenbalg and the missionaries that followed. Feared more than respected, male village deities commanded a ritual life that meticulously requested sacrifices, offerings and homages to protect devotees. Failing to do so provoked wrathful curses and often the death of the unworthy worshipper, much like a *pālaiyakkārar* feudal lord would punish peasants unable to pay tribute. Ziegenbalg writes: "The function of Aiyaṇār in this world is to rule over the devils and to keep away all hovering devils so they do not harm or deceive the people." (Ziegenbalg 161). This image of the role of Aiyaṇār as the ruler of the *poligar* gods evokes that of the Nāyaka rulers over their own *pālaiyakkārars*. The obedience of "inferior" village deities to an all-powerful Aiyaṇār seems to have declined over time considering Whitehead's thorough description of nineteenth-century rural Tamil religious economy, in which Aiyaṇār is superseded in popularity by the many martial deities (Whitehead 1921). This fading significance of Aiyaṇār is also attested to by the apparently rapid

decline of his cult in the re-rooted religious lives of Tamil indenture, in comparison to the other *vīraṇs* (see chapter 2) who asserted themselves as regional patron-deities in localized cults of their own.¹⁷ The middle of the eighteenth-century saw the complete collapse of Nāyaka power, and thus began Maturaivīraṇ's tale of prominence within the “new rule” of *pālaiyakkārars* over Tamil South India.

Although it is likely that oral legend kept Maturaivīraṇ's memory alive, it is the dismantlement of Nāyaka kingdoms by their ambitious mercenary generals that created the conditions favouring more canonical textual transmission of *vīraṇ* narratives. These same generals, new kings in many cases, would also sponsor *vīraṇ* worship through temple-patronage and the commissioning of epics. Of the myriad of divine *vīraṇs*, one stands as the boldest lord, liable to conquer much of the Tamil religious world through his border-crossing religious popularity and symbolic potency. His name: Maturaivīraṇ.

Anti-Hero Worship: The Making of Maturaivīraṇ

One century before being amalgamated with Christ and Napoléon in the French Antilles, Maturaivīraṇ rose to the status of popular deity in eighteenth-century Tamil South India. Probably confined at first to the tale of a (human) warrior associated with Nāyaka rule, Maturaivīraṇ is not mentioned in Ziegenbalg's extremely meticulous listing of the Tamil pantheon. It is thus possible to assume that, as a worshipped god, Maturaivīraṇ had not emerged yet in the early 1700s, considering his absence from *Genealogie der malabarischen Götter*. A dating of Maturaivīraṇ's earliest cultic presence through the mapping of the oldest shrines from the standpoint of archaeology

¹⁷ In Réunion, the worship of Ayenel (Aiyaṇār) was limited to some families declaring him their patron deity. According to Jean Benoist, this cult had faded almost completely by the 1980s. In the Singaīny family temple on Réunion island, I met the elderly cook of the shrine, who still does the clay horse offering in his house. “Meet the last descendent of Ayenel,” was I told when we were introduced to one another.

and art history still remains to be done. Although no clear dating has been associated to the redaction of his *katai*, a philological comparison of the literary language and style shows that it is anterior to the composition of the *Kāṭavarāyaṇcuvāmikatai*, dated “late eighteenth-century” (Shulman 1985).

As his name indicates, Maturaivīraṇ is likely to have originally been tied to the Madurai area, in today’s southern Tamilnadu. The Nāyaka kingdom died with Queen regent Mīnākṣī (d. 1736), the heirless sovereign who spent her last years repealing many *pālaiyakkārars*’ claims to her throne (Devakunjari, 1979). She also spent much time turning these warlords into stewards of her authority. Although set during the reign of Tirumalai Nāyaka (r. 1623-1659), the story of Maturaivīraṇ really is the story of lower-caste *pālaiyakkārars* supplantation of Nāyaka rule. Below, I will briefly summarize the story as told in the *Maturaivīraṇcuvāmikatai*¹⁸.

After a penance offered to Śiva, a son is born to the righteous king of Kāśī (Benaras) in the North. The court’s Brahmin astrologers predict that the child will cause great misfortune to the realm. The King abandons the newborn baby in a forest where the boy is protected and fed by a serpent sent by Śiva, who promises a great future for the infant. He is rescued and adopted by the Cakkiliyar (shoemaker) Cinnāṇ and his wife. The couple name their son Muttukumaraṇ, they flee to the South and raise him there. Growing up, the boy becomes a fierce and courageous forest-dwelling hunter, subduing tigers and wild elephants. On the look out for adventure and joined by his father, the hero becomes a footman in the army of local Governor Pommaiya [Tel. Bommayya]. He falls in love with the nobleman’s daughter Pommi [Bommi], and the

¹⁸ This narrative summary has been constructed from my own copy of the *Maturaivīraṇcuvāmikatai*, from David Shulman’s remarks in his study on the work, as well as from the different versions narrated to me by Charlemagne Badamia, the fruit of his researches between India and Réunion. Mr Badamia also gave me a copy of the *Maturaivīraṇcuvāmikatai*, whose publisher is unknown, purchased by him in Tamilnadu. Translated with the help of Kavinien Karuppudayan, this version has been helpful in reconstructing the story’s main narrative.

girl reciprocates his feelings. After taking the form of a fly to seduce the noble girl, he elopes with Bommi and impatiently marries her despite the fact that she is menstruating. Ambushed by Bommaya and his army along the Kāveri river, Maturaivīraṇ single-handedly massacres the soldiers and his father-in-law. Crossing the Kāveri, Maturaivīraṇ and Bommi arrive at Tirucci where he pledges loyalty to its viceroy and his patron deity, Viṣṇu as Raṅkanāta [Raṅganātha] at Srirangam. Sent to defend the god's temple against *kaḷḷar* bandits, Maturaivīraṇ becomes notorious for his victories against the bandit lords whom he subdues one after the other. Impressed by his valour, Tirumalai Nāyaka decides to appoint Maturaivīraṇ commander-in-chief of his army and the couple settles in the imperial city of Madurai. Winning battles against *kaḷḷar* rebels, the hero is ennobled and renamed Maturaivīraṇ. He enjoys a sophisticated life as a patron of the arts and religion, winning the affection of Goddess Mīṇākṣī of whom he becomes an ardent devotee. Maturaivīraṇ makes the mistake of falling in love with Veḷḷaiyammāl, a courtesan promised to the Nāyaka. Using sorcery to deceive her guards, he forces himself on Veillaiyammal to coerce her into marrying him. Escaping in the night, disguised as a *kaḷḷar*, Maturaivīraṇ is stopped by soldiers who cut off his arm and leg, and these are miraculously restored by Mīṇākṣī. Two different versions of his death are known: in one he commits suicide after having failed his duty as protector of the Nāyaka, while in the other he is arrested by the Nāyaka's troops and dismembered at the gallows. Following his death, his two wives immolate themselves. Left without any honor, a frightful Maturaivīraṇ haunts the Nāyaka king in dreams and apparitions and even through possession of his servants. To put an end to the torment, the Goddess Mīṇākṣī orders the King to build a temple to Maturaivīraṇ. The Nāyaka obeys, enshrining Maturaivīraṇ, flanked by his two wives, as the protector of his house

and city. From that day, Maturaivīraṇ has protected Madurai and the country from all forms of evil and danger.

Its hero becoming the patron God of Madurai and, therefore, its “true” king, Maturaivīraṇ’s story appears to simply echo the *pālaiyakkārar* replacement of Nāyaka kingship. But the story’s relevance reaches out beyond the borders of Madurai, gaining a deeper and larger significance for late feudal South India. The *Maturaivīraṇcuvāmikatai* is certainly the best relation of a lower-caste warlord’s formidable ascension to the highest level of power. From infant prince to untouchable, hunter to soldier, general to king and human to deity, Maturaivīraṇ distinguishes himself by his ability to adapt to various societies, by a certain talent to “pass.” There are various ways to read the *Maturaivīraṇcuvāmikatai* as much as there must have been many interpretations in different milieus of reception. As A. K. Ramanujan (1993) writes, “Each text has to be read for itself and in context to get its meanings. Texts cannot predict contexts, structures cannot predict functions, nor motifs and types meanings. Archetypes are empty unless cultures, by which I mean subcultures, fill them.” (105). The epic certainly exalts explicitly the valourous, cunning nature of the hero, in his ability to bluff (if not deceive) all his superiors, making him palatable to an oppositional lower-caste narrative of one-upmanship. Maturaivīraṇ’s use of magic and shape-shifting gives a deceitful edge to the formidable actor he is, fully comfortable in his adoption of a high-caste noble guise, a trope identifiable in the regal fashioning of assertive *pālaiyakkārar* usurpers of power. Coveting his employers’ goods as much as his concubines, Maturaivīraṇ affirms the values and *raison d’être* of a “robber-baron turned king,” who is comfortable in both worlds. Yet, a more dignifying construction is also possible. In the Purāṇic context, Maturaivīraṇ’s trials by transformation (social or

physical) can embody a religious discourse on the ephemeral, impermanent and cyclical nature of time and space (Doniger, 1984; Shulman 1985).

Metamorphosis, in the study of comparative mythology, can be the result of a permanent curse uttered by the gods on an evil hero, or a permanent ordeal that constantly tests the righteousness of a virtuous character. In Maturaivīraṇ's ballad, the hero is born to be a dharmic king, being the son of the raja of Kāśī or Banaras. After his apotheosis as a patron deity, he re-assumes the dharmic kingship that was stripped from him at the beginning of the narrative, spinning the story full-circle. Stuart Blackburn (1987) sees in the *katai* of Maturaivīraṇ the "Purāṇicization" of an earlier local legend. Velcheru Narayana Rao (1993) argues in favour of a Brahmanic end to the story, reading into it literary attempts to infuse Purāṇic tropes into local myths. These tropes of the Sanskritic imagination fulfill a social purpose by bringing the narrative closer to the values of upper-caste moral economy (Rao, 1993). I would also argue that the story of Maturaivīraṇ can as well be seen as a Tamil Śaiva Purāṇic tale. Gods from the Sanskritic canon are continuously present in popular Tamil religion. Figures like Soobramanian (Tam. Cuppiramaṇiyaṇ or Murukaṇ; Skt. Subrahmaṇya) and Panjalay/Draubadee (Tam. Tiraupati; Skt. Draupadī), for example, are ever-present in the cult of Maturaivīraṇ in the diaspora. In the *Maturaivīraṇcuvāmikatai* they play a direct role in the story, control the actions of the hero and test him through his series of transformations. As Shulman (1985) argues, the impermanence of Maturaivīraṇ's various selves in a mutating environment is reminiscent of the Brahmanic idea of the self wandering in *saṃsāra*. If one accepts a structural model, the story interestingly follows the organizational patterns of a moral myth. Despite clearing obstacles and climbing social steps, Maturaivīraṇ proves himself by finally appearing as who he is *supposed* to be, after atoning for his sins through a sacrificial suicide. This

“Purāṇicization” of a previously less dignified character certainly highlights the influence of upper-caste literati on the popular ballad. This is not surprising when we think about ways in which lower-caste kings legitimated their imperial identities by employing “service Brahmins.” Yet, despite these readable narrative markers of a “brahmanical sensitivity,” the *Maturaivīraṇcuvāmikatai* remains an assertively vernacular “folk purāṇa” to use A.K. Ramanujan’s category. It roots the story in a vernacularized ambience, making use of vivid descriptions of mundane regional life and a frequently colloquial language, participating in a rather comical trivialization of the mythical domain. Most importantly, what makes a “folk purāṇa” out of an epic entails its main character being the more or less explicit (local) “avatar” of a member of the Brahmanical pantheon. “In taking the same Gods and heroes as in the Sanskritic epics and Puranas and making them do, say, and mean different things in a local milieu, the folk myths domesticate them, incorporate them in bodies that sweat, stink, defecate, and menstruate [...], localize them and often contemporize them.” (Ramanujan 1993, 105). If we take the *Maturaivīraṇcuvāmikatai* as a Tamil “folk purāṇa,” which of the lofty and transcendent Purāṇic gods could have been so carnally incorporated, vernacularly domesticated, and narratively contemporized through *Maturaivīraṇ*?

Undocumented in all my textual sources on the Tamil legend of *Maturaivīraṇ*, a story I was told in Réunion is quite illuminating. It retells the birth of Souplameniel (Cuppiramaṇiyaṇ or Subrahmaṇya) from the sweat of Sivène (Śiva). This story has a deep resonance with the Purāṇic narrative of Gaṇeśa’s birth and the beheading by his father Śiva. In the Réunion story, Souplameniel is the one who beheads his brother Gaṇeśa (Tam. Vināyakar), in order to allow his father Siva to reach Pārvati. When resurrected, Vinayégél (Vināyakar) curses Souplamaniel, condemning him to be reborn as Mardévirin (*Maturaivīraṇ*) and suffer a violent death in punishment.

Indeed, there are many connections that help us perceive Maturaivīraṇ as a “more human” and perhaps even “lower” form of Subrahmaṇya/Murukaṇ in the *Maturaivīraṇcuvāmikatai* narrative. First, he can be understood as the surrogate son of Śiva and Pārvati in his birth narrative, where the presence of the snake imagery explicitly connects to the famous myth of Siva saving the city of Madurai from a giant snake in the Tamil text *Tiruvīlaiyāṭal Purāṇam*, and by extension to the goddess Mīṇāksī in this period (Harman 1989; Hudson 2010). Second, the hero’s given name is Muttukumaraṇ (“the Pearl Prince”), one of the popular epithets of Murukaṇ (Clothey, 1978).

Maturaivīraṇ possesses many of the key “humanized” attributes that have been essential to the development of the figure of Murukaṇ in Tamil South India: (1) Both their legends tie them deeply to the Tamil land as its “Lords” through narratives of travel and conquest; (2) They are both commanders of armies which uphold order. While Murukaṇ is the general of the Godly host, Maturaivīraṇ is the army commander who protects the (Tamil) realm of men; (3) They share an association with the forest as the place where they prove their valour. Just like the “God of Hunters”, Maturaivīraṇ, as a hunter, tames the wilderness and emerges out of it as an accomplished mythical hero; (4) Both display an implacable fierceness in battle, what the human Maturaivīraṇ’s story reveals in its more real-life gruesomeness; (5) Both have acquired a reputation as philanderers. While Murukaṇ’s erotic escapades are subsumed in allegory, Maturaivīraṇ’s sexual voracity appears in a raw and immanent form. Both transgress caste norms, to a different degree. Murukaṇ’s seduction of Valli and Maturaivīraṇ’s of Bommi, are equally assiduous courtships of an ingenuous girl, while Murukaṇ’s other wife and Devasenā and Maturaivīraṇ’s Vellaiyammāl are both images of noble grandeur. Long before its forceful revival during the colonial period, the cult

of Murukaṇ had gone through some decline since its medieval peak. Ziegenbalg sees the princely and bigamous Aiyaṇār as another form of “Supramanier”, replacing the latter in popularity in village worship.¹⁹ By inflecting its hero with Murukaṇ-like attributes, the *Maturaivīraṇcuvāmikatai* enshrines Maturaivīraṇ as the new master of Tamil religiosity, riding the wave of eighteenth-century martial consciousness, arguably asserting a more effective agency in contrast to the “light weight” powers of the withdrawn Brahmanical deity.

All the elements mentioned so far in this section challenge the postcolonial contemporary idea that Maturaivīraṇ has an exclusive “low-caste” or “folk” identity. Moreover, if Maturaivīraṇ’s identity and worship are certainly “Hindu”, I would like to emphasize the dialogical influence of Islam which I sense has influenced the making of Maturaivīraṇ. Susan Bayly has shown the wide array of narrative and iconic borrowings between *vīraṇs* and warrior *pīrs* (*hazrats*, or Sufi masters) in eighteenth-century Tamil India. Muslim warlords and their Northern mercenaries played a large role as equally ambitious would-be-rulers in the many *pālaiyakkārar* wars of early modern Tamil India, reifying images of the “fierceness” of the Muslim warrior in the Tamil imaginary. Sponsored by Muslim and Hindu lords, the Sufi shrines or *dargahs* of warrior *pīrs* flourished in this martial period (Bayly 1989). In these ritual spaces shared by Muslims and Hindus, *vīraṇs* often adopted the *pīrs*’ garb and attributes. The most dreaded Muslim commanders were perceived as “holy warriors”, and often embodied attributes of divinity that resonated with “Hindu” ones. One can thus argue that the Tamil Islamicate as a whole in this period was understood as a sign of martial fierceness. Conversely, martial figures, also ended up connoting the Tamil Islamicate, as exemplified by the conversion of many *pālaiyakkārars* and sellswords to Islam.

¹⁹ This renders likely the connection between Murukaṇ and another *grāmadevatās* such as Maturaivīraṇ.

Judging by the proximity of Muslim and Hindu warlords as well as their mirroring cults, I would argue that “Muslimness” was never far in the understanding and representation of *vīraṇs* throughout Tamil South India. Concerning Maturaivīraṇ, his narrative cradle in Madurai had been the stage for the ambitions of two central Muslim commanders: Chanda Sāhib (born Husayn Dost Khān, d. 1752) and Yusuf Khān (1725-1764). Both ambitious rulers were crushed at the height of their power and it is very possible that they served as inspirations - among many others - for the figure of Maturaivīraṇ, as much as the latter’s narrative affected the popular legends commemorating Chanda Sāhib and Yusuf Khān (Bayly 1989). The narrative of the *Maturaivīraṇcuvāmikatai* describes the warrior-god as a figure of ascension and fierceness, themes that would later be developed in the diasporic afterlives of Maturaivīraṇ. Before reaching Mauritius, the god went beyond the borders of bardic lore and rooted himself in the fertile ritual and mythic field the villages of the future “Madras Presidency” had been turned into.

Team Grāmadevatā: Maturaivīraṇ in Tamil Village Religion

Right up until today, Maturaivīraṇ is one of the recurring faces of South Indian “village Hinduism.” By the 1840s, when colonial agents toured Tamil villages on the coast and in the heartlands to recruit workers for plantation colonies, one of the most essential gods of peasant life, Maturaivīraṇ, would enlist for the sea crossing. Goddess worship boomed in the eighteenth-century Tamil countryside through the large patronage of rising Vēllālar landlords (Bayly 1989, Hildebeitel 1988). The elevation of these landowners from wealthy farmers to influent literati enabled the parallel elevation of various land-protecting and rainmaking “*ammaṇ*” goddesses, the most popular one being Māriyammaṇ. Rather than a political order, these rainmaking goddesses

embodied the relationship of peasants with their environment, often symbolizing the elements and other natural forces. Their illness-inflicting irritability and dread-striking ambivalence were the mirrors of a harsh rural universe, full of droughts, floods and various kinds of plagues and poxes. Adorned nonetheless with the iconicity of queenship and understood as localized forms of Brahmanical *devīs*, the *ammaṇs* attracted a large array of *vīraṇs* and other fierce deities into their entourage of devoted servants (Hiltebeitel 1990, Biardeau 1990, Whitehead 1921). Grafted onto these local pantheons, Maturaivīraṇ occupied the role of the main bodyguard or watchman of these female *ammaṇ* deities as he had in the more urban worship of Mīṇākṣī. That subaltern position did not afford him just a small cult, judging at least by the many accounts of massive devotion commanded by martial deities in general. From early to mid-nineteenth-century, growing European political control had not succeeded in eliminating cultures of royal authority and ritual that emanated from the small kingdoms or princely states of South India.

As much as the British-controlled warlords still ruled their lands, *vīraṇs* were still highly relevant in the ritual life of Tamil villages (Whitehead 1921), where *kaḷḷar* and *maṇavar* chieftains challenged the authority of the British (Dirks 1987). Mirroring a still uncertain and violent caucus, the mid-nineteenth-century Tamil political hall of fame encompassed a dangerously sacred universe. The story of Maturaivīraṇ was well known to villagers through itinerant bards and drama (*nāṭakam*) troupes performing, on certain religious occasions, episodes of the *Maturaivīraṇcuvāmikatai*. But by the nineteenth-century, Maturaivīraṇ stood in a cluster of equally potent deities who need some introduction.

The most ubiquitous cult of the whole Tamil region was undoubtedly that of Māriyamman (Hiltebeitel 1988, Bayly 1989), whose most frequent attendants were

Periyācciyamman, Kāṭṭēriyamman, Muṇiyāṇṭi-Muṇīcuvaran and Maturaivīraṇ. Tied with the precarious world of peasant women, the first two are notable for their dangerous ambivalence, and are often propitiated at the time of childbirth and other women's lifecycle events. Often amalgamated into a single deity, Muṇiyāṇṭi and Muṇīcuvaran appear as the merger of many symbolic realms of fierceness born from the religious imagination and ending up as dreaded vigilantes.²⁰ This "dreadfulness" shared by all *kāvaltaivams* ("guardian deities") found its most concrete expression in their largely bloody sacrificial cults.

The carnivorous nature of village gods certainly mirrored the non-vegetarian lifestyle of the lower-caste communities that worshipped them. In fact, even the "higher" gods from the Brahmanical pantheon could be, in their rural cults, recipients of sacrifices. The belief that meat consumption was an almost magic provider of virile force made it a ubiquitous part of warrior-god rituals where profusely bloody holocausts of goats and roosters mimicked the carnage of the battlefield. Known to be an addictive part of soldiers' rations, alcohol and tobacco were also offered to *vīraṇs* and the two *muṇis*. The officiants of these non-Brahman cults were known as *pūcāris* (Hiltebeitel 1988, Benoist 1998). *Pūcāris* also marked village religion with another distinctive ritual, namely that of possession. Goddesses and their attendants spoke directly to their devotees through the person of the *mālai pūcāri*²¹. Many warrior-Gods were believed to easily possess their *pūcāris* by "riding" them, the possession

²⁰ Over the twentieth-century, the fierceness of Muṇiyāṇṭi and Muṇīcuvaran appears to be the result of their proximity with the frightfulness supposedly associated to rural Śaivism in Tamilnadu, when the two amalgamated gods came to be known as "servants of Śiva." I have noted that old Réunionese representations of the Minis (*muṇis*) portray them with attributes of Muslim *pīrs* such as ample green Mughal *kamīz*, Persian headgear, pointy beards and hookahs. I wonder if the preindenture imagination of the *muṇis* was not one in which the warrior aura of the *pīrs* was grafted onto the aggressive figure of the Śaiva non-Brahman ritualist-renouncers (*paṇṭāram*), in line with the permanent amalgamation of Muslim and Hindu worlds described by Bayly.

²¹ Literally the "garlanded officiant," the *mālai pūcāri* was the religious practitioner specialized in deity possession. The title is explained by the wearing of a flower garland by the officiant before being possessed, a sign that indicates that he/she welcomes the god into his own body.

understood as a *chevauchée* by the deity (Bayly 1989; Jean Benoist 1998), Maturaivīraṇ being known for his “quickness” in arriving upon devotees’ request (Whitehead 1921, Masilamani-Meyer 2008).

Traditionally, it seems that Maturaivīraṇ ranked lower than Muṇiyāṇṭi in the hierarchy of Tamil village shrines (Whitehead 1921). This leads me to think that the importance he acquired in the diaspora was the result of the new significance he took on in the plantation universe. In nineteenth-century South India, it appears that Maturaivīraṇ was mainly celebrated for having subdued *kaḷḷars* and other bandits. The cult of Caṅkili Karuppaṇ, another hero-god and tutelary deity of the *kaḷḷar* world, was likely to have risen during this period. Whitehead and later Dumont testified of the fear commanded by the powerful *kaḷḷar* deity, patron of “robbers and marauders” (Whitehead 1921, Dumont 1957). A popular oral legend presents Caṅkili Karuppaṇ (also known as Karuppacāmi) as the archenemy of Maturaivīraṇ, as the bandit-king of *kaḷḷar* troopers defeated by the paladin. In fact, in Réunion island, the chains that are a central part of Karuppaṇ’s iconography are believed to have been tied by Maturaivīraṇ upon capturing him.²² As the only warrior able to stand on the way of Karuppaṇ, Maturaivīraṇ remained an essential figure in the protection of the sacred and mundane universe. In Réunion until today, Karuppaṇ is believed to lose power if placed next to Mardévirin in a shrine.

The religious and social history of early indenture is an eloquent testimony to Maturaivīraṇ’s cultural prominence. The *Maturaivīraṇ Paṭṭu*, one of the most popular Tamil hymns to Maturaivīraṇ from India, exalts Maturaivīraṇ as an invincible universal lord. In Appasamy Mourougaiyan and Ernest Moutoussamy’s etymological lexicon of

²² I have heard this legend (probably an oral addition to the *katai* corpus) in Réunion. Karuppaṇ also appears as the enemy of Maturaivīraṇ in the popular feature film *Mathurai Veeran* (1956) with politician-actor M. G. Ramachandran in the lead role.

Indian Caribbean surnames, one can find the compound Virinpermal (Vīraṇ Perumāṇ) as a name honouring Maturaivīraṇ (Mourougaiyan and Moutoussamy 2009). Reserved for the highest gods of the Hindu pantheon, the addition of the honorific “Perumāṇ” illustrates the reverence afforded to Maturaivīraṇ by indentured laborers.²³ The presence of icons of Maturaivīraṇ in many Réunionese families is still more interesting. They have been enshrined for having served as talismans during the journey from India to the islands. “Madourévirène was always with them. He was their god and he protected them. They sang his prayer and kept him round their neck. People cannot forget the Lord Madourévirène,” Mr Badamia, a third-generation Tamil Réunionnais told me, with tears in his eyes. Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, villagers from all over Tamil South India disembarked onto new lands, about to recreate their world in a new one, their religion amidst other ones. And it is this history of Maturaivīraṇ that we shall turn to next.

²³ Perumāṇ, the “Great One” is an epithet given to the highest deities of the Śaiva pantheon, usually reserved for references to Śiva himself.

Chapter 2

From Watchman to Witchcraft: The Worship and Representation of Mardévirin in Colonial Mauritius

All Mauritian Tamils agree that Mardévirin is mostly a figure of their past. They also admit that their religion “changed a lot” over the last half of a century. To understand better the brutal erasure of Mardévirin from Tamil religious life, it is important to apprehend the ground in which he had been firmly rooted since indenture, a ground displaced and replaced by a religious revolution described in the next chapter. Uncovering this “forgotten religion” relies upon an “archeological” process, oscillating between ethnographic investigation and site exploration. It is complicated by the forces of communal taboo and ideological oblivion that are profoundly embedded in the cultural life of modern Mauritius.

Despite the odds, what emerged from this research is the portrait of a richly complex religious world that enriched the island with one of its most colorful characters, the Tamil *grāmadevatā* Maturaivīraṇ. Since its arrival from South India, Tamil religion, I will argue, occupied a special place in Mauritian colonial society and in the Mauritian *imaginaire*, with Mardévirin functioning as a pivotal signpost. Far from being a “minor deity” of this sacred world, this figure concentrically expanded outward from the Tamil community to the whole island, all the while traveling as a marker of colonial plantation’s politics.

Fields of Power: Mardévirin’s Interlocked Worlds

By the late nineteenth-century, virtually all the sugar estates in Mauritius possessed at least one temple attending to the religious needs of laborers whose parents hailed from villages across the Tamil-speaking parts of the Madras Presidency, present

day Tamilnadu (Sooriamoorthy 1977, Younger 2010). Most often only second in numbers to those from Bihar, “Madras laborer” families formed tight endogamous enclaves, even as they neighboured other Indian peasants, creole factory employees, as well as the white administrative class, ranging from overseer to plantation owner (Carter 1995).

Accounts of visitors on the island bear testimony to the vividness of “Hindu” ceremonies witnessed on plantations, mainly “walk on fire” (*tīmiti*) and “hook-piercing” (*kāvaṭi*) processions (Carter 1995). In fact, at a time when North Indian religion was limited to house rituals and *baṭka* scriptural education, the public and somatic character of South Indian festivals and processions made them - in Christian perception, as least - representations of emergent “plantation Hinduism” (Carter 1995).²⁴ From temple worship to walking on fire, Tamil emigrants re-rooted almost completely their religious life in the plantation where indenture had brought them. Their ritual practices were grouped under the umbrella name “*Madras* religion” or more popularly “*Servis Madras*.”²⁵ With migrants in the process of adopting the Creole language, daily Tamil ritual terms like *kōyil* (“temple”) were transformed into “hybrid” terms like *lēgliz* (“church”).²⁶ While migrants found themselves in this linguistic and cultural vernacularization of Tamil religious life, it nonetheless retained many of its original ritual and cultic elements. Unlike what happened in Réunion or the French Antilles, the British hold on Mauritius enabled a certain proximity to India, unmatched

²⁴ The *baṭka* was a school imparting scriptural and linguistic education to the children of Bhojpuri labourers. Vibrant “institutions of memory” of North Indian Mauritian life, *baṭkas* have been instrumental in the preservation of Hindi-Bhojpuri language among Mauritians of North Indian descent, in marked contrast with the loss of language among those of Tamil and Telugu origin.

²⁵ Serving as both a noun and an adjective, “Madras” referred to South Indian people and culture in Mauritius, and was used by Tamils to describe themselves until the word “Tamil” (Tamoul) became the preferred term during the 1960s. The compound “*Servis Madras*” incorporates the English word “service” but here *servis* means something more like “cult” and thus connotes a “popular” form of religion.

²⁶ Literally meaning “fort” or “palace”, the Tamil *kōyil* is also used to refer to both Hindu temples and Catholic churches in contemporary Tamilnadu.

in the rest of the Tamil diaspora, whose religious worlds were not located on the direct route between Madras and Port-Louis (Younger 2010). While Réunionese and Antillais ritual specialists or *pousaris* (Tam. *pūcāri*) were sometimes left to a great deal of cultic and literary improvisation (Benoist 1998), Mauritian religious life has always been inflected by vibrant South Indian elements through the availability of printed texts, ritual icons, architectural savoir-faire, all imported from India, as well as a relatively well-preserved linguistic knowledge among its ritual specialists.²⁷

While Port-Louis and other Mauritian towns were already home to a certain kind of Hindu orthopraxy by the 1850s (Sooriamoorthy 1977; Reddi, unpublished paper), plantation religion remained under the control of non-elite *pousari* specialists.²⁸ To hold this title and occupy the function of ritual knowledge bearer in Mauritius, the first condition was often the ability to read or recite liturgical Tamil, in the form of hymns and chants. *Pousaris* were mainly drawn from lower-caste families, yet central to the *pousari*'s functions was the performance and vernacularized preservation of South Indian village rituals, and not so much his caste status (Benoist 1998).

In today's *imaginaire*, the *pousari* is the officiant called upon to conduct the kind of ceremonies that upper-caste ritual specialists, known commonly as *ayyās*, from the towns or higher caste status would not, such as animal sacrifice, funerary services,

²⁷ This proximity with India gave Mauritian *pousaris* a real authority in the region, with Réunionese *pousaris* travelling to Mauritius to “learn” from their Mauritian “confreres”, the latter also journeying to Réunion to teach worshippers hymns and rituals. These contacts also introduced into Réunion much of the necessary religious paraphernalia of popular Tamil religion, a notable example being early printed booklets of the popular hymn known as *Māriyamman Tālāṭṭu*, which over time have become veritable objects of cultic reverence themselves.

²⁸ Urban religious life was under the control of religious-savvy *vēḷḷālar* merchant caste groups, mainly Piḷḷais and Ceṭṭis. Erected in 1861, the Kaylasson Kovil in Port-Louis, for example, possessed a Brahmin priestly lineage since its foundation. Other town *kōyils* were actually administered by *vēḷḷālar* ritual specialists who also conformed to upper-caste notions of orthopraxy.

and divine possession.²⁹ Whereas in Réunion the *pousari* was the sole repository of religious knowledge (Benoist 1998), in Mauritius, it was common to see a plantation temple - especially if generously endowed - being served by an *ayyā*, himself sometimes confusingly referred to as “*pousari*”.³⁰ He nevertheless dealt only with the offerings and prayers of the ritually “clean” space of the temple sanctum, while a *pousari* - arguably the most popular among the devotees - would take care of the animal slaughter and possession séances outside the sanctum. As I will discuss later, this spatial and ritual separation mirrored the distinction between the main deity and his/her guardians, iconic centres of two separate and yet converging/complementary worlds, the “clean” and the “bloody”. More than half of the temples erected in plantation spaces were dedicated to Mariamma (Tam. *Māriyamman*), the rest to Panjalay (Tam. *Pāñcālī/Tiraupatiyamman*; Skt. *Pāñcālī/Draupadī*).³¹

When the first migrants arrived from India, they were directly propelled from the boat to the sugar estates without any liminal introduction to the larger insular society whose language they initially did not speak. They were foreign as well to the social mechanics of the imperial Mauritian context. They were left to understand their new world through their distinctly South Indian codes as much as through the well-

²⁹ The term *ayyā* here referred to a priest in a more clerical sense, usually *vēllālar* ritual specialists abiding by some Āgamic rules and a vegetarian lifestyle. Most of the *pousaris* indulging in animal sacrifice and possession would come from low-caste or *paraiyar* (Dalit) communities.

³⁰ These were known as “clean” *pousaris*, having gained the status of *ayyā* with a domestic/sartorial lifestyle closer to traditional temple rules, but still considered *pousaris* for their handling of more rural cults revolving around “popular” goddesses such as Mariamma or Panjalay. These *pousaris* - often with higher caste status - were from literate families and occupied the function of teachers, in charge of linguistic and scriptural transmission among labourers.

³¹ Because this chapter focuses on the vernacularized religion of the colonial period in contrast to the post-independence “Tamilization” of religious life, I will use in this chapter the creolized names of deities (as well as prayer and other religious vocabulary) as spoken and transcribed during this period, in order to be more faithful to the “forgotten” world I am describing. To this list must also be added the temples of Mama Kaarli (*Kālī*) and her (less officially recognized) guardian Karoupène (*Caṅkili Karuppan*). This cult was rather marginal and peripheral within the Servis Madras world, often relegated to remote rural temples and shrines, for its completely sacrificial “bloody” nature and ties with untouchable communities. The gory and ambivalent aspects of the cult made it fall rapidly into the perceived categories of “sorcery” and “harmful religion.”

delineated ones of the *tablisman* (“estate”). For Indian labourers, the South Indian “little kingdom” was the model that appeared closer to the early colonial plantation whose rules they needed to assimilate. This will prove crucial in our study of Mardévirin’s evolution in Mauritius. *Coolies* from the Madras Presidency had left villages with very close ties to a range of Tamil princely states.³² Despite their rulers’ fading power under British rule, these states still assured much of the cultural, political and administrative authority required to govern the realm (Dirks 1987). In British-ruled Mauritius, economic and political powers belonged to long-established French colonists who ruled the largely rural country in a set of neighboring estates belonging to often quasi-dynastic lineages of planter families (Carter 1995), these “rulers” having recreated in Mauritius a certain *ancien régime* culture of landed aristocracy.

With its borders, its internal rules and the allegiance to a powerful name, the plantation system in Mauritius indeed resembled some of the little kingdoms of British South India. As he provided money and protection, the administrator appeared as a largely kingly figure for the Indian workers, echoing the key-functions that *rājās* held towards their subjects.³³ I would in fact argue that this simile was cultivated by the planters themselves.³⁴

Moreover, Hindu temples were built on land granted to laborers by the owners and administrators. In pre-colonial South India, temple construction and patronage were

³² *Coolie* is the historical term referring to Indian Indenture emigrants in Mauritius. While it is understood as a pejorative term in many South Asian and diasporic contexts, its use in Mauritius and tellings of Mauritian history is ubiquitous.

³³ In a Bhojpuri popular song sung across the plantations, the opening line is *rāj* ____ [name of the planter, depending on the estate] *ke rāj maiṁ hūṁ* - “I am in the kingdom of King [name].”

³⁴ In his memoirs *Mes champs et mon moulin* describing plantation life in Edwardian Mauritius, administrator’s son Henry North-Coombes mentions the tradition of *coolies* coming to pay homage to the master in a ceremony echoing strongly the Darbar traditions of princely India. They had been imprinted into imperial self-consciousness across the British Empire through the great Delhi Darbar of 1911. In the same book, North-Coombes mentions the planters’ original custom of giving their laborers a day’s rest on the Catholic “Three Kings Day” while hosting balls and parties at the mansion, almost as if the whites wanted to drive home to Indian laborers the idea that they were actually the celebrated monarchs (North-Coombes, 1969).

always associated with royal bounty as a sign of suzerainty (Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam 1993; Branfoot 2000). In Mauritius, this initial patronage from white owners is crucial as it strongly cemented, at a religious level, the association between planters, peasants and the land that united them. Endowed with foundation legends and powerful symbolic significances, the temple - and its original associations with “kingly rule” - helped establish, with increasingly blurred borders, the merger of the insular plantation’s world and the divine pantheon, as well as with the geographies of the South Indian *mentalité*.³⁵ In “early modern” South India, king and god were mutually fashioned one upon each other in temple contexts. Temples themselves were understood as the “fort” or “palace” of the king, centres of a realm mirroring the mythological one or infused by it (Branfoot, 2007). In his study of medieval Christendom, Le Goff (1988) shows how the theologians of the Gothic period produced an extensive mapping of paradise, derived from the structures of feudal kingdoms, with God standing above angels, saints and prophets in a similar pyramidal organigram.³⁶ In a “chicken-and-egg” relationship, this mapping justified the feudal states of Europe in its own medieval *mentalité* (Le Goff 1964). Although I do not dispose of enough first-hand evidence to affirm that there was an explicit modelling of deities on planters, some facets of plantation religious life are indicative of such a trend. Catholic planters were undoubtedly a regular presence within temples, often invited to festivals and given traditional courtly honors such as garlanding, palanquin-holding, temple procession and

³⁵ My use of the word “*mentalité*” is indebted to its characterization by the Annales School which refers to a culturally defined worldview (mainly through religion, arts and politics), mapping a group’s experience of society (Le Goff, 1980).

³⁶ In Réunion where a stronger Catholic culture prevails, a similar organigram is observed where God is the *Gramoune*, the plantation owner; Saint Michel, the *commandeur* while the estate’s mill evokes thunder.

even participation in the *pousai* (Tam. *pūcai*; Skt. *pūjā*) offerings (Benoist 1998).³⁷

Furthermore, quite a few temples built in the nineteenth-century display architectural features shared with tablisman palatial mansions, as well as with the richly baroque Catholic churches visited by the island's white landed aristocracy. Upon looking at the age-old statuary of centenarian plantation temples, one can notice the white complexion of Soubramanian, Panjalay and Mariamma which, besides being attributed primarily to the use of limestone, was certainly given an additional meaning within the insular imagination.

Furthermore, I would suggest that the association between Mariamma and the Virgin Mary might have reinforced this correspondence between divinity and administration. In the late nineteenth-century, Marian devotion gained popularity in the plantations through the impetus given by planters' wives following the woman-centered devotional movement around the Lourdes Marian apparitions.³⁸ It would not be surprising if, through Mary, the plantation's archetype of the Gran Madam ("Great Lady", epithet given to a plantation owner's wife) had been amalgamated with Mariamma using the symbolism of "divine queenship" found in South Indian Māriyamman narratives and rituals.³⁹

³⁷ Benoist briefly mentions the presiding participation of white planters in temple festivities. I owe this detailed list of functions to recollections of older Tamil Mauritians.

³⁸ Our Lady of Lourdes is certainly the most popular and pervasive image of the Virgin Mary in Mauritius, enjoying a central place in Tamil Catholic and Tamil Hindu religiosity down to the present. Its cult originated in France through an affirmation of female middle-class respectability and lay participation in the Church (Hobswam 1983), as the Virgin of Lourdes arguably echoes the figure of 19th century's French Catholic bourgeois "good lady." As early as the 1860s, in colonial Mauritius, women from the white and creole upper middle classes became the standard bearers of the Marian movement throughout the island (Nagapen 1990).

³⁹ In both Réunion and Mauritius, I have met many descendants of *pousaris* whose family legends tropically evoke the proximity between the *pousaris* and planters' wives. The latter would often require the services of the former as healers and soothsayers for the well-being of their families and the estate, often favouring in return the religious activities of the officiants. In Mauritius, the deity of the famous Amma Tookai (Durga) Kovil - deeply associated in the Tamil *imaginaire* with the white world due to the temple's active patronage by the estate owners' dynasty - was known by worshippers as "Madame Toukay [or Tookai]" by worshippers, including a large number of creoles from the plantation. The term *madame* had for long been reserved to the white bourgeoisie.

The semiotic continuum between the memory of the Indian “homeland,” the reality of plantation life, and the mythical world of the divine realm finds eloquent expression in the hybrid space of the old plantation temples. Yet in this symbolic structure of Creole Hinduism, I would argue, the most powerful character might not have been the ruler, but rather the middle-man.

Many laborers arrived safely in Mauritius with the talisman protection (Tam. *kāppu; raṭcai*) of Maturaivīraṇ tied around their neck after surviving a perilous voyage where tempests and monsters had been warded off by the recitation of the *Madouraivirène Pattou* (*Maturaivīraṇ Pāṭṭu*) which would provide the god the distinction of being the first deity to alight from a boat with the laborers. According to one of my interlocutors, one of the earliest popular traditions of nineteenth-century Tamil religion in Mauritius was the gathering of laborers for the recitation of the *pattou*, in order to protect each day from danger.⁴⁰ In his capacity as the protector against indenture’s initial hardships, Maturaivīraṇ is entrusted with the same set of functions assumed by the god Hanumān among North Indian Bhojpuri-speaking migrants on the plantation in the early colonial times. This role arguably turned the monkey-faced *Rāmāyaṇa* character into the most invoked and cherished god among North Indian Mauritian Hindus and, until today, he remains a symbol attached to the community’s memory of indenture as well as its sense of belonging.⁴¹ Just as Hanumān could not be unhinged from the Mauritian Rāmjee cult, Maturaivīraṇ attached himself to the figure of Mariamma as her guardian, with this goddess replacing Mīṇākṣi whose

⁴⁰ I owe this information to Sanjiven Murday from his personal research among the elders of the Tamil community across the island.

⁴¹ North Indian Mauritian Hindus show much enthusiasm in evoking their daily devotion to Hanuman, often mentioning how the Avadhi devotional text *Hanumān Cālīsā* protected their forbears from the extreme weather conditions of the sea voyage and early plantation hardships. This is partly explained by the wide promotion of Hanumān worship through a “text” easily accessible among illiterate or semi-literate Indian villagers. It leads me to think that the *Maturaivīraṇ Pāṭṭu* had the same function, and triggered the same kind of response.

more urban worship did not flourish in Mauritius.⁴² Mentioned two times in the *Mariamene Talatou* (*Māriyamman Tālāṭṭu*)⁴³ and always enshrined as the second largest figure in Mariamma temples, Maturaivīraṇ appears to have become an essential part of the arguably most important cult in colonial Mauritius.

As the Tamil community adopted the mores and predominant language (Kreol) of Mauritius, changes in pronunciation turned Maturaivīraṇ into the more creolized Mardévirin. Whichever name was attributed to him, one can clearly see the demon-fighting figure's symbolic relevance in the daily life of early migrants, enhanced, on the other hand, by the abuses of colonists. With the creolization of religion and the emergence of a social contract between laborers and landowners, it appears that Mardévirin became more and more rooted in the plantation's divine hierarchy. By looking again at temple architecture, one sees that a prominent space was dedicated to the *kāvaltaivam*, known in Mauritius as the *gardyen* ("guardian"). In all the unrenovated temples - or following the recollections of interlocutors at reconsecrated *kōyils* - Idoumbène (Iṭumpan), Nalvan (Nallāravan) and Mardévirin (respectively protectors in Soubramanian, Panjalay, and Mariamma temples) stand as obvious signposts of the sacred space. Through their images enshrined in large ex-voto niches or Marian grotto structures reminiscent of the Catholic world, the guardians appeared as the "key holders" of the temple, to whom honour had to be paid in order to be granted permission to reach the main deity. This is in compliance with the temple traditions of South India where at the village level, warrior *kāvaltaivams* often replaced the figures

⁴² This "swap" was and is still common in rural Tamil Hinduism, in which a pan-regional guardian is tied to a more local deity.

⁴³ The "Lullaby to Māriyamman", a textual embodiment of the goddess's worship from India to Mauritius, is a hymnal invocation in which her legends and attributes are enumerated. This is used to lull the upset rain deity and bring her to rest. In Mauritius, the *Talatou* was sung by *pousaris* and *amayes* ("grandmothers," or older women) in the context of possession by Mariamma, to call or welcome her, or during the walks on fire while the penitents made their way on the embers. It was also sung to soothe people affected by fever, the latter itself understood to be a manifestation of the goddess.

of the “palace intendants” of large temple complexes, figures such as Gaṇeśa, Āṇḍanaiyar (Hanumān), Bhairava or Garuḍa. In the insular world and its plantation *mentalité*, this position would have corresponded to the plantation’s office of *sirdar* (“overseer”).⁴⁴ Marina Carter insists on the centrality of this position in the political and socioeconomic sphere of the colonial plantation, as the powerful intermediary figure between the white owners and their Indian laborers (Carter 1995).

In his study of popular North Indian Hinduism, Pavitrnanand Ramhota (2010) has convincingly shown how the localized pantheon of “minor” North Indian deities symbolically echoed the plantation’s social order, mainly through the figure of Dhi Baba.⁴⁵ Of unknown origin and aniconically represented by a rock tied in a white cloth, Dhi Baba is considered as a guardian deifying the function of the *kolom* (Chazan-Gilling & Ramhota 2010). Ranking above the *sirdar*, the *kolom* was a white overseer or intendant to whom was assigned the supervision of the field, and he was considered the head of the *sirdars*. In Mauritius, Dhi Baba is officially recognized as the North Indian counterpart of the Tamil Minisprins.⁴⁶ Although not as present in the religious world than Mardévirin, it seems necessary to introduce Minisprins first to understand better the former’s positioning.

“Minisprins is the guardian of the field,” a plantation-raised Créole lady told me, insisting on his initial hold on the rural world.⁴⁷ I would argue that in the Tamil imaginary representation of the plantation’s sacred universe, Minisprins was more explicitly closer to the white world than Soubramanian or Mariamma.

⁴⁴ The title “*sirdar*” comes from the Hindustani *sardār*, meaning commander or leader.

⁴⁵ Dhi Baba is a popular God of Northern India, invoked as the protector of the village. I owe this information to Catherine Servan-Schreiber.

⁴⁶ This was confirmed by Pavitrnanand Ramhota and Ayya Ajagen Curpen (see Chapter 4). I note some similarities between Indian imageries of the South Indian Muṇḍicuvaram and the Rajasthani Pābujī, including their white horse (see next page) and their dignified martial attire compared to the more marginal Maturaivīraṇ.

⁴⁷ In Mauritius, “the rural” cannot be dissociated from both the plantation itself, as well as the idea of its ownership by the white community.

In the rural goddess kovil in the village of Terracine, the octogenarian *ayyā* describes him as follows: “Minisprins is big! He’s like the master of the world. When the wind blows on the sugarcane field, it is because Minisprins is blowing. He dresses in white, and he rides a white horse every night to see if everything is all right. He can also become a white dog.” This representation also evokes the lordly image of the *kolom* or even the boss watching over the harvest on horseback. In style (dress, mount) and even substance (as the residual color of this shape-shifting), this insistence on the white color seems to associate Minisprins with the white world of the plantation, from boss to *kolom*. Scholars and interlocutors recognize Minisprins as the Tamil *Muṇicuvaraṇ* or *Muṇiyāṇṭi* (Benoist 1998), the latter being arguably representations of the fair-skinned “Northerner” in eighteenth-century Tamil local mythology. In addition to the *muṇis*, I also see a clear association with the figure of *Aiyaṇār*. Both *Aiyaṇār* and *Muṇiyāṇṭi* rank above the moral-cum-political hierarchy of guardian deities and are believed to be *Maturaivīraṇ*’s lieges in shrines where the narratives and ritual functions of these different gods overlap.

In a manner similar to this symbolic vernacularization of the Indian temple, I also sense that the boundary-marking assemblages of various warrior-gods were represented in Mauritius by field-protecting shrines where the *gardyens* symbolized the plantation’s ladder of political hierarchy, perhaps as much as *Maturaivīraṇ* did for the South Indian feudal order. In these shrines, including those to the notable Bondié Zak (see Chapter 4), a Minisprins with a white man’s features is often the presiding deity over *Mardévirin*. Thus transposed in a plantation context, it would be logical to posit *Mardévirin* as the *sirdar*, considering *Maturaivīraṇ*’s subaltern position in the martial entourage of *Aiyaṇār*-*Muṇiyāṇṭi*. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, the horse is a defining marker of *Maturaivīraṇ*; it marks him semiotically as a warrior-king and ritually as an

agent of possession. Within the plantation, the horse was the defining attribute of the staff-boss, *kolom*, and *sirdar*. I argue that the *sirdar* is a key-figure to understand the larger religious world of the plantation. As representative of the Indian laboring community in the plantation and as one of its prominent figures, he wields considerable political power. By early twentieth century, *sirdars* had become the caretakers and the patrons of temples⁴⁸, as well as the organizers of religious ceremonies, having secured the permission and support of white employers for these activities, which gave them a place in society that *gardyens* had within temples (Carter 1995; Sooriamoorthy, 1977).⁴⁹ Marina Carter (1995) succinctly summarizes the *sirdar*'s position between the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries: "The *sirdar*'s role was more complex. Generally of the same ethnic origin as laborers, he could function as leader, protector, intermediary or oppressor. There is also ample evidence of the *sirdars*' collaborative role [who] above all supervised the laborers in the field, punishing them for poor or inadequate work [...] Yet, at other times *sirdars* led their bands in litigation, work-stoppage and open revolt against the masters." (Carter 1995, 215)

As described by Carter, the *sirdar*'s slippery allegiances and political ambiguity within the tablisman's "little kingdom" are strikingly similar to those of the *pālaiyakkārar*, between his kingly protectors and vassals. From economic to sexual politics, the *sirdar* was arguably himself a regal figure. In fact, the 1900s emerging

⁴⁸ Like that of Mardévirin, Hanumān's popularity could also be explained by the patronage of its cults by Bhojpuri *sirdars* who would often re-fashion themselves along the lines of the religious identities of North Indian martial castes. This included participation in the cult of the knightly-hero Hanumān. In the Muslim community, many of its *sirdars* were known as local master-healers or holy men, reminiscent of the porous border between spiritual mastership and royal identity in Indian *pīr* culture.

⁴⁹ This symbolic association between the *gardyen* and the *sirdar* appears to have been favoured by the latter in their capacity as religious patrons. A striking example of this tendency is the story of Sirdar Kisten Mistry, President of the Draupadi temple of Stanley, known for having immolated himself during the *tīmiti* of 1891, in a move most likely to be an emulation of Draupadi's *gardyen* Nalvan, whose own immolation is remembered vividly in the Mascarene *tīmiti* traditions. In addition to being religious patrons, many *sirdars* were *pousaris* themselves. Possession being a strong element of their ritual life, *pousari-sirdars* "enacted" through trance, the role of Mardévirin, arguably emphasizing the relationship between the god and the *sirdar* position.

class of “small planters” were mainly composed of former upstart *sirdars* having bought lands from their white employers to “buy themselves a crown.”⁵⁰ Self-made man, would-be king, potentate, band-leading hero as much as rebellion-crusher and even wife-stealer, the Maturaivīraṇ of the *Maturaivīraṇcuvāmikatai* wears all the hats of the *sirdar* found in the historical Mauritian imaginaire, laborers having been certainly sensitive to these aspects during the retellings of the legend. Jean Benoist preserved the story of Mardévirin as told to him by famous Réunionese *pousari* Francis Pougavanon⁵¹ (Benoist 1998). The tale reproduces exactly the episodes found in the *Maturaivīraṇcuvāmikatai*, with the difference that Pougavanon gives to his “kingdom” a vocabulary related to the plantation and describes Mardévirin’s weapon as a “rifle”, and his attire as “boots” and “jacket” (Benoist 1998). Benoist convincingly concludes that Mardévirin becomes the Commandeur of the plantation, symbolizing the Indian’s progress through the estate’s tough meritocracy (Benoist, 1998).⁵²

During my fieldwork in Mauritius, I was lucky to obtain a detailed retelling of the Maturaivīraṇ narrative by the elderly *ayya* of the countryside temple in Terracine. One interesting mark of adaptation was the reference to the hero’s parents as *dhobis*, washers rather than *cakkiliyar* shoemakers.⁵³ Although he described an ill-defined fantasy kingdom as the set of his story, the priest referred to Mardévirin as the “bodyguard” of the “miss”.⁵⁴ When I suggested, with Benoist in mind, that this story would have appealed more to the sensitivity of plantation life, the *ayya* said: “Of course, this story was very important to us before, Mardévirin went through hardship

⁵⁰ A phrase often used by elderly Indo-Mauritians to refer to the early twentieth-century social elevation of Indian planters.

⁵¹ Benoist recorded Francis Pougavanon narrating his creole version of the *katai*.

⁵² In Réunion, the term “*commandeur*” refers to the same function as *sirdar* in Mauritius.

⁵³ As a caste term from Western India used beyond its reference to washermen, *dhobi* often serves as a euphemism connoting an untouchable (Dalit) status in Mauriius.

⁵⁴ A form of address as well as a noun, sometimes used to refer to girls of the creole and white bourgeoisies. It was common on plantations for planters’ daughters to have Indian men serving as “bodyguards.”

just like us. My father, who did prayers and told the holy stories (to children), would always tell that story.” When I said that Mardévirin looked a bit like a *sirdar*, the *ayya* did not really react but nonetheless nonchalantly shrugged and said: “My dad was a *sirdar*.”

More explicitly found in the Francis Pouvagavanon réunionese story, the image of Mardévirin as the estate’s overseer is nonetheless materialized in Mauritius in the famous yet mysterious figure of the Bonom Salute in Saint-Julien d’Hotman village. This statue of a jeering man doing a military salute, sporting a pith-helmet and a khaki uniform, serves today mainly as a sacred boundary marker (see Appendix 4). Passers-by show their reverence by folding hands or offering flowers. The statue is very close to the village’s main Mariamma temple.

None among the villagers or temple-goers is able to clearly identify the character beyond the assurance that he is either an Indian *sirdar* or a white *kolom*. Two informants external to Saint-Julien told me that the Bonom Salute was Mardévirin. This is actually very likely, since, thanks to the kovil’s president, I came to know that the Bonom Salute was located at the entrance of the goddess’s temple until the 1960s, facing the deity and being adorned - much like the Mardévirin of Pougavanon - with a real rifle as his weapon.⁵⁵ Even if we take this *sirdar*-god to be a deity other than Mardévirin, it would still demonstrate how, in colonial imagination, the character of the *gardyen* could only match that of the *sirdar*. As a figure of unstoppable ascension, the *sirdar* appears indeed as the echo of the South Indian *poligar* that Maturaivīraṇṇ mythically embodied. But, as much as Tamil religion itself, Mardévirin has traveled far beyond the tablisman’s border. Whether retaining some plantation symbolism, attaining a renewed relevance or being crafted in a new image, Mardévirin remained a powerful

⁵⁵ This suggests a role as *pousari*.

figure within the Mauritian religious, literary and magical imagination.

Gods of Crossroads: Mardévirin and Religious Hybridity

Insular societies have always been a privileged space for religious hybridity. Rather than the term “syncretism” which implies a bilateral crossover of religious blocks understood as monolithic, I prefer to invoke the idea of religious “hybridity.”⁵⁶ The idea of the hybrid relies on many exchange dynamics between different religious poles and sensitivities that do not necessarily abide by the official codes of nominal or sectarian religious affiliations.

In the description of the religious worlds of former plantation societies, much importance has been attributed to the highly heteroclit and politically subaltern religions born of the African slave cults. Antillais Vaudou, Brazilian Candomblé, Cuban Santería and, to a lesser extent, West Indian Obeeah all share - beyond all clichés and misrepresentations - a pantheon of larger-than-life and often morally ambiguous deities, each of them amalgamated to equivalents in the Catholic “pantheon” of saints (Hurbon 1993). The two main modes of worship of these deities are animal sacrifice and possession of worshippers, with a large part of their mythology and cults revolving around the spectral underworld. Considered largely antinomic by the standards of Judeo-Christian religious modernity, these “Creole religions”⁵⁷ tend to be represented

⁵⁶ I refer, in a religious context, to Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of hybridity as the mixing of different cultural elements, resulting from colonization (Bhabha 1994). This idea of religious « mixing » has also been developed in a Latino-American context by ethnomusicologist and novelist Alejo Carpentier, as the encounter and symbiosis between religious worldviews from Africa, Europe and Native Americas (Zamora 1995),

⁵⁷ I avoid here the use of the expression “Afro-Caribbean religions” as it emphasizes the African element - certainly dominant yet vernacularized - that is not understood as such by practitioners, glossing over the major influences of European Christianity, native religions, as well as South Indian cults. Neither would I label them “Caribbean religions” as similar cults with identical patterns are found in the southern United-States and the whole Latin American world. I therefore borrow the expression “Creole religion”, coined

by what is termed “magic” by traditional anthropology. The ritual solutions these religions and their gods have on offer include those that deal with mundane and trivial problems such as illness, social feuds or romantic/sexual obstacles. All of these recurrent elements have made the “slave religions” marginalized by the political and clerical institutions of (white-dominated) Christian colonial society. As expressions of a subaltern religious consciousness and couched in an aura of mystery, these religions slip easily into the insular imagination. They range from being generous reservoirs of miracles and wonder to dark, devilish underbellies of the religious, social and racial order of slavery. To some extent, these religions are an essential part in the formation of a postcolonial religious consciousness and imagination. While in the Antilles the Tamil cult evolved as a corollary cult to Vaudou (L’Etang 1997), in Mauritius and Réunion, it replaced the already minor slave cults that were destined to rapidly become extinct.⁵⁸ I would argue that in the colonial Indian Ocean, Tamil cults occupied the space and role that slave religions did in the rest of the creole world, as a hybridly porous, subaltern, and often ambivalent religious system. Again, Mardévirin serves as one primary, if not pivotal, key-figure. When it comes to the making of a composite religious culture, Réunion island and the Caribbean offer a vibrant terrain for this interaction, whereas the plantation in Mauritius did not hold as much that role. In Mauritius, separate quarters with their own places of worship, as well as a well-preserved endogamy did not leave much space for exchanges between Creole and White Catholics, North Indian

by French-Réunionese ethnologist Stéphane Nicaise, describing the post-slavery and postcolonial hybrid religious continuum found in Réunion Island (Nicaise, 1999). I apply it here to cults born of slave life, using a generic definition of “creole” as an insular culture shaped by the history of slavery.

⁵⁸ This replaces the old custom of adorning Mardévirin statues with an actual *sab* (machete), the iconic weapon of the god often used for the sacrifice offered to him. Indoumbène (Itumpan) shrines also display the *gourdin* (mace) of its deity. In the insular imaginaire, both the machete and the mace are “iconic” metonyms of plantation life and more particularly of the office of *sirdar*. In the Bonom Salute shrine, the presence of the rifle is eloquent, since the possession of a fire weapon by a *sirdar* was seen as a “gift” of the white boss, marking his satisfaction with his *sirdar* and the trust he placed in the man, much like the expensive sword gifts of South Indian kings to their commanders.

Hindus, Muslims and Tamils. Living in towns could nevertheless provide opportunities for the active transposition of religious symbols and shared ritual experience. In urban Mauritian milieus, Tamils were present prior to indenture, having settled mainly in Port-Louis as artisans and dock workers, constituting a thriving merchant community as well (Sooriamoorthy, 1977). Already exposed to Catholicism on the Coromandel coast and in the Madurai heartland (Bayly 1989), Tamils were particularly receptive to the Catholic culture in towns, attending masses and worshipping saints.⁵⁹ Earning the nickname of “Madras Batizé” (“Baptized Madrasis”), a large number of Tamils formally converted to Catholicism under missionary activity, which did not necessarily entail the cessation of Hindu rituals and practices. This proximity with the Christian world facilitated the closeness of the Tamil community with créoles, resulting in many shared religious experiences, of which Mardévirin was a central part.

In *Guardians of Tamilnadu*, Eveline Masilamani-Meyer provides a comprehensive study of South Indian village Hinduism. She argues for a structural opposition between order and wilderness in the classification of Tamil deities. While regal and posed deities are usually associated with urban structures and light spaces, *vīraṅs* are always linked with forest wilderness and hostile regions (Masilamani-Meyer 2004). The behaviour and imagery of these deities mirror the untamed region upon which they reign. This inherent ownership of the forest’s wild forces can entail safe passage and protection for humans, as much as punishment for violating the rules. In a dangerous place, the gods are as uncontrollable as their exterior dominion (ibid.). Mostly absent in the Mauritian plantation, this order would be replicated only in a specific part of the island’s urban world. Understood as “Madras god” or spirit,

⁵⁹ Anthropologically speaking, this original (Coromandel) Tamil Hindu awareness of other cults and cultures, of shared ritual lives, arguably gave Tamil emigrants a certain predisposition for the insular *métissage*, for which emigrants from the Patna Province were arguably less predisposed.

Mardévirin has travelled the streets widely through prayers and incantations. But he always remained closely associated with one site on the map of the imaginary: the domestic courtyard. From *gardyen* of the tablisman temple (and even of the whole plantation), Mardévirin kept this role in urban temples, although his importance was considerably more acknowledged in the domestic space, under the title of *gardyen lakour* (“guardian of the yard”), in memory of his function as boundary-marker in India. The god became the most active gardener/keeper/watchman of the courtyard, standing there with other recurring “official” *gardyens lakour*: Minisprins, Pétchiaye and Katéri.⁶⁰ While Mardévirin and Minisprins serve as figures of protective vigilantes associated with male householders, the goddesses Pétchiaye (Periyācci)⁶¹ and Katéri (Kāṭteri)⁶² echo women’s roles in the Mauritian patriarchal consciousness as family

⁶⁰ Mardévirin, Minisprins, Pétchiaye and Katéri form an unavoidable quartet that serve as starting point or minimum limit that all courtyard shrines have until today. Although in the past, additional deities could also be found in a courtyard. Navran Mini (the Tamil Nakūrāṇṭavar and Réunionese Nargoulan) was represented in boat mast-like posts (like in Réunion) or large trees marked with a handprint of koumkougou (Tam. *kuṇkumam*, vermillon). Always venerated as “god of mariners” in thanksgiving for the safe sea journey of forefathers, his association with the Muslim world was often forgotten - unlike in Réunion - except in some families where Muslim neighbours were called to sacrifice goats to Navran the “Muslim way.” As a rock draped in black, Caṅkili Karuppaṇ was recurrent under the name Malgas (“Malagasy”), the chained dark-skinned “Black Lord” having been tied to the imaginaire of slavery and its necromancers (known as *sorsier malgas*). Malgas was prayed for his ability to retrieve lost or hidden money, which echoes the insular belief in slave sorcerers’ ability to guide corsairs and prospectors to lost treasures. Also invoked for the blessing of thievery, Malgas, much like the Tamil Karuppaṇ was noteworthy for his slippage into black magic and rituals conducted with harmful intention. Another *gardyen lakour* in rural households would be the white boss (as a large stone given whisky and cigars) and the misses (as smaller rocks given perfume and biscuits), again another representation of the white world. In my estimation this is a localization of Tamil traditions of male and female serpentine *nāga* stone (Tam. *nākakkaḷ*) worship, equating white masters and serpent deities for their essentialized association with land itself. I owe this information to “T.” from Pamplémousses and “Mrs C.” and “Naden” from Rose-Hill.

⁶¹ Retaining the role of midwife she originally had in Tamilnadu, goddess Pétchiaye’s symbolism revolved around the protection of children and pregnancies. The “Servis Pétchiaye” included an offering of egg curry with an assortment of vegetables as a thanksgiving for the fertility of the female householder. Curries made of entrails were also served as a reminder of the goddess devouring the bowels of the evil king in her narrative, this more bloody offering given to bless dangerous pregnancies. Within the courtyard, Pétchiaye mostly lost the fearful character of Periyācci, becoming in people’s imaginaire a sweetened motherly figure colloquially called sometimes “Maman Pét” (a pun, “mother of the little ones”).

⁶² Unlike Pétchiaye, Katéri kept her dark aspect as a “witch,” often associated with the inauspicious family characters of widows and barren or unmarried women. Described as a moody spirit and worshipped through the sacrifice of a black hen, Katéri was invoked to cure illnesses and often to curse neighbors and rivals, slipping easily into the world of sorcery. Women suffering from hysteria or epilepsy

custodians and housekeepers.

The oldest material symbol of *gardyen lakour* was the aniconic unmarked but draped stones that represented each of the guardians.⁶³ Still found in some urban Tamil homes today, this was the original assemblage in plantation houses. Traditionally, the annual reconsecration of the courtyard entailed a journey to the seaside. In front of the lagoon, the family would summon the spirits of the four gods from across the sea. After having propitiated their arrival by ritual offerings, the family carried the landed gods symbolically embodied in sizeable sea rock collected in the water. Back at home, the rocks would be disposed at one of the courtyard's corners to be "seated" and to have their "eyes opened" with saffron paste and milk as per *abisegon* (Tam. *apicēkam*; Skt. *abhiṣeka*) traditions. Then, the male householder would explain to the *gardyens* the terms of their work, against an agreed amount of sacrifices and offerings per year. This ceremony called *lapriyer asizé* ("the sitting prayer") is fascinating as it reenacts the procedures attached to the indenture system. Upon arrival, off-the-boat, contracted *coolies* were collected at the depot to be sent to the plantations where their masters would explain to them the terms and conditions of their work. The *lapriyer asizé* sets the indelible mark of the plantation on domestic rituals existing even outside the tablisman. In the larger courtyards of towns, the rocks would be enshrined or even replaced by trees, with their more loaded entities, continuing the Tamil village belief in the divinity of trees.

Trees are variously attributed to be embodiments of Minisprins, Katéri and

were believed to be possessed by Katéri, who was seen as the divine personification of the gendered image of the "mad old maid."

⁶³ The stone is the most widespread aniconic representation. Other forms include tin or iron sheet *soulons* (Tam. *cūlams*, tridents) draped in cloth (usually red for Mardévirin and white for Minisprins) and marked with *koumkougou*.

Pétchiaye. Mardévirin and Amène (Mariamma)⁶⁴ - also present as a tutelary figure - are virtually always described as mango tree and lilac trees.⁶⁵ Each of the shrines received particular offerings, Mardévirin and Minisprins trees are traditionally given sardines, rum and a lighted cigarette. Stories abound of occasions where Mardévirin in person could be seen consuming the offerings with gusto. “He was a tall man with long hair, dressed in white,” remembers Kadress, a Mauritian Tamil in his mid 50s, nephew of famous Port-Louis healer *pousari* Mamé Antoine. Mardévirin was believed to be a night vigilante and the main watchman of the property. The plantation imaginaire is very much present here, with the *asizé* ceremony unwittingly marking the courtyard as a replica of the plantation. Kadress’ descriptions of Minisprins and Mardévirin are very interesting:

“Mardévirin was tough but you could deal with him. You could not make fuss with Minisprins. You could get things from Mardévirin, get around him... People would say, getting things from Minisprins, that’s not easy! If you do a job for Mardévirin, he will do something for you. But Minisprins...It’s only when nothing worked with Mardévirin that you could go see Minisprins. But don’t fool around. He is the (main) gardyen lakour, the chief, the boss! Don’t make trouble. When my uncle went to see Mardévirin (in the courtyard), he would “tutoye” him, talk to him like to a chap. But when he turned to Minisprins! He would, hey! (Kadress mimics his uncle slapping him to fold his hands in reverence) Big respect! With Mardévirin you do a contract, with Minisprins you just scrap and bow. My uncle told me, it’s easy to get Mardévirin, but not Minisprins. He only got him two or three times, and when he would come, you had to keep you head down, give him “vous” and explain him the problem, he would ask questions. But Mardévirin! As long as you found some arrangement with him, he would do any job for you.”

Again, this dynamic is similar to the relationship between the peasants, the *sirdar* and the boss, Mardévirin being the most efficient and reachable protector despite not being the highest in rank.

⁶⁴ From the Tamil *Amman* (“mother-goddess”), a more urban local appellation for Mariamma.

⁶⁵ While the Mauritian *lila* leaves index the *neem* traditionally used in *Māriyammaṇ* worship, the association between Mardévirin and the mango tree is interesting in a shared symbolism of protection, as until today dried mango leaves (like South Indian mango-leaf threshold garlands or *toraṇams*) serve to ward off evil spirits from doorsteps in Tamil Mauritian homes and businesses.

Yet, Mardévirin is arguably the most powerful in his duties towards the domicile. Minisprins serves as a solely tutelary figure, Katéri and Pétchiaye are family-protectors as “sisters” or “maids” of Amène, “God (sic) for/of Mums” as described by an elderly lady in Port-Louis. Mardévirin is the one who protects the household from evil. The courtyard by day is the passage that leads to the protected interior. By night, the space is susceptible, and thus becomes the realm of darkness, exposed to the many beliefs about spirits and evil creatures of the natural and supernatural world. Like the *poligar* mercenary in a kingdom or the *sirdar* on the plantation, Mardévirin is the vigilante, embodying tough discipline that protects the ordered space of the house by clearing the wild realm of threats. I argue that it is the courtyard rather than urban Tamil temples that provided Madras religion with the appeal it held for non-Tamils. In that process, Mardévirin crossed borders, travelling through and permeating the larger Mauritian imagination. Before the post-independence communalization of politics and society, Mauritian towns included neighborhoods where extended families from different ethnic communities lived side by side. These families shared a common courtyard, bordered by their various houses. This resulted in daily interactions and exchanges between tenants, including a certain awareness of the other’s religious and cultural life. Always present with the other *gardyens* in a garden close to a Tamil family’s home, Mardévirin came to be known by créole and Muslim families thanks to these shared courtyards, known and identified, but also feared and respected, if not worshipped.

The courtyard could become a place of worship of its own for celebrations involving the whole neighborhood. Whether they were family-members or not, *pousaris* would practise all the rituals of plantation religion (sacrifices, possessions, healing and divination) that were denied access in the urban temples held by the

orthodoxy-conscious Tamil bourgeoisie. Sedley, a Créole who grew up in Port-Louis in the 1960s recounts: “I remember, my mother would call us, the *pousari*’s saint was about to get down on him, that was something amazing for a kid to watch!” The Créole community has been particularly receptive of Mardévirin, due to its marked proximity with the Tamil world.

In towns, the church and the Catholic bourgeoisie actively vilified the Servis Madras as “devil-worship” in much the same way that English missionaries had decried village religion in South India. In this imaginaire, the *pousari* becomes the *sorsier Madras* (“the Madras sorcerer”) and all Tamil rituals are expressions of a crude and immoral religion. Yet, as Jean Benoist has argued in the Réunionese context, many creoles embraced Tamil religion as a complementary practice parallel to their Christian lifeworlds. While they never forsook Catholic institutions and devotions, many Créoles felt a sense of efficiency and expediency in the more sensorial and embodied religious experiences of their Tamil neighbors, understood as direct solutions to suffering and affliction. In Mauritius, I would argue that this plural religiosity takes on a deeper role.

Tamil religion has been greatly conversant with Catholicism as can be seen in remembered practices such as believers kneeling in front of *padoms* (Tam. *paṭams*, “images” or ritual icons) and *pousaris* asperging blessed water on devotees, as well as the ongoing appropriation of Catholic saints and Marian representations in personal devotions. On the Créole side, the adoption of the *gardyens* is one of the most recurring borrowings during the colonial period. An eloquent image of this mingling was found in the courtyard of Créole and Madras *batizé* families. While the garden was under the protection of the *gardyen* under their trees, the interior would contain lithographs and statues of Catholic popular devotion. The threshold was under the protection of icons of Saint George and Saint Michael, both being presented the same offerings as Mardévirin

and Minisprins, namely sardines, rum, and cigarettes. It is interesting to note the symbolic dichotomy between the two. On the one hand, there is the wild, dark realm of the courtyard, associated with the ambivalent Tamil *gardyen* and, on the other, the ordered luminous domain of the house under the protection of heavenly figures. While these two Christian figures keep guard at the door, their exterior physical presence and their protectorship over the liminal space between “inside and outside” clearly posits them as mirror-images of the two main Tamil *gardyens*. While the Virgin Mary inside mirrored the Amène under the tree as motherly figure, the functions of the two saints clearly echo the roles of Mardévirin and Minisprins.

In insular hybrid religiosity, deities are often mingled, their identities blurred and superimposed, depending on the ritual narrative being deployed in the moment. I would argue that in the Tamil diaspora of the Indian Ocean, two patterns of such “loan-figures” can be identified:

(1) What I would term “full calquing,” an amalgamation in which the two figures can be blurred into a single one, their differences in two different contexts reduced to mere appearances. Depending who is calqued on the other, one deity/saint possesses an overtly recognizable identity whereas his counterpart’s is underlying and “hidden.” For instance in Martinique, the absence of Tamil *padoms* led *coolies* to adopt Saint Michael lithographs to represent Mardévirin, with a clear consciousness of who the saint represented in Catholic tradition, of which they were also regular participants. Mardévirin thus guarded goddess shrines as Saint Michael, but was recognized as the Catholic archangel “in a church” context and Mardévirin “anywhere outside.”

(2) A semiotic collage in which worshippers recognize the functional and ritual similarity of two deities/saints, even though the identities of each have been clearly demarcated. Thus, in Mauritius, the Virgin Mary is often recognized as “almost the

same as Mariamma” or is sometimes identified as her “sister”, with her statues placed in goddess shrines, under her fully acknowledged “Christian” identity as the Virgin Mary.⁶⁶ Mardévirin, Minisprins, Katéri and Pétiaye have undoubtedly partaken in this kind of religious collaging and, to a less verifiable extent, been calqued as “saints”, the term by which they are described by older Tamils and Créoles. In the slave religions of the Caribbean, the Christian alter-ego of a deity of African origin is a crucial feature, as it provides both a provocation for the colonial Christian *imaginaire* and a legitimization in relation to the latter. This reality is difficult to uncover in Mauritius, where communal consciousness inhibits and ultimately censors any expression of proximity to “other” religious worlds. While other *gardyen*’s “Christian alter-egos” are rather unclear, Mardévirin appears to have most likely found his echo in the figure of Saint George. Popular all around the colonial world as a recurring figure of European Christianity (Riches, 2000), Saint George has enjoyed devotion for his links to the island’s colonial power, expressing, in Mauritius in particular, a presence that he does not command in the French Créole islands. “A Créole healer once told me that Saint George does the same job as Mardévirin, so he can be called instead of him,” a Mauritian Tamil taxi-driver familiar with sorcery told me. As an evil-combating knightly horseman, Saint George parallels Mardévirin as much in imagery as in narrative⁶⁷. As the guardian of the house and a protector against misery, Saint George

⁶⁶ This association between Mary and Māriyamman was already found in Tamilnadu’s villages with Christian communities, the two being amalgated in the shared ritual spaces of worshippers in full calque. Considering the depth of contemporary Mauritian communalism, I assume that the safer collage would suggest a Hindu attachment to the Virgin Mary. In Réunion, Marie and “Mariamin” (also known as the “Hindu Madonna”) have been fully blurred into one identity and I suspect this calque was equally widespread in preindependence Mauritius.

⁶⁷ Saint George is known for rescuing (if not eloping with) a princess, paralleling the story of the capture of Bommi in Maturaivīraṇ’s narrative. The Christian convert Saint George defies the authority of his master, Emperor Domitian, just as Maduraivīraṇ defies the authority of the Nāyaka, with both heroes ending up violently executed by their imperial employers. These similarities could not go unnoticed in Mauritius as the story of Maduraivīraṇ was retold by *pousaris*, while the legend of Saint George would

(and Saint Michael) occupied a central place in people's lives.⁶⁸ Créole *longanistes*⁶⁹ in their mimicry of *pousaris* would manipulate the cult of Christian saints that included possession, Saint George being invoked in the same manner as Mardévirin. A possible indicator of a Mardévirin-centered calquing is his apparent progressive transmutation into Saint George among Madras Batizés who exclusively professed Catholicism. Marceline, a second-generation Catholic Tamil woman in her mid-sixties describes Saint George and Saint Michael as “our *gardyen lakour*, for us what is the *gardyen lakour* for them” in reference to her Hindu relatives. Although now the exclusively Catholic Madras batizés have preferred a more distinctly Tamilian form of Catholicism as the marker of their identity,⁷⁰ Saint George was once their most popular saint, undoubtedly the residual calque of Mardévirin in the same way that Saint Jacques had replaced the Yoruba deity Ogu among Haitian Catholic devotion.⁷¹ Among Créoles (with or without proximity to the Tamil world), Saint George occupies a function similar to Mardévirin's among Tamils, being worshipped for punishing robbers and harshly striking wrongdoers as would a tough vigilante. Certainly inherited from Mardévirin, this surprising moral ambivalence in a Christian figure foregrounds the

have been known from the large array of “pious literature” available in print among Catholic families and in parishes.

⁶⁸ “Saint George!” happens to be a popular interjection among older Mauritians in moments of distress or danger.

⁶⁹ While today the word *longaniste* is synonymous with “witchdoctor,” a *longaniste* was traditionally a Créole religious specialist self-styled as a Christian officiant with supernatural powers not held by the official Catholic clergy, including the power to induce possession, healing, and soothsaying. The role of the *longaniste* vis-à-vis catholic rituals is thus akin to the *pousari*'s position vis-à-vis the relatively upper-caste temple priest.

⁷⁰ Through the juxtaposition of Indian Nationalism on Mauritian politics, a certain awareness of India through media and travel and the notion of inculturation that appeared in the Church in India in the wake of the Vatican II Council, the Mauritian Tamil Catholic middle-class has recently favoured a return to a more “Indian” Catholicism, through the adoption of “inculturated” rituals, the cult of Indian Catholic saints and the use of an “Indianized” liturgy. An important figure in this process is that of the Virgin of Velankanni whose cult among Tamil Catholics in Mauritius is currently booming.

⁷¹ I owe this information to Marceline's husband, Marcel, who holds much of the “institutional memory” of the Christian Tamil community in Mauritius. Marcel affirms that Saint George held a prominent place among Tamil Catholics as a protector against evil. He mentioned that during Holy Sacrament adoration vigils - particularly popular during the Lenten season - icon hawkers would target Tamil clients by peddling large quantities of Saint George lithographs outside the churches, for “Madras people were very much into Saint George.”

prevalence of the “darker” side of Mardévirin, which was an unavoidable feature of his cult in old Mauritius.

Divine, But All Too Human: Mardévirin and Witchcraft

In her mid-seventies, “Madame I.” is the matriarch of a large Créole family from Stanley, a fairly gentrified working-class neighbourhood mostly inhabited by Tamils and Créoles.⁷² She ushered me into her living room towered by a ceiling-hung lithograph of a brightly-colored and life-size Sacred Heart of Jesus. “Well, I am a good Catholic,” said Madame I. when I told her that I was interested in her religious life. When I asked what she knew about Mardévirin, Madame I clenched her fists on her armchair and raised up her upper body. “Why are you searching him?” she defiantly asked me, as if Mardévirin was an old acquaintance. I explained her briefly my research. “Let me say things straight. He’s a bad folk! A bad folk,” hammered Madame I. before starting her story.

“You need to be careful with these Madras saints.” Madame I.’s mother - a Madras batize - had raised her children in the fear and respect of the four *gardyens*, all present in the family’s courtyard where the mother would sacrifice hens and roosters to her “saints”, enshrined in small rocks by the fence. When Madame I. married into a family of “good Catholics, not like those (Créoles) who do these sort of things”, she abandoned the old rites of the courtyard. When her mother fell gravely ill, she turned to the services of a Muslim healer who declared that the illness was caused by the “evil spirits” worshipped by the old lady. With the help of the healer, she threw the rocks in a sugarcane field, resulting in the recovery of her mother that very night. “Christian saints

⁷² In conformity with the consent form approved by McGill board of ethics, some informants preferred to be referred to by an initial rather than being mentioned by name.

are good, look at Saint Anthony! Madras saints are evil. Especially Mardévirin, he is the worst. He can do bad things to people.” I asked if she could detail, she uneasily replied “bad things, really bad things” before moving back to her love for Catholic saints.

Madame I. explained that Saint George was the best help available to find a stolen object as well as the burglar; although she never asked the saint to “go nasty” on the culprits, he certainly could. “You don’t mess with Saint George, so if you did something bad, watch out.” Before I left, Madame I. showed me her personal altar in her bedroom where were enthroned four different Virgins from four different apparitions. She showed small portraits of Saint Philomène and Saint Expédit,⁷³ towards both of whom she bore a great devotion, as well as her recently acquired image of the Virgin of Velankanni, “she is the Virgin Mary from India, that’s where my mother’s old people came from you know, I like her very much.” The afternoon spent with Madame I. revealed many of the inherited paradoxes of colonialism and also the contradictions of the Christian/Créole world vis-à-vis the *gardyen lakour* and the Tamil world in general. Since Madame I. could not articulate the reasons of her intense dislike for Mardévirin, as if out of taboo, it is perhaps important to try to understand how and why the hero of the ancient *Maturaivīraṇṇucuvāmikatai* could be seen as such a “bad folk.”

South India-based European and Euro-American missionaries ranked *Maturaivīraṇṇu* as a “fierce god”, in the category of all those deities whose dreadfulness is

⁷³Removed from the liturgical calendar in the 1960s, the two saints are still objects of devotion in “popular” Catholicism among Mauritian working-class families. I see a possible connection between Katéri and Saint Philomena, whose identity as an accused witch with a rather fearsome appearance tie up with the dark “witch” figure of Katéri. I have noticed a great popularity of Saint Philomena among Créole and Tamil individuals familiar with *gardyen* worship. Saint Expedit, obscure Roman centurion often worshipped for dubious reasons, is particularly present in Réunion where he is associated with Mardévirin in the absence of a Saint George cult.

crucial to their image and function as awesome evil-fighter or boundary-keeper. The *Maturaivīraṇcuvāmikatai* portrays Maduraviīraṇ as an unpredictable rogue and his Tamil cult highlights an ambivalence that calls for worshippers' utmost respect for the god's ritual terms and conditions. But beyond the traditional wrath of displeased Tamil village deities towards evil people and inobedient worshippers, the Mauritian Mardévirin often shows a more sinister side in his harmful tendencies. All the statues of Mardévirin as watchmen in old temples depict him with a rather sardonic facial expression. Outside the temple, as depicted in recollections of domestic religion during the colonial period, Mardévirin takes a very human character.

The two most common experiences of Mardévirin *outside* temple ceremonies were (1) the offerings and animal sacrifices made to his representations in the courtyard; and (2) his descent into a possessed celebrant to deal with the complaints and requests of his worshippers within their homes and courtyards. The ensemble of Hindu cults as a whole served as “the Other” of the Christianized society that was colonial Mauritius. But through its bloody and otherworldly ceremonies, Madras religion was singled out as the “darkest” and most dangerous form of paganism, needing to be countered, if not out-and-out attacked. The Mauritian elite (representatives of the Catholic church, white and Créole bourgeoisie, and the English administration) stigmatised Madras religion by seeing barbaric violence in the animal sacrifices and evil forces at work within possession ceremonies. As a possessing agent, Mardévirin takes the role and form of the demon in Christian understanding.⁷⁴ While in Catholic religious sensibilities, possession is always an unwanted intrusion, the traditional Tamil understanding of possession makes it a sought after and blessed -

⁷⁴ In the diary of a Jesuit exorcist in Réunion in the 1970s, Mardévirin is one of the demons possessing a créole man attended to by the clerical exorcist (Danjoux 1975).

albeit sometimes ambivalent - state that is nonetheless recognized as a manifestation of grace (Nabokov 2000). More attentive to mortals than the higher gods or those enshrined in large temples, or even Catholic saints, Mardévirin was believed to yield quick results through possession, when called upon to address concerns for petty troubles and queries. In accordance with Maturaivīraṇ's tastes mentioned in the *katai*, Mardévirin was usually summoned by the *pousari*'s consumption of alcohol and cigarettes, with the god often asking for more, sometimes becoming inebriated so as to more readily give prophecies or advice to worshippers.⁷⁵ A white gentleman in his 80s sang for me a short rhyme that was popular in the plantations during his childhood. It translates as follows: *Mardévirin, tied in your langouti* [Hin. *laṅgoṭī*; loin-cloth], *you shit-head naughty babouji* [Hin. *bābujī*, "Sir"], *make us fall in love*. This rather unflattering Cupid role ascribed to Mardévirin seems to connote that the Mardévirin-induced love was more sexual than romantic. The presence of sex in the cult of Mardévirin is arguably essential and reveals some of its darker aspects. Elderly women would explain their limited interaction with Mardévirin as he was exclusively "the God of the men", while they and their mothers would pray to the family-protectors Pétchiaye, Amène and Katéri as they were considered "Gods (sic) for women."

For men, the goat sacrifice to Mardévirin was believed to assure the birth of male children, which makes Mardévirin the tutelary "patron of virility" in the Tamil sexual *imaginaire*. As seen in his epic cult, Maturaivīraṇ is a sexually voracious man who brutally seduces women or abducts them. A middle-aged Tamil man recollecting his parents' rituals remembered mostly Mardévirin for having "not one, but two wives!" sharing the information with me with an admiring and rather suggestive enthusiasm. A Tamil grandmother told me that girls ought not pray Mardévirin in their

⁷⁵ Mardévirin is thus "invited" or "summoned" when he does not arbitrarily descend.

wish for a husband, as the god could “get the girls for him[self].” In the (now destroyed) Mardévirin shrine in the Port-Louis harbour neighborhood, married women would offer food to the image and bathe it to seek protection for their husbands and children, these rituals understood by *pousaris* and worshippers to turn their participant into “Mardévirin’s mistresses”. After all, Mardévirin as a god was well-known as a *galan* (“womanizer”), as remembers my earlier mentioned interlocutor Kadress.

While Mardévirin possessed Kadress’ *pousari* uncle Mamé Antoine, the bothered god would initially be reluctant to share his divine knowledge with attendants. Antoine’s sister-in-law, as ritual interrogator of the God, would have to engage in flirting with Mardévirin to eventually get him to provide help to the faithful. More than a *galan*, Mardévirin is certainly a trickster deity and many worshippers remember his unpredictable tendency to cruelly fool his devotees. These “bad tricks” usually revolve around the food offerings. The preparation of the *manzé servis* (“ritual food”) for the *gardyen* required effort and dedication, especially for the male gods who demanded the costly purchase of animals for slaughter. As in South Indian village *piracātam* (Skt. *prasāda*) tradition, the food would be shared by the sacrificer’s family as the initial blessing in anticipation of the successful answer to the prayer. Stories abound about Mardévirin immediately putrifying the offering given to him or about consumed meals affording nightmares to the sacrificers. In the Mardévirin shrine at Caudan where the god was believed to descend every night in the imposing palm tree, worshippers were asked to bring large food offerings to be presented to the tree before immediately leaving, to allow the god “to eat unbothered.” Andrea Pinkney argues that *prasāda* initiates and marks the reciprocity between Gods and worshippers, as it is understood as a form of socially-cementing gift-sharing (Pinkney 2013). These images of Mardévirin portray a god that “grabs” and “does not want to share” - much like an exacting feudal

poligar of Tamilnadu, marking Mardévirin as a deity who is hard to trust. In food or in seduction, and beyond the demonization of Madras religion by the colonial order, Mardévirin was indeed a threatening god that could harm as much as he could protect. But another feature of this darker human side is also the god's association with the afterworld.

In its South Indian “cradle”, the cult of the martyred hero-turned-deity Maturaivīraṇ is not explicitly tied to death. In Mauritius however, the rogue god would take on a more macabre side through his presence in beliefs and rituals surrounding the end of life. Death is omnipresent in plantation-born Créole religions, as they carry with them the memory of a brutal uprooting and daily violence. Death symbolism permeates many narratives. It underlies most insular discourse on death, including the primary ones. Even in Indian Ocean colonial Tamil contexts, the vernacularized religion presents, in many ways, a corollary to Christian visions on the subject.

From Māriyamman to Maturaivīraṇ, most gods of the Tamil village pantheon have passed through grizzly murders as the first step of their deification, and they certainly could be associated with funerary celebrations in villages while some “higher” gods could not.⁷⁶ As heirs of Tamil village religion, *pousaris* handled a religious world where the Brahmanical taboos on death did not apply, to the extent that they were officiants at funerary activities for most castes. Shunned by temple *ayyas*, the *karumaṭi* ceremony, which marks the end of mourning, sixteen days after death, was a distinctive marker of the *pousari*'s importance in Tamil religious life. It made him the ambivalent manipulator of the underworld. As talisman-makers, herbalists and healers, *pousaris* possessed an equally ambivalent knowledge of ghosts and dead spirits to the point of

⁷⁶ Although Purāṇic-Āgamic gods such as Śiva and Viṣṇu are not present in the *karumaṭi* service, that does not prevent Yama and Sūrya from being essential actors in the ritual.

claiming mastery upon them.

As Mardévirin was central to *pousari* religion, he figured prominently in death-related rituals⁷⁷. As night watchman of courtyards, Mardévirin appears to have been given an essentialized association with the inevitably dark symbolic universe of the night, serving as the main protector against evening dangers. The repetition of the *mantra* “Madouravirène!” was supposed to ward off aggressors and evil spirits during night walks.⁷⁸ The most knowledgeable informants about Mardévirin also mentioned his custodianship of dead relatives, often prayed to for his power to liberate a passed soul wandering on earth as he could “break their bondage.” Again, a servitude-echoing image that could easily make Mardévirin one of the masters of the dark underbelly of the remembered colonial world.

With the recent return to Hindu orthopraxy, cremation is now the most common funerary ritual among Tamil Mauritians. Before the 1970s, a passage by the Catholic cemetery - or at least its unconsecrated grounds - was far more common, making the Christian representation of the graveyard a central part of the Tamil religious *imaginaire*. Mardévirin ruled this important locus as well, much as he did on the plantation temple or in a family courtyard. Believed to reside in the Grand Cross at the graveyard’s crossroads, Mardaye was the god believed to be the custodian of dead souls, reigning over their sepultures as the intendant of the cemetery in the same way Mardévirin took care of the temple or the domestic courtyard. “Mardaye” is very

⁷⁷ In the regular slippage between Servis Madras and sorcery, the bloody cult of Kaarli (Tam. Kālī) occupies an important place. Always peripheral and marginalized within the Tamil community itself until a recent upgrading, “angry Maman Kaarli” as well as her *gardyen* Karoupène-Malgas (Caṅkili Karuppan) provoked fear and distrust, according to my informers, these cults being practiced for desperate and often ambiguous ends. The same tendency can be noted around the cult of Katéri, already ambivalent at its symbolic core, the “witch-goddess” used by sorcerers to send illness or curse romantic unions. See chapter 4 for the orthodox recuperation of Kālī cults.

⁷⁸ Note the use of an appellation closer to the Tamil name of Mardévirin, inflecting the god’s name with a certain *mantra*-like aura. I have heard of this old belief thanks to T. from Pamplemousses and Aya Ajegen from Rose-Hill, while discussing beliefs among the generation of their parents and grand-parents.

plausibly the creolization of *Cuṭalai Māṭaṇ*, god of crematory grounds in Tamil village religion (Hiltebeitel 1988).

It appears that *Maturaivīraṇ* and *Māṭaṇ* were merged into one by the closeness of their creolized names, as well as through many overlapping features, making “*Mardaye*” nothing other than the appellation of *Mardévirin* himself in his role as graveyard-keeper. This additional role truly marks *Mardévirin* as arguably the most important god of the colonial Tamil Mauritian pantheon, as an unavoidable figure of authority on life as well as death, comparable to the Baron Samedi of Haitian Vaudou or the Ogun of Candomblé. More than his moral slippery-ness and the antinomian features of his worship, it might have been this very position that made *Mardévirin* such an ambivalent figure in the Mauritian imaginaire.

As the gateway to the afterlife and the underworld, the cemetery is the inescapable realm of sorcery and black magic in Mauritius. It is the inheritor of all the magic or “superstition” laden-meanings it had in rural Europe, East Africa and India. The Christian cemetery has been a site of encounter for sorcerers and witchcraft doers of all communities, resulting in a certain *métissage* of every macabre belief. As the master of the graveyard for the Tamils, the image of *Mardévirin* as a dark ghostly power seems to have found one of its roots in the Grand Cross of Mauritian cemeteries. In creole imagination, the cemetery cannot be the site of any positive “white” magic, but is used solely for its “black” counterpart or at least for dubious encounters with the dead, which marks *Mardévirin*’s association with this world as dangerous and evil. In his travelogue, Pierre-Edmond Pulvéniś mentions the belief in *Mardé*, as the spirit of any executed man haunting or possessing his mortal victims (Pulvéniś, 1996). Until today, to “put a *Mardé*” is the practice by which someone sends an evil spirit on an enemy, this *Mardé* being still thought to be *Mardévirin* by many practitioners, as the invocation to *Mardé*

is done at a cemetery's Grand Cross. It is common among elderly Mauritian Tamils, when showing great annoyance at a neighbour or relative, to say "wait until I send Mardévirin for him/her."

Conclusion

Mardévirin was the hero of a cult born in indenture and shaped by the narrative poetics and religious politics of the Mauritian colonial order. The god was the main force of a religion which had become "the Other" of Christianized society, to the point of becoming bothersome within its own communal foyer. While Mardévirin had been the hero of Tamil colonial *imaginaire*, the postcolonial one would reserve to the Lord of Madurai another fall from grace and power.

Chapter 3

Vēlaṇ versus Vīraṇ: Mardévirin, the Tamil Renewal, and Postcolonial Religion⁷⁹

During my fieldwork, I met with four elderly gentlemen, all over 70, all raised on sugar plantations, two creoles and two whites. After explaining my research, I asked them: “Do you know who Mardévirin is?” Each and every one replied with much assurance: “Of course, he is the god of Tamils.” The use of the encompassing label “Tamil” with reference to Mardévirin is interesting, since it contrasts with the contemporary perception in Mauritius that Mourouga (Tam. Murukaṇ) is the “god of Tamils.” Indeed, Mourouga has become a powerful identity marker for today’s Tamil Mauritians. This is forcefully conveyed to the rest of the population during the Mourouga-centric Cavadee (Tam. *kāvaṭi*) festival, acknowledged as a show of communal self-definition and self-projection. Most Tamil Mauritians, whichever generation they belong to, would proudly style Mourouga as “the god of the Tamils.” However, when I asked the four elderly gentlemen about Mourouga, none of them knew who he was. Besides unhesitatingly dubbing Mardévirin “God of Tamils”, they remembered colourful possession rituals that had struck them during their childhood and had left a certain prejudice about Tamil religion in their minds. In the light of the recollected history laid out in the previous chapter, it is not surprising that, for people brought up in the colonial period, Tamil religiosity could be equated with Mardévirin.

From the above observations, I would like to re-examine the construction of contemporary Tamil religious identity, and Mourouga’s place therein. Furthermore, I will attempt to see how the modern “god of the Tamils” was posited in relationship to Mardévirin, with one religious order being replaced by another. This chapter will deal

⁷⁹ Vēlaṇ means “the lance-holder,” and is a Tamil epithet of Murukaṇ who holds the lance (*cakti-vēl*) in his hand.

with the dynamics and mechanics of social and religious postcoloniality, such as the roles played by nationalist mythmaking and bourgeois ideology, which in twentieth-century Mauritius was almost always tied to developments in the Indian context.

No Country for Old Gods: The Reshaping of Tamil Religious Life

On a Saturday afternoon in Port-Louis, I went for a visit to the imposing Sockalingum Meenatchi Ammen Kovil, better known as Tanp' Kaylasson, understood by Tamil Mauritians as the oldest and highest seat of Brahmanical religion in the country.⁸⁰ I was given a passionate tour by the temple's official guide, Ané A. "You see here the only temple that has stayed pure always, and now all temples are like this. We don't take life away here. You see, before, in the old days, people sacrificed animals, which is forbidden in our sacred scriptures. Delusion it was! But we were brought to consciousness by religious knowledge and now people are closer to God."

When Ané A. said that sacrifice was something over everywhere now, I passed a remark, noting that not far from us, in Réunion, animal sacrifices were still common practice. "Tsk, Réunion. Backward people. No developpement. Look at us, what we have achieved. Look at me, I was born in a sugarcane field, my mum used to cut the cane! And now look at me, thanks to faith and knowledge." The implication here was that Réunion was "backward" because it was still a "colony," or perceived to be so, as opposed to Mauritius, which was fully "civilized" after having gained its independence.⁸¹ I happened to visit Réunion where I gathered important material for this thesis; I made observations there that proved to be essential to my arguments here.

⁸⁰ "Madras Cathedral" is a jocular way to refer to the *kōvil* among Tamil Mauritians. The Kaylasson was the first and until the 1960s the only temple served by Brahmin priests, from a lineage of Tamil *smārta ayyars* from the Palghat region of modern-day Kerala.

⁸¹ Officially a French Overseas Department since 1946, Réunion is often derogatively called a "colony" by Mauritians.

Most of the rural temples of Réunion still proudly continue a profusely bloody sacrificial worship. Mardévirin, Minisprins, and Katlarayin (Tam. Kāttavarāyaṇ) are visually, narratively and ritually omnipresent in Réunionese religious life where, to quote a popular saying, people on “Saturday go to the *koilou* (Tam. *kōvil*), Sunday to Church.”⁸²

Receiving me in his Réunionese temple, *pousari* Alexis Poinin-Coulin told me: “Mauritius is *swamitized*. Because people want to feel close to their roots; here too, in Réunion, people get *swamitized*, thanks to Mauritians in fact. Always full of themselves because they think their country is like India. But here, we’re not in Mauritius.” According to Poinin-Coulin, the survival of *gardyen* and sacrifices in Réunion was due to the fact that, unlike Mauritius, it had not been a British island.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, British Mauritius was always deeply tied to India which, by the 1900s, had already provided two thirds of its population, turning it into a vibrant Hindu-dominated cosmopolis where, compared to other plantation societies, Indian languages had survived to a great degree. Despite an unchallengeable creolization, the different regionally-based Hindu religious groups maintained their distinctiveness through regular arrivals of material culture, knowledge and new immigrants from India.

In his linguistic history of Tamil in Mauritius, Ponsamy Tiroumalechetty observed in birth registers that from the nineteenth-century to the 1930s, the majority of given names referred to “village deities.” From the 1930s to the 1950s, names echoed a generically pan-Indian Hindu or at least Sanskritic inflection (Tiroumalechetty 2011).

⁸² The best testimony of this religious universe, where Mardévirin prevails, is undoubtedly Christian Barat’s monograph *Nargoulan - Culture et rites malbar à la Réunion* (Recherches universitaires réunionnaises 1989)

Starting in the 60s, Tiroumalechetty noted the hitherto preferential use of Dravidian-sounding names from an exclusively Tamil repertoire, while until today in Réunion's thirty-something Tamil temples, priests can still be called Jean-Baptiste or Séraphin. What changes in cultural climate were behind this progressive shift? The 1930s represented a period of profound transformations in Mauritius that arguably paved the way for the island's independence in 1968. This transformative decade saw a certain loosening of the white aristocracy's hold on the island, to the profit, at least in the political field, of the Créole bourgeoisie and the "Indian masses." Despite its internal cultural and religious lines of division, the Indian community was a united political group since the 1880s, further to the energetic impetus given by Madras-born lawyer Rajarethnum Moodaliar. Along with his Mauritian entourage, Moodaliar focused the island's eyes on Congress-conquered India (Reddi 1986). By the 1920s, the Indian bourgeoisie - of all regional origins - drew ideas of political emancipation from its support of emerging Gandhian nationalism.

Founded in 1936 by Créole progressive patricians feeling empathy with the Indian working class, the Mauritian Labour Party brought about a new political consciousness that would trigger, by the late 1940s, a quiet independence movement, bolstered by India's own new "liberty" (Hazareesingh 1973). This 1930s "revolution" was as much religious as it was political. Led by Bihari intellectuals Basdeo and Sookdeo Bissoondoyal and Marathi political activist Pandit Sahadeo⁸³, the Mauritian chapter of the Arya Samaj⁸⁴ boosted Indian Mauritian pride, reminding the community of its "glorious" antiquity and cultural heritage. A passionate Arya Samaji of Tamil origin, Permal Soobrayen, created a distinct reformist niche within his own community,

⁸³ All the reformers listed on this page were staunch Gandhians.

⁸⁴ Founded by reformer Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883) in 1875, the Arya Samaj movement propagated a form of neo-Hinduism based on a Judeo-Christian monotheistic model, urging for the end to Puranic, popular Hinduism and a return to Sanskrit Vedic religion, blind to caste.

promoting Tamil language and literary tradition while fully respecting the larger Northern Indian-led reform movements (Mahatma Gandhi Institute 1986). The 1930s imbued the Tamil community with a new “Hindu consciousness”. In solidarity with Indian political movements that sought to denounce caste, “idolatry” and “supersition”, Permal Soobrayen is credited for having weakened caste affiliations among Tamil Mauritians and I suspect that in this process he also contributed to the diminishing status of *gardyen* worship.⁸⁵ But it was through Soobrayen’s disciples - two decades later - that the ideological tempest that would uproot Mardévirin from the field of Tamil religion sprouted.

Till today, people in Mauritius speak in awe of Mootoocomaren Sangeelee. Throughout his life he was an indebted and unquestioning follower of Soobrayen. This Rose-Hill middle-class educator is remembered as a tireless religious reformer and cultural activist, as well as the translator into French of Tiruvalluvar’s *Tirukkural*. Though he was not the sole inceptor or actor of what came to be known as the *Renaissance Tamoule*, or “Tamil Renewal,” he is remembered today as one of its main figures. The movement took shape in the 1950s when Sangeelee and fellow Soobrayen disciples actively contributed to the opening of communal “Tamil schools” throughout the island, where a “forgotten” linguistic and cultural knowledge was imparted to children. The 1950s was the decade that gave decisive momentum to the Mauritian Independence movement. Indo-Mauritian Labour leaders openly emulated Indian nationalist ideas. Centered around the earlier mentioned Kaylasson temple, Tamil religion became a rallying political force, as much as in India. The independentist Tamil bourgeoisie founded the *Hindu Maha Jana Sangam*, promoting Sanskritic and

⁸⁵ Animal sacrifice was also one of the main “Hindu supersitions” that the Arya Samaj intended to eliminate.

highly Brahmanical Hinduism throughout the island. By means of this patronage, the Tamil renewal was becoming increasingly “spiritualized” in its activities, finding a powerful champion in Veerassamy Ringadoo, a lawyer and ruling party stalwart, long serving Minister of Finance and, much later, Mauritius’ last governor-general and first President of the Republic. Himself a reformer and an admirer of Sangeelee, Ringadoo extended the *Renaissance Tamoule* to Réunion in “solidarity” with “Tamil brothers”, sending reformers and priests to the French island. By the late 1950s, Dravidianism reached Mauritius, with flags of the DMK and portraits of Tamil nationalist leader C. N. Annadurai displayed in temples and Tamil schools.⁸⁶ This short-term enthusiasm for a secular Tamil separatism never hindered the (Sanskritic) religious and pro-Indian wing of the *Renaissance Tamoule*, reformers having but flirted with Dravidianism out of a kind of culturalist sympathy. With given names turning more Tamil-sounding as shown by Tiroumalechetty, the renewal intensified its religious action in the 1960s, culminating in the official recognition of “Thaipooam Cavadee” as a national holiday by Independence. By the 1970s, young Mauritian priests, trained by reformers, rapidly took over religious life, joined in the 1980s by Brahmin officiants from India who were invited and sponsored by temple associations.⁸⁷ The growing influence of these reputedly authoritarian Brahmin priests created a small schism in the Tamil Renewal movement, the more Dravidian-minded leaders seeing the practices of Sanskrit-reciting Brahmins as an attack on Tamil identity (Tiroumalechetty 2011). Out of these counter-reforms emerged what in Mauritius is known as “Saivam,” strictly Tamilian Śaivism following the scriptural corpus of Śaiva Siddhānta.⁸⁸ To counter the importation of

⁸⁶ I owe these informations to my personal communication with Sada Reddi.

⁸⁷ The majority of these priests hailed from the business bourgeoisie, the merchant higher castes.

⁸⁸ An encounter between early Śaiva Tantric philosophy and Tamil *bhakti* devotionism, South Indian Śaiva Siddhānta emphasizes the centrality of Śiva as both deity and philosophical concept. Śiva’s grace

Brahmins, this movement called upon Tamil *siddhāntin* priests from Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka to implant a Sanskrit-free (i.e. Tamil) worship in Mauritius. Although it constitutes a powerful identity force today, Saivam is still not as deeply rooted as its more pan-Hindu alternative. By the time of the death of Sangeelee in the 1990s Mauritian Tamil Hinduism exhibited quite a precise replica of South India's great religious divides. The religion represented itself as institutionally Indianized/Tamilized/Sanskritized whereas most worshippers gravitated between various cults depending on the ritual occasion. From the end of the twentieth century till today, the most visible victory of the *Renaissance Tamoule* is the now almost-complete reconstruction of Tamil temples following Āgamic codes, turning small local shrines into large *kōpuram*-topped edifices of "Dravidian Hinduism."

The Tamil renewal is undoubtedly the force that helped to put an end to *gardyen* worship, with "Servis Madras" becoming "La Religion Tamoule" in the contemporary Mauritian consciousness. Recently, I have met many younger Tamils having a very vague memory of Mardévirin as a God that their parents stopped worshipping around the 70s. As I have mentioned in the Introduction, Sangeelee believed that the "nasty gods" and their supersititious cults had to be uprooted from the religious life of modern Mauritius. From temple conduct to theology, the reformer's *Le Symbolisme dans l'Hindouisme* encapsulates all the religious tenets promoted by the first-wave *Renaissance Tamoule*. Almost every Tamil temple in Mauritius has at least one member that can recall having met "Monsieur Sangeelee" during his frequent touring of the island's religious landscape. Remembered for his passionate preaching style and sometimes vindictive exhortations, his sermons, taken on by other Mauritian reformers

(Tam. *aruḷ*) occupies central soteriological significance; the bulk of *śāstras* in the tradition are attributed to non-Brahmin Tamil-speaking *ācāryas*.

and Indian priests, would truly reshape personal devotion between temple and household. Only two of my interlocutors confirmed personal memories of Sangeelee publicly attacking the very repugnant character of Mardévirin and Minisprins, whereas most people particularly remember his promotion of the cult of Mourouga .

Despite the absence of testimonies, not to mention evidence, of other “lay” reformers’ distrust of Mardévirin, it nevertheless seems unlikely that Sangeelee single-handedly defeated his *gardyen* foes. Today, those to whom Mardévirin’s demise can be imputed rest in a mixed and contradictory memory. Informants from the bourgeois renewal milieu praise the “good sense” and “spiritual elevation” of the whole community for ending sacrifices and possessions. More socially and religiously subaltern informants blame the “town sophisticates” and “their *swamis*”, the latter word encompassing Sanskrit-friendly Mauritian and Indian *ayyas*. A frequently mentioned name was that of Brahmachari Patten, scholar and preacher remembered for being “against Mardévirin” and preaching for the abandonment of the disreputable god, during his tour of temples in the 1970s. Now known as Swami Pranavanda, a Hindutva flag-waving votary, equally a member of the Chinmaya mission, the gentleman categorically refused to talk about Mardévirin when I met him, saying that this topic called for just “trivial matters that were not worth wasting saliva for.”

A Mauritian *ayya* from a Port-Louis Mariamma temple noted that there was nothing wrong with the worship of “Lord Madouré Virène”, “a worthy servant of the Goddess” but, if people had stopped praying him, it was because they were deluded by the “Śiva fanatics” of Saivam. “Even Amène is no good for these people.” As moral and narrative figures, the *gardyens* were certainly directly targeted. “Mr. C” confirms that, in the 1970s, “it was better to abandon fully the cult of the *gardyen lakour*” in order to climb in the hierarchy of temple associations. However, he continued that

among those who accepted to remove the *gardyen* images from their yard, many did it only after having begged the *gardyens*' forgiveness for that disrespect. Only then did they bring them to the sea, thus ending the indenture-like contract between the householders and the deities.

With the exception of Sangeelee's words in his catechism, I found no archival evidence of an elaborate reformist rhetoric against the *gardyens*. But it is undeniable that "renewal" agents from all sides agreed on one object of discontent: animal sacrifice. The institutional crusade against *koupé* ("cut", kreol noun for sacrifice) was initially cloaked in Hindu revivalist rhetoric, politically justified by India's official 1961 ban on sacrifice. In the particularly virulent articles in *The Tamil Voice* newspaper the denunciation of animal sacrifice as "barbaric", "perverting" and "decadent" gained more and more mileage, along with the sermons of reformers in temples and to individual families. Later reinforced by Śaiva reformist ideas and more recently "new age" upper-caste Hindu vegetarianism, sacrifices were progressively banned from all temples with the exception of two by the late 1990s, and now only one.⁸⁹ As part of a larger moralization of religion, the shaming and public end of sacrifice could only deprive the carnivorous *gardyens* of their undissociable ritual base. Such an essential element of Servis Madras, the *koupé* became the main symbol of the "forgotten religion" of the pre-renewal Tamil world. But when it comes to guardians and Mardévirin in particular, it seemed that it was more a general unfavorable climate that was to blame for his progressive marginalization, rather than individual ideologues "guilty as charged."

⁸⁹ The rural Mama Toukay Kovil of Camp-Diable continued goat sacrifice as an essential part of Durgā worship, until the practice was definitely banned by an Indian *swami* around 2000. Today, sacrifices are performed only at the Kaliamma Kovil of Médine. The latter justifies its continuation of Kālī-centered sacrifices through the adoption of a rhetoric drawn from "new age" Tantrism.

“Un deivom peut en cacher un autre”: Deity and Cult in Post-Reform Religion

Mauritian reformers compacted the South Indian religious lives of the island within a unified form of “Hinduism” - later called “Tamil religion” - that was marked as Indian, Tamil and orthodox at the same time. They adapted the Hindu reformist ethos of colonial India to a Tamil Mauritian context and framework, and here converged the political interests of the intellectual bourgeoisie and Brahmanical religious consciousness. The latter was coupled with a revivalist concern for cultural “authenticity,” in an anxious sense, as if to offset any deprivation of that authenticity by the European project of colonial modernity. The whole reformist enterprise ends up, however, in an appropriation of the codes and values of colonial modernity to redefine an “authentic” spiritualized cultural self. These are some of the paradoxes of the *Renaissance Tamoule*. The Tamil bourgeoisie of Sangeelee and Ringadoo saw themselves as the redeemers of a pristine religious world from a century of degradation. A recurring concern was to show to the island’s white/Créole “supposedly moral” elite that it was mistaken when it characterized Tamil religiosity as barbaric witchcraft, while in fact they legitimated this judgement which they had themselves assimilated from earlier colonial discourse. Today, the reformers and preachers associated with the *Renaissance Tamoule* are praised for having saved the community from “dark ages” and “barbaric” practices. The once-central worship of Mardévirin could no more find a place in this new, middle-class order. He was the hero of a religiously antinomian legend as well as cult, prone to slipping easily into the realm of witchcraft and “superstitious” fears. As I have argued in the previous chapter, Mardévirin was the face of a hybrid and porous religious universe, beyond cultural bordering. Turning Tamil religiosity into an allegiance to Tamil language and traditions, the *Renaissance Tamoule* reclaimed an ill-defined creolized space and bound it with rectilinear frontiers

- those, *inter alia*, of religious nationalism.

I believe, however, that the figure of Bonom Salute can help us understand the deeper semiotic discomfort behind this shift. Mentionned briefly in the previous chapter, the Bonom Salute, a local name given by the whole Saint-Julien d'Hotman village, is this statue of a racially ill-defined plantation official in pith helmet and safari jacket. Still near Legliz Mariamma and once integral part of it, the Bonom Salute was placed in the 1920s as the guardian deity of the goddess, before being taken away from the Mariamma temple in the 1960s, only to be placed as a rather secular boundary marker, despite the occasional ritual tributes given by some passers-by. Today there is a complete amnesia about who Bonom Salute might represent. "He is a white man, can't you see the way he is dressed? A *kolom*," said a Créole villager. "He is a British soldier like those we could see long long ago," said an old Telugu lady. "The only thing I know is that he was a *sirdar*, a Tamil *sirdar*. Old people would know but they are all dead," said a visitor to the temple. When I asked why nobody was interested to know more about such an original artifact, people shrugged and looked apathetic, if not uncomfortable. Today, the many agents of visual culture throughout the postcolonial world have turned the pith helmet and the safari jacket into metonymic symbols of colonial domination. Having become undissociable from the image of the white male colonizer, the helmet and the outfit connote European brute force and all the forms of violence it inflicted on colonized people. Adopted in Mauritius by the French planters in what seems a colonial mimicry of their British "overlords", the pith helmet and the safari jacket were given to all plantation staff regardless of their ethnic origin, arguably becoming two of the most potent visual markers of station and authority on the plantation.

In this village isolated amidst large clusters of sugar cane fields, the Bonom

Salute was built in the 1920s as the *gardyen* of the Mariamma temple, recognized by all as a *sirdar*. Occupying the same location and function as Mardévirin statues in other old temples, it seems clear that the Bonom pictured Mardévirin in colonial fashion, or at least as a male *gardyen*. As a localized example, the Bonom Salute could explain the discomfort around the memory of Mardévirin. I have argued previously that the god and the *sirdar* position were equated in the early twentieth-century religious imagination. No more a simple narrative element such as Pougavanon's Réunionese retelling, this visual materialization showed the *gardyen* in the uniform that the *sirdar* shared with the white bosses, certainly echoing the *sirdar*'s own political ambivalence. It might also have been a way to highlight the guardian's dangerous "fierceness," such an interpretation relying on the fact that, in the 1920s, the bosses were no more respected imperial figures but despised despots. I argued that Mardévirin worship flourished because it was symbolically relevant in the social structure of colonial Mauritius. But by the 1960s, this uniform was the essentializing garb of colonial abuse; standing in as a Mardévirin equivalent, the Bonom Salute added to the painful memory of indenture and exploitation. As much as *sirdars* were becoming more and more distrusted figures of the postcolonial insular imaginaire, Mardévirin was dethroned as "god of the Tamils", which leads me to question the succession of Mardévirin by a higher deity.

The "Tamil Renewal" installed Mourouga as the most important god of the pantheon and centre of Tamil Mauritian religious economy (Trouillet 2014). Mourouga worship had been deeply rooted in Mauritius, although it was limited to the urban world of merchants and traders, those who patronized *cavadee* processions for Thaipooosam (Tam. *taippūcam*). Starting in the early 1960s through newspaper articles and temple preaches, Sangeelee and the other reformers actively promoted the worship of the god

once-known as Soubramanien, renamed Mourouga in its tamilized way, also known as *Velène* (Vēlan). Peripheral until then for the entire community, *cavadee* and Mourouga would become not only symbols of religious identity by the 1960s, but also of the “spiritual elevation” of Tamils in Mauritius. The *Renaissance Tamoule* also included a large campaign of moral policing, with reformers attacking the consumption of alcohol, tobacco and “lewd behavior” in the community. Sacrifice, of course, was targeted as the root of all evils. People were warned against it, the arguments founded on Brahmanical notions of karmic demerit and post-Gandhian ideals of non-violence. This post-Victorian morality cloaked in Neo-Vedantic Brahmanism skillfully uprooted *gardyen* worship by successfully erasing the ritual support on which it relied deeply. At the same time, it advocated a sanitized religion and installed on its top a “righteous” Tamil deity that had to be emulated at multiple levels.

In the 1950s, the Tamil bourgeoisie favoured the worship of the god Kṛṣṇa through the creation of the *Govinden* festival.⁹⁰ This Tamil bourgeois religion was at the same time the main standard bearer of the island’s Hindu community (Tiroumalechetty 2014). Aware of Indian nationalist movements since the 1910s, the Tamil bourgeoisie arguably chose *Krisnen* among other deities as the Kṛṣṇa of the *Bhagavad-gītā* had been turned into an essential icon of political Hinduism by the nationalist milieu (Davis 2015) with which Tamil Mauritian intellectuals were highly conversant.⁹¹ Moreover, British rule and Indian regionalisms had already fragmented the larger Indian population into various linguistic communities. In these conditions, projecting a deity palatable to Hindi-speaking and other Indo-Mauritians (Kṛṣṇa)

⁹⁰ Held during the whole month of September following Kṛṣṇa Janmāṣṭamī, the *Govinden* festival revolves around Kṛṣṇa-centered prayers and songs.

⁹¹ Many Indian Mauritian “freedom fighters” had visited India and actively participated in nationalist activities, many of them being members of the Indian National Congress. As demonstrated in the writings of Arya Samaji Basdeo Bissoondoyal, the Kṛṣṇa of the *Bhagavad-gītā* was a strong political-spiritual model for Mauritian nationalists (Bissoondoyal 1992).

appears as a useful move on the part of Tamil Hindus at a time when all Indian groups were uniting for the cause of independence.

By the early 60s, when Sangeelee and others write and preach, independence is already a won cause: after a decade marked by a highly polarized independence movement, the communal economy of the future state could already predict its future balance sheets. Next to the Créoles and the Muslims, the Hindu community was a fragmented group in which Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, and Marathi speakers formed separate religious as much as cultural communities (Hazareesingh 1973). The North Indian majority had claimed political power over other communities, in a move already seen as arrogant by other groups. The beginning of the Tamil Renewal and its emphasis on Mourouga appear to go along with the self-assertion of politicized Tamil leaders who were seeking a distinct voice in the future communal state that was positioned to be ruled by North Indian Hindus.⁹² While choosing the patron deity of early and later Dravidianism, the “Renaissance Tamoule” clearly drew up the borders and limits of Mauritian Tamil Hinduism, ensuring that if a Telugu or a Créole were to practise *cavadee*, it would be in full submission to the god of Tamils. The Mauritian cult of Mourouga seeks its founding myth in the story of the race between Gaṇeśa and Murukaṇ, the latter’s own “travel to glory” echoing the emancipation of the Tamil community from both colonization and the newly instituted communal order.⁹³

⁹² This could have been felt as particularly humiliating for the political faction Tamil bourgeois elite which had sponsored and led the independence movement until the early 1950s, despite being outnumbered by the Biharis.

⁹³ According to legend, Murukaṇ went on to become a courageous warrior after loosing the holy fruit (Tam. *paḷam*), a mango in the Mauritian version, denied to him in favour of his elephant-headed brother during a race. The short tale has always been one of the first stories told to children in Tamil “Sunday Schools” and by their parents as part of a semi-institutionalized religious instruction. In many ways, Mourouga’s conflict with Ganesh symbolizes the dissatisfaction of the Tamil political elite - and the whole community by extension - for not having been given their “due.”

Mourouga also served as a moral standard in narrative and iconography. Reformers established a Brahmanically-normative Mourouga, portrayed as a model of righteousness and justice (Clothey & Ramanujan 1978). As a martial figure, his strength and valour are controlled forces at the service of goodness and order. The sacrifices and possessions associated to the *cavadee* festivities were marginalized in favour of a sanitized festival in which order prevailed, the corporeal mortifications of *cavadee* rituals assumed in an allegorized Brahmanical vocabulary of penance and purification. In contrast to the unrestrained and popular religious world of *gardyens*, Mourouga commanded a religion of asceticism and self-control (Collins 1997). Although it retained the popular element of votive rites and rituals for “trouble,” it was a religion of patience and effort where the “quickness” and “efficacy” of sacrifice and avenging deities had no value. The sweeping popularity of the cult between the 1970s and the 1980s contributed to spread what could be termed a religious culture of independence. “Mourouga embodies action, he bows to no one, he goes up the mountain, to its top,” says Deven N., a religiously observant Tamil Mauritian former MP. “When you get into a temple, it’s like government house. Mardévirin, he is just the bouncer. But Mourouga, Mourouga is the Prime Minister.” At the level of a spiritual metaphor, this religious culture of independence started with the very figure of Mourouga who had overcome obstacles to become a stately deity. This figure of power through freedom clashed with the colonization-rooted images of Mardévirin and other *gardyens* as servant figures. Freed from the intercession of these deities, the worshipper was invited to abandon religious servitude for a more direct relationship with the divine as epitomized by *cavadee* processions. Since early indenture, the cult of Soubramanien-Mourouga had always been associated with the free world of towns, due to its patronage by merchants and traders, while the goddesses and their *gardyens* were

rooted in the plantation and the world of *sirdars*. With the plantation symbolizing the uncomfortable remnant of the colonial order in the postcolonial imagination, it was necessary to move religion out of the plantation to the new ruling urban field. I would argue that the shift from *gardyen* worship to Mourouga worship, echoes at a religious level the transition of Mauritius from a colonial plantation economy to an independent free-market society. Propelled by a bourgeois religious elite, the cult of Mourouga served as both the cultural and spiritual capital required to attain respectable middle-class religiosity.

I believe one can argue that this revived prominence of Mourouga did not uproot, but somehow replaced, Mardévirin. We have seen the possible connection between the two in the making of Maturaivīraṇ in early modern Tamilnadu in Chapter 1. If today the youthful, if not child-like depiction of a princely Mourouga prevails in his iconography in Mauritius, images from the old colonial period represent him as a more adult and warrior-like figure, closer in representation to the communities that landed in Mauritius. Another important feature Mourouga shares with Mardévirin is bigamy. Although now heavily allegorized or discarded through the observation that “a god cannot be a player”⁹⁴, the presence of Devayanay (Devasenā) and Vaḷḷi was often portrayed in older iconography, in a manner similar to the oral narrative lore that was sung to celebrate the love of Mardévirin for Bommi and Veḷḷaiyammāl.⁹⁵ Although it would be farfetched to assert that the reformers consciously replaced Mardévirin by Mourouga, the popularization of the latter certainly occurred as a shift between two figures in what could be termed an iconic transfer; the attributes of valor and martial

⁹⁴ This phrasing was repeated many times to me, the same word *galan* (“lover,” “player,” “womanizer”) so often used in the past to describe Mardévirin.

⁹⁵ The *Narḷgon Valli* -- a play about the amorous conquest of Vaḷḷi by Murukaṇ -- was part of the same cross-insular theatrical *nāṭakam* drama repertoire of the Tamil diaspora. I obtained this information from Kavinien Karupuddayen.

protections being passed residually from one god to the other, in the passage between two diametrically opposed ritual orders. Reformers definitely attempted to remove sacrifice and *gardyens* from the centre of cultic life. However, I would argue that this fading indexed the fact that they did not fit into the new postcolonial religious consciousness. An intercessional religious world faded away alongside an equally fading intercessional polity.

While the cults of Mardévirin and Minisprin were being ruled out, one *gardyen* was spared the vigilance of the Tamil Renewal: Idoumbène (Itumpan). This deity was worshipped as the guardian of Mourouga temples and was given a major importance during *cavadee* for being its first performer and patron according to tradition. As we have seen in Chapter 2, Idoumbène too had an equally bloody sacrificial cult, receiving offerings of goats in thanksgiving for the successful conduct of Thaipoosam *cavadee* mortifications.⁹⁶ But he was meant to be strongly appropriated by the Tamil renewal for his association with Mourouga in a narrative called upon to be highly significant. In his narrative, Idoumbène is at first an arrogant and impure demon submitting to the might of Mourouga and purifying himself through the effort of carrying the two mountains, the foundation myth of *cavadee*. Idoumbène thus symbolized, for Hindu reformers, the salvation of the sinful through hard penance, echoing the rescuing of the Tamil “man” from a decadent religiosity through the worship of Mourouga. Until today, Idoumbène occupies an important place in *cavadee*, his image leading the processions. Without any goat sacrifice, a tradition of Idoumbène worship after the procession has taken ground.

This construction of “respectable religion” relied on the development of a distinctly “middle-class” religiosity. As we have seen in Chapter 2, the centre of gravity

⁹⁶ Never found as a *gardyen lakour* and always tied to Soubramanien, Idoumbène was known for promising rewards to devotees in their dreams, if they brought spicy fish curry to his trees near ponds and rivers.

of religious life was the exterior realm on the plantation under the tutelage of a mother goddess and her servants. The main locus of a more private worship was the courtyard, itself a model of the plantation's social universe on a ritual level. The interior of the house was especially ritually porous, to the point that many Tamil households deployed Catholic imagery to protect the interior; as opposed to the "wild" exterior protection of Mardévirin between the yard and work in the fields. Reformers encouraged the reworking of domestic ritual life, which began with attempts to "reclaim" the interior. In the 1960s, reformers and their newspapers advocated the reading of the Tamil moral work *Tiroukoural* (*Tirukkural*) as part of household religiosity, in order to give to Tamil religion a unifying sacred text on the Christian model.⁹⁷ Printed copies of the text were kept on the bedside tables of the religious elite, but failed to support an assiduous exercise comparable to liturgical readings in Créole families. Yet today, most religiously-conscious Tamils take great pride in the moral wisdom of the *Tiroukoural*, "our Bible." The transformation of domestic religion also entailed consecrating Mourouga as the very lord of the home through its icons. Today, the representation of infant Mourouga (Pālamurukaṇ) or as the youthful Paḷaniyāṇṭavar ("Lord of Paḷani Town") is the most prevalent one among representations of the deity in Mauritius. This appears to have started as the "blessing image" of families and, from then on, became the main representation of the god in the spirit of middle-class religiosity, confining the more martial representation of Mourouga to the *cavadee* festival and Mardévirin to mere yard function.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Attributed to the poet-saint Tiruvalluvar in the fifth century BCE, the *Tirukkural* is known for its aphorisms of "universal," non-sectarian wisdom. The text was later praised by missionaries and Orientalists as a potential tool for sowing the seeds of a Christian /Western morality among Tamil speakers..

⁹⁸ I see also a possible echo with the Infant Jesus of Prague, particularly popular in créole and madras batizé devotion. The figure is also very much popular in the Catholic families of South India, where it appears to echo the cults of Pālamurukaṇ and Pālākṣṇa

The official presence of the *gardyen lakour* is still predominant in the social periphery of the urban seats of orthodoxy, mainly rural and urban working-class households. If routine yard sacrifice of hens have been replaced by vegetarian offerings of lemons, some less religiously gentrified families still give sardine offerings, thus continuously asserting the “carnivorous” need of these deities. Naden’s house encapsulates many of the ramifications of the Tamil renewal on personal religious life. A family man in his early 60s, Naden could be categorized as a member of a recently gentrified working-class. Born in an impoverished tablisman family, Naden spent most of his career working as a newspaper office factotum. Now well on his way to retirement with a reasonably comfortable pension, Naden’s cautious economic life turned him today into the patriarch of a family of professionals. We started the tour of his cozy house by his family’s living room shrine. “See, I have there Mourouga , Śiva and his family, and Shirdi Sai Baba. I am a Tamil first but then also a Hindu. Sai Baba belongs to all Hindus.” Naden stated that the shrine of his bedroom included Mourouga and Sakti Mariamma. He showed us an incense-smelling calendar on which was pictured Tiruvalluvar. “I never read the Kural to be honest with you, I know some quotes but no more. But it is good to keep an image of Tirouvalouvar in my house. He is our Prophet, he gave us our sacred book. As big as the Bible!” Naden told me that he equally revered Mourouga and Amène, and attended both *cavadee* and walks on fire with the same fervor. I asked if he had a particular preference between “Sanskrit” and “Tamil” as ritual languages, and “swamis (reciters of Sanskrit)” or “thondars (the colloquial term for reciters of Tamil).” Naden replied: “It depends on who sings the best. It all depends on what you want. Look, take death for instance. Before *pousaris* were doing *karumatīs*. There are no more *pousaris*. Indian Brahmins and Mauritian *swamis*, they don’t want to touch that, they don’t do death. You have to take an *ayya*

who does it!”⁹⁹ Naden then ushered me into his courtyard where the *gardyens* were orderly found as cloaked black stones on a ceramic altar. “I don’t cut. I give only lemons. Every Friday I never miss do to the offering to my saints so that they can protect my house.” When I tried to ask questions on his knowledge of the *gardyens*, he shifted to another subject. “You know I am also into Catholic saints. Especially Saint Anthony. What I find great is that you can give him food too with his bread loaf. I also go to Church sometimes. Less and less people go because some *ayyas* would get angry. People were more tolerant in the old days.” Naden nonetheless added something on his *gardyens lakour*. “When you pray to them, it’s like any other god, you must imagine them closing your eyes. Just like they are in temples, to remind us. With the sword, the turban, moustache, everything.” As the guardians could still be found in temples despite their fall from power, it was interesting to see that even their recollection in the human imagination - once so creative - was now also conditioned and regularized by the normativity of the temple, after years of religious homogenization through the Tamil Renewal, which so emblematically played itself out in the religious life of Naden’s home.

Conclusion

Mardévirin and the *gardyens* did not outlive the end of the larger insular order which they symbolized at the religious level. They fell prey to the rectilinear religious imagination of nationalism and postcolonial, middle-class society. Forcefully pushed to the margin and the shadow, they can nonetheless be momentarily taken out of this periphery when the occasion warrants it. And, as we will see in the final chapter, after

⁹⁹ This mention of an *ayya* “that does it” is certainly a reference to Saiva *thondars*, some of them performing the old village tradition of *karumaṭi*, restructured and subsumed into Siddhāntin metaphysical discourses on death and destruction.

the imposition of the apparently cohesive religious order of the “Tamil Renewal,” these temporary “resurrections” of Mardévirin can re-enact what Naden once called “the old days.”

Chapter 4

Dismembered Memories, Fragmented Images: Recollecting Mardévirin in Glocal¹⁰⁰ Mauritius

This final chapter is about the “afterlife” of Mardévirin in an almost post-mortem sense, as part of the god’s cultural biography. After his “birth” in early modern Tamilnadu, his “life” in colonial Mauritius, his postcolonial agony and “near-death” in the 1970s, we can now see a sort of afterlife in the glocalized market economy and consumer society which Mauritius is today; an afterlife that is interwoven between old religious communities and the newer ones linked by social media. The previous chapters attempted to restore the memory of a god and of his “forgotten religion.” As a more direct account of my fieldwork, this chapter is the most anthropological in nature, addressing directly the various ways following which Mauritian Tamils remember – consciously or not – Mardévirin, in a time when the god and the colonial plantation’s religion should have ceased to carry relevance.

Influenced by the subaltern studies framework in South Asian Studies, I arrived in Mauritius with many preconceived ideas about Mardévirin’s trajectory from India to contemporary Mauritius. Quite schematically opposing a Sanskritized upper-caste bourgeoisie to a *gardyen*-worshipping lower-caste working-class, I was expecting to inevitably meet Mardévirin, remembered and actively revered by all those defiant of Sanskritization. This chapter indicates that reality is far more nuanced.

My argument in this final chapter is twofold. In the first section of the chapter, I assert the marginal and minimal place given to Mardévirin in the “official face” of contemporary Mauritian Tamil Hinduism, throughout its most symbolic religious

¹⁰⁰ The portmanteau word *glocalization* combines *globalization* and *local*. I owe the concept to sociologist Roland Robertson. It blurs the boundary between the local and the global by positing the economic/political/cultural changes of globalization through the prism of the “local” periphery; as a recipient, transformer and equal agent of economic and cultural fluxes (Robertson 1995).

institution: the temple. Second, I argue that when remembered, Mardévirin is the only indirect/secondary actor of a memorial continuation of the *gardyen* religion. By the end of the chapter, I hope to demonstrate that there are many ways to continue and reclaim a distinctively local religious identity, with Mardévirin as a potent and yet very withdrawn symbolic force, a sort of disembodied entity.

As an introduction to this aspect of my fieldwork, I would like to mention my stay at the family home of the late Koomara Venketasamy in the northern village of Camp-Laboue. I must credit the fond memory of my “Mamé” Koomara for my present academic interest in the Tamil world, from Mauritius to India. I owe much to the friendship and affection of his family towards me. Had they not so warmly transformed their house into one more site for my fieldwork, many thoughts and ideas would not have found utterance. Despite conducting research in my own country and, for that matter, in sympathy with M. N. Srinivas’ support of the study of one’s own milieu (Srinivas 2009), I was nonetheless an outsider to Mauritian Tamil life, something which added to the difficulty of my task. Coming from a background moulded by the former colonial elite’s values and privileges, my “good faith” and enthusiasm were not ascertained enough to fully avert the risk of provoking taboo and defiance, the more so as I was trying to uncover a controversial subject. The shortcomings of this thesis all result from these fieldwork hazards. Without the trust and friendliness of the Venketasamys and of the other actors of this chapter, I would not have learned how to navigate in this richly complex universe. As proposed by my fieldwork participation forms, all informants in this chapter have agreed to be referred by their names and have given consent to share this information.

On the Tamil side of Camp-Laboue village, the Venketasamy family live in two houses sharing a single courtyard, respectively under the rule of Shama and Tamode,

Koomara's widow and younger brother. During the two afternoons and two days spent in this deeply religious joint-household, Mardévirin was something like a harmlessly colorful ghost, made relevant by my presence. In the first month of my fieldwork, I was afraid of discovering that the memory of Mardévirin was extinct or at least sunken in unspeakable taboo. I had faced some aggressive denials, from people pretending to have no knowledge of the god, in addition to coming across some genuine cluelessness. "*But I can tell you anything you want to know about Mourouga,*" was a recurring follow-up line.

One evening in Camp-Laboue, Tamode asked me if I wanted some *sarayon*. Asking what it meant, Tamode and his son Kanna roared in laughter. "*He is into Mardévirin and he does not know what Sarayon is!*" They meant rum.¹⁰¹ I understood that alcohol and Mardévirin were intimately linked, inspiring a conversation that moved beyond the simple association in courtyard rituals which Tamode, as a matter of fact, precisely described for me. Their house was a real microcosm of Tamil Mauritian religious plurality. By his education and job as a journalist, Koomara turned into a village dignitary, professing all his life devotion to Mourouga and *cavadee*, as well as affirming firmly that he was a "Hindu". His college student son Vellen kept the same affiliations. While accepting the label "Hindu," his elder sister Mirouda is more attracted by the spirituality of modern global Hinduism, that of gurus and yoga, more in tune with her own professional milieu as a corporate coach. After Koomara's passing away, his wife Shama got closer to Saivam, becoming strictly vegetarian, permanently sporting Siva's sacred ash (Tam. *vipūti*; Skt. *vibhūti*) and preferring to declare herself "Tamil" rather than "Hindu". Tamode and his son, both taxi drivers, display more enthusiasm for the Amène's world and its tradition of fire walking rather than

¹⁰¹ The Créole *sarayon* comes from the Tamil for spirituous liquor, *cārāyam*.

cavadees. Koomara's first brother Siva was apparently a reputed expert on "Mardévirin stuff", implied by his family to be so because of his tough occupation as a prison warder.¹⁰²

My interactions with this family showed me that I could not make generalized statements based on a dichotomous vision of Tamil religion in Mauritius; in a single family, religious identity was individually indexed through age, gender and social status. While Vellen seemed indifferent to Mardévirin, Mirouda remembered him solely by describing the sardine and rum offerings to the God made by her older relatives during her childhood. Shama justified her religious inclinations through food habits: "Minisprins, Mardévirin. I have no use for these gods in my house. I am veg! I am into Śiva, Sivène is the only Lord and I am very well, thank you very much. When I remember these horrible stories about the *gardyens* our parents used to tell us, *ayyo!* Look at Pétiaye, biting the guts out of someone's belly, yuck, why would I worship this kind of god, a god who likes bloody entrails." I could sense in this food-centric speech a certain discourse on the ideal standards of domestic religion and domesticity in general. She went on to describe Sivène as a model of righteous steadfastness. Praising Parvedi (Pārvatī) as a kind and patient mother, Sama was portraying the perfect household through the emulation of a morally perfect divinity. When I noticed the presence of the four main Nāyaṇārs¹⁰³ ("Sambadar", "Apar", "Soundarar" and "Manikkavasaga", as named by Sama) on a lithograph against a wall, Sama gasped in joy. "You know the Nāyaṇārs! Do you know the story of the hunter who gouged his eyes out?" And she went on with the most gruesome narratives of Tamil Śaiva

¹⁰² Very sadly, it was not possible for me to meet Siva due to his demanding workshifts.

¹⁰³ The sixty-three *nāyaṇārs* ("leaders") were a group of medieval poet-saints whose hagiographies (regrouped in the later text called *Periyapurāṇam*) and poems comprise the main textual corpus of Tamil Śaiva *bhakti*.

devotion, mimicking, in graphic gestures, chopping or repeated stabbing.¹⁰⁴ I realized that the *nāyaṇārs* had to some degree replaced the *gardyens* in a translated imagination. In a sense there was a constant need for an intermediary and intercessional pantheon deeply associated with human life. Despite receiving no sardines or goat curry, the *nāyaṇārs* supported violent enough narratives to provide the amount of bloodiness required to enshrine deified martyrs and canonize their memorial hagiographies or *katais*.

When I interviewed Tamode, he seemed apathetic to the main subject of my research. “Mardévirin, yeah people worshipped him before but he is not that of a big deal. Too much work it is to worship him, too much effort, we don’t need him so much, it’s not like before. Pray Amène and you’ll be fine. Pray Madourai Virène too if you want to be protected but don’t you spend too much energy on him, this is useless. Give him one lemon, a flower, and that’s okay!” When I interviewed Kanna, Tamode’s son, he pinched my sleeve and said with a big smile after checking that no one could hear. “Oh by the way, if you are into Mardévirin. There will be a sacrifice soon! For my sister’s wedding.” Despite the fact that the upcoming sacrifice to the old *gardyens* was a secret to no one in the family, Kanna’s mischief was about recalling that the Mardévirin cult remained a practice not to be spoken of too loud, yet claimed as their own at some moments, as I further observed in my fieldwork.

A House for Mr Virène: Mardévirin in Contemporary Temple Worship

I was informed about the shrine in St-Félix village, located in the middle of a sugarcane field nearing the southern village. The place was known for hosting aniconic

¹⁰⁴ The *Periyapurāṇam* is full of gruesome stories as metaphors of selfless devotion (Hudson 1989). According to my Tamil language coach Kavi Karupudayyen, *nāyaṇār* narratives were popular in the Mauritian legendary oral corpus, although never part of a cult as they would be after the introduction of the modern Saivism.

representations of Minisprins and Mardévirin as well as an Amène guarded by the two *gardyens*. Minisprins and Mardévirin were the main objects of devotion in the shrine, attracting many worshippers of the region, according to my informer Sanjiven, by virtue of their “great power”. According to Sanjiven’s description, the St-Félix Kovil was a red brick edifice reminiscent of English cottages, the kind of house occupied by *sirdars* and *koloms* in Mauritian tablismans. Sanjiven had in fact been to St-Félix the previous week, after which he posted a picture of the *kōvil* on his Facebook page. Thrilled to see such an icon of the hybridity of “Creole Hinduism”, I went there two weeks later only to find the English Cottage razed to the ground. What appeared to be the walled statue of the Goddess stood in the middle of rubble, next to piles of unused building bricks awaiting a new construction. No remains of Mardévirin or Minisprins could be spotted among the débris. Even such an isolated and unconventional shrine failed to resist the “Kumbabisegam frenzy” of Mauritian Tamil Hinduism.¹⁰⁵ My extensive survey of the island’s Tamil temples proved to be a telling visualization of the official religious discourse on Mardévirin and most of the other *gardyens*.

Called *légliz* or *kōvil*, the temple has always been the pivot of all forms of Tamil community life since the late days of the French colony. Closely associated with the reverential and suave realm of *ayyas* and learned clergy rather than the more rustic universe of *pousaris*, temples and their hierarchies defined the norms and codes of religious authority. From its architecture to the rituals allowed within its space, the temple represents and stands for an institutionally-sanctioned religion. From the early 1990s, the Tamil Temples’ Federation of Mauritius launched a series of renovations of

¹⁰⁵ This is the Tamil term *kumpāpicēkam* (Skt. *kumbhābhiṣekam*), the “pot-consecration,” so called after the central blessing of the timberpots that crown the temple towers (*kōpurams*). It represents the ritual inauguration or the periodic re-consecration and purification of a temple according to Āgamic rules. In Mauritius, *kumbabisegam* refers mostly to the reconstruction of an older temple structure and its re-consecration as a place of orthodox worship.

the island's temples, according to Āgamic rules. The renovation process usually involved the reconstruction of the sacred space and, as a matter of fact, destruction of the older structures, in view of a ritual consecration through the formal, orthodox, Brahmanic *kumbabisegam* ceremony. Today, three old temple structures still stand due to lack of funds for their transformation. The main reason advanced for the rebuilding of old temples by the Federation and temple associations is a sense of cultural pride and religious orthodoxy, through the emulation of a glorious architectural tradition at the service of Āgamic functionality. Influenced by a Brahmanical discourse, the common idea is that a temple with a tower or *kōpuram* “works better”, being a ritually “clean” ordered space, purifying the space from its past of sacrifice and other bothersome customs. Needless to say, *kōvils* in Mauritius are continuously being made more “pure” by routine *abisegams* and *kumbabisegams*, and thus are conforming to rigid discourses on Hindu orthodoxy brought from India. This “Āgamization” of Mauritan temples is a further example of the growing middle-class religious consciousness of the Tamil community. The newly renovated, lavish centres of Tamil religious orthodoxy speak volumes about economic power and middle-class religious compliance amidst the spiritual angst of today's modernity (Waghorne 2004).

In the oddly “communal” as well as “liberal” society that is twenty-first century Mauritius, a search for Mardévirin forces us to focus on “new” goddess temples. Although nominally “Mariyamma”¹⁰⁶ temples, the deity's characterization is glossed over by her generic appellation as “Amène”, alongside being understood as the scriptural, transcendent Parāśakti and linked with male figures of the Brahmanical pantheon, reclaimed in any case by both Sanskrit Brahmanism and Dravidian Śaivism. In all sanctums, the enthroned Amène is systematically flanked by Gaṇeśa on

¹⁰⁶ This is as indicated by their names in Tamil, usually painted on *kōvil* entrance gates.

her right and Mourouga on her left, the deities respectively symbolizing the Brahmanical legitimacy (Gaṇeśa) and the Tamil authenticity of the cult performed in the temple (Mourouga). Through established statuary or pinned up lithographic prints on the walls, various members of the Sanskritic pantheon architecturally or iconically “Purāṇicize” the temple’s universe. So far, these choices are common examples of middle-class Sanskritization found in urban South India and its diaspora. When it comes to Mardévirin, the gods’ temple status is less enviable. Prior to the Tamil renewal, the effigy of Mardévirin guarded the entrance of the Temple, sometimes facing the sanctum and gazing at the goddess.¹⁰⁷ Before entering the temple, homage had to be paid to the guardian, contributing to his diet, during festivals, with animals slaughtered in front of the statue. At the temple level, this position established the intercessional function of the deity between worshippers and a higher pantheon. As much as he was present in people’s religious lives, Mardévirin was enshrined in the most visible spot of the temple.

Contrarily to what I had initially expected, Mardévirin was not completely obliterated from the new temples.¹⁰⁸ The deity is nearly always present, found in niches along with Petiaye, Minisprins and Katéri. Mardévirin is always depicted in a homogenized portrayal as an armored warrior raising a sword with his right hand, as it is the case on his “official” lithographic representations found in Indian temples. A few remarks are necessary here. First, these deities are present under their Tamil names, their emphasized Tamilness making them “sound” more “respectable”, unlike a more

¹⁰⁷ This positioning asserted the god’s control over the goddess he guarded.

¹⁰⁸ Mardévirin and the other guardians were found exclusively in Amène temples, graphically absent of Mourouga kovils. The latter temples being considered more institutionally respectable for their canonical cult of an orthodox deity, the absence of guardians in Mourouga kovils highlights their ambivalent role in the less controllable Amène worship.

Créolized sonority.¹⁰⁹ Second, associating the three other deities with Mardévirin downgrades the latter, downplaying his former preeminence by showing that he is “just a guardian among others.” Third, the location of the deities is always at the back of the temple, against one of the protecting walls. By transplanting the model of the domestic yard unto temple grounds, *kōvils* downgrade Mardévirin and the guardians by materializing their status as mere *gardyen lakour* within the larger central space of religious normativity. By being provided with a courtyard and the presence of the *gardyens*, the temple is merged anew with the home through the institutional emphasis on a normative, domestic religiosity. Found sometimes near the ablution sink or the temple’s kitchen, the “*kaveldeivom*” (*kāvaldaivam*) niches reveal the relative unimportance of these gods in the ritual organigram, their peripheral function consisting of simply ridding worshippers from evil influences.

Despite being the proudest examples of Āgamic reconsecrations, rural temples, from what I observed, have maintained devotees’ respect to guardian deity worship. Older devotees may go to the back of the temple to prostrate in front of the Mardévirin statue – and not to the three others – and then come back to the front of the *kovil* and enter the sanctum, apparently out of the old habit of asking the guardian’s permission to enter the temple. But trying to get worshippers to explain me the motives of their devotions around the guardian niches was met with equivalent displays of genuine unawareness or feigned ignorance, while the same worshippers would enthusiastically expound upon the symbolism behind Amène’s statuary or tell me who Lakṣmī or Gaṇeśa was.

¹⁰⁹ Their names are often engraved in Tamil script or in various transliterations such as “Madourai Virène,” “Madurai Viran,” or “Madurey Viren.” The Créole “Mardévirin” would not appear on such signs.

In the temple of Helvetia, *ayya* Visnu, in his forties, told me a bit more. While showing me all the statues of his temple, Visnu said that it was important to have black granite as the old limestone was too “vulgar.”¹¹⁰ When I asked him about *gardyens* he said: “Madourai Virène protects us from evil. Old people mostly give him respect and some young people too. We need him in the temple. We give him flowers and fruits and ask him: Madourai Virène relieve us from pain! But careful, it’s important to refrain from giving him lives. When you get blood, the pure essence leaves the statue and an evil spirit gets in! You must keep your worship pure.” Visnu thus also expressed an interesting idea asserting the ambivalence of Tamil deities. Obviously having in mind the Hindu belief that icons bring about the very presence of the deity, he implied that Madurai Virène could be good as long as his worship remained clean, sacrifice turning him into evil. It seemed that the deity had found in his niche a low but stable job in the temples’ routine, tolerated as ritually useful gargoyles more than recognized as essential deities. This led me to wonder what happened during more active periods of the ritual calendar.

As per Tamil tradition, the entirety of the ritual universe of the temple is mobilized during the time of a major celebration. In Mauritius, the Timiti (Tam. *tīmiti*) represents the summarizing ritual of the Amène cult, with temples hosting walks on fire throughout the year.¹¹¹ I was curious to see to what extent guardian deities were mobilized during the celebration. I was lucky to be given full access to participants in the Timiti of Mont Roches Murugan Malay Kovil.

¹¹⁰ As material used to build huts in the old plantation, limestone is deeply associated with the poverty of colonial times in Indian Mauritian imagination. Black granite emulates the materiality of temple icons in South India.

¹¹¹ Mauritian Timiti tradition evolved from the Draupadi-centered cults of Northern Tamilnadu, having emerged as the reenactment of the *Mahābhārata* narrative of fire and penance (Hiltebeitel 1988).

I cannot make any statement on a standard form of Timiti in the colonial period but, thanks to testimonies of informants throughout the island, I can assert the dominance of Mardévirin on the celebration at that time. In Mauritius, the walks on fire were originally dedicated to Draubadi-Panjalay in continuation of Northern Tamil traditions but were later offered as well to the more popular – and “cross-tamil” – Mariamma.¹¹² In the traditional walk for Draubadi, Nalvan – Draubadi’s guardian – emerges as enabler, guardian, and role-model for conduct during the ritual. In a similar way, walks for Mariamma featured her guardian, Mardévirin, as the protector and model for devotees. Up to the 1960s, goats were sacrificed to Mardévirin, prior to the devotees’ walk on the embers, to warrant their safe passage. Families for their part were called upon to sacrifice roosters to the god in the evening, as thanksgiving for having walked across the fire, safe and unburnt. Accompanied by a range of drums and bells, prayers to Mardévirin and songs about him – including the *Maturaivīraṇ Paṭṭu* – were recited and chanted along with the *Māriyamman Tālāṭṭu* during all the hours leading to the walk. Mardévirin was often called upon by *pousaris* to boost the courage of devotees. *Pousaris* were the masters of the Timiti, always setting the example for worshippers, being the first to walk on the embers. On two occasions, I have heard of *pousaris* getting possessed by Mardévirin so that the god could lead the walk himself. Until the 1970s, in the Ebène Kovil, a Narlgom (*nāṭakam*) narrating the story of Mardévirin was organized before the Timiti to edify the worshippers, with the actors in costumes entering the square later.¹¹³ All my informants warned me that these

¹¹² One of the oldest records of the ritual in the island, an engraving from the 1850s depict a Mauritian walk of fire (Carter). Based on the many oral testimonies gathered, I can attest the large presence of Mariamma-centered timitis in the 1950s, having heard mostly of Draupadi-centered walks prior to this period.

¹¹³ I owe this information to Sanjiven Murday.

practices were long dead, that Timiti was now only about Amène and that Brahmins had taken ownership of the celebration.

The postcolonial liberalization of religion has put an end to the necessity of guardian intercessors. Cloaked in both the vocabularies of allegorical *bhakti* and *tantra*, Timiti has become a direct experience between the devotee and Amène in all the temples of Mauritius. I felt that to get a sense of resistance to the Tamil renewal – and a potential survival of Mardévirin – I had to go in the seat of a more popular religion. That was again a naïve belief. I could not have predicted the complexities I would be confronted with at the Mont-Roches Kovil.

Now a suburb of Rose-Hill, Mont-Roches is a former tablisman known for having a largely Tamil population. Mont-Roches has been a markedly working-class neighborhood as well as a stronghold of the leftist Mauritian Militant Movement. Founded by Tata Koulou, a famous holy man, in the 1970s, the Murugan Malaye Kovil is a place where *cavadee* and Timiti are performed each year. Hosting Mourouga and Amman as its central deities, the temple is served by Mauritian priests. During the ten evenings of the fast period, the rituals included *abisegam* of the Amène, followed by a homily by one of the priests on various aspects of Śāktism. The ceremonies ended with a procession of the deity around the temple. When arriving next to the gardyen shrine, the priest simply offered a camphor flame to Mardévirin and Minisprin. Every night before reentering the temple, two elderly men would place themselves by each side of the Goddess chariot, carrying a trident and a saber respectively. While porters made the Amman swing to the beat of the percussions, the two men entered into a frenzied trance and accompanied the deity to her sanctum with loud screams and wide howls before recovering themselves. Waiting for confirmation, I had assumed that these two older gentlemen were insuring the presence of Mardévirin, represented by the saber, and

Muniswaren, by the *soulon* (Tam. *cūlam*, trident). During the great *ourvalom* (Tam. *ūrvalam*, procession) two days before the fire walking, the whole community followed the chariot carrying Mariamma everywhere across Mont-Roches. Far from the temple's elite singing *bhajans* around the chariot leading the procession, the less affluent worshippers followed a group of drum players who tried to outbeat the singing voices in what was clearly an assertion of subaltern identity. At one moment, a new drum movement started to the repetitive utterance of “Maturaivīraṇ Cuvāmi!” When I questioned some of the performers later on, I did not get much beyond “Maturaivīraṇ is our God! He's a tough God!” or “Maturaivīraṇ is the boss” while the boys flexed their biceps or closed their raised fists. By the gestual impersonation of a strong God mirroring their own, this rather superficial appreciation of the deity seemed mainly an assertion of masculinity through the assertion of physical power and authority. Making them powerful next to *bhajanam* singers performing their own religious capital, the very name of Maturaivīraṇ served as a vehicle for the young drummers of Mont-Roches to assert their masculine subaltern pride.

During the *ourvalom*, the drummers and the *bhajan* singers were separated by the firepot carrier possessed by Amène, flanked by the two possessed old gentlemen, whom I presumed to be the main guardians. I later asked one of the seniors present to tell me who the men were supposed to be. He told me: “Look, one has a saber and the other a *soulon*. These are Mardévirin and Munisvarène, they are the guardian angels of Mariamma. They must protect her always like bodyguards.” He told me that having the guardians following the Goddess was a tradition of the temple. Having befriended the carrier of the *soulon* over the days of preparation, I tried later to ask him questions about his gift of “grace.” When I asked about Munisvarène, he suddenly looked defiant. “I don't see what you are talking about. I received the grace of the Goddess. I carried

her *soulon*, I was Amène. So was my chap.” When I asked the *ayya*, he told me that the sabers and the soulon both represented different aspects of Amène’s *cakti* and that it was these different abstract forces that were shown by calling Amène on two different devotees plus the firepot holder. The metonymic symbols of Mardévirin and Minisprins had been stripped of their original figures, once again proving the reclaiming of the Timiti by its main titular figure to the conscious “backgrounding” of the guardians.

On the day of the walk, no prayers were offered to Mardévirin on the way to the square, only countless recitations of the *Māriyamman Tālāṭṭu* were heard alongside the tantric mantras blasted by the loudspeakers of the temples. The walkers kept gazing at the golden Amène statue. The ceremony ended without any help of any guardian deity. The blessing, in the morning, had consisted in placing four impaled lemons at each corner of the town square. It reminded me of anecdotes about Timitis of old when the blood of four hens was spilled at each angle, to propitiate Mardévirin, Minisprins, Petiaye and Kateri. Lemons being the substitute of blood, I inquired about the presence of the four fruits in an interview with one of the attendants. The man gave me a clear answer. “This is here to prevent people from doing nasty things. Before, they used to do it like, you know, for these gods.¹¹⁴ It’s because of such nasty things that we have been called sorcerers and people say our gods are demons”, he finished with a tearful voice. I was deeply moved by this testimony. Sangeelee, Ringadoo, Pranavanda and others had used the very colonial discourse to justify their shaming of popular worship. Beyond this problematic ideology and its use of an “us versus them” logic, the Mont Roches official had expressed his social and religious dignity by rejecting *gardyens* and sacrifice. From a more working-class religious consciousness, yet following the same

¹¹⁴ My interlocutor clearly referred to animal sacrifice, as he made more explicit comments later in our conversation.

religious logic of elite reformers, this collective rejection was after all a way to try heal the wounds of indenture, colonization and inequalities. Meanwhile in Réunion, Monsieur Badamia defended his identity by rejecting “swamization” when he said : “Me, I pray Mardévirin, me. I cut in front of the chapel. It was the god of my dad and his dad, I won’t abandon him. It’s like people who go vegetarian to pray better. Eat greens, fine, you’ll still be a *soudrass* [Skt. *śūdra*].” Two islands, two opposite ways to use religion to defy a history of marginalization. In Mauritius, the Victorian moral order had shaped religiosity. However, if the temple had become the seat of Āgamic orthodoxy, the house could be refuge of Mardévirin’s resilience.

My Dinner with Mardé: Possession and Food as “Embodied Memory” of Mardévirin

Mamé Saga is a family man in his late 50s, living in the working-class neighborhood of Cité Trèfles, near Rose-Hill. One of his relatives, met by chance, was told how difficult it was to obtain testimonies about animal sacrifices. He then said : “Well, actually there’s a sacrifice tomorrow at my cousin’s. Let me ask if you can attend.”

Mamé Saga graciously accepted me as a guest and warmly welcomed the textual and visual documentation of the ceremony. Mamé Saga was preparing the coming marriage of his elder son and, on this Sunday morning, he was about to offer two roosters and one hen to his *gardyens*, the flesh being prepared and served after the *sanbrani* (Tam *sāmbṛāṇi*)¹¹⁵ in the evening.

Mamé Saga was conversing with me over tea when relatives announced that the sacrificial victims had arrived. We stepped out in the exiguous courtyard. Left in the carrying bags, the poultry were quite agitated. In the neighborhood where houses are very close to one another, leaving little space for privacy, the sisters-in law pinned a tablecloth to the iron gate as a thin symbolic veil which appeared more as a stage curtain for the already overlooking neighbours. Obeying the injunctions and corrections of his almost-blind elder brother, Saga lit the camphor and served one by one the deities with plates of sardine sandwiches. Meanwhile the attendants were casually talking or phone-texting. He approached the Mardévirin altar to proceed with the first sacrifice.

-No, not Mardé. Minisprins first, said the elder brother.

¹¹⁵ Named after the flagrant incense used during the ritual, the *sanbrani* is a Tamil Mauritian ceremony for the blessing of the household, through the propitiation of tutelary deities.

Saga took a lighted cigarette and smoked it, inhaling deeply with the head “renversée”, thrown back. He suddenly started to shiver, getting out more and more smoke, his movement comparable to that of an epilepsy patient during a seizure. When, fully in trance, he bowed his wobbling head down in a loud wheeze similar to a shaken soda bottle erupting. A deep and gruff voice escaped from Saga’s throat.

- Who is calling me? I am Minisprins! Why are you giving blood?
- There is a wedding! answered two women in mirth.
- When you will give me blood again?
- When a baby comes!
- All right. Cut!

A shivering but milder and more controlled Saga seized the rooster handed over to him and, from a single shot, beheaded it on the rocky surface facing Minisprins. Recovering his senses like a runner after a race, Saga took a last cigarette puff and emptied in just three sips the rum glass offered to the god. Seated on their open window, the neighbors were playing dancehall reggae, covering the rite’s noise in the street. Blood was smeared on the rock and the cigarette stuck on an iron pike so that the god could enjoy the drinking and smoking.

“Now Mardévirin,” remarked Saga as if ready for a second round requiring more strength. Repeating the ritual, Saga inhaled the cigarette smoke more deeply until the shivering, panting and wobbling. Suddenly, his hands and knees abruptly hit the floor, as if the descending voice had footed his body down in submissive prostration. A laughing roar howled out from the man’s whole body. A mix of enthusiasm and dread rose up among the family and myself. “What is your name?” asked one brother. “Mardévirin!” vociferated the voice from an even more guttural throat, before adding “This wedding won’t go well if you don’t give me what I want.”

Saga kept shivering and wheezing. His brother grasped the second rooster and held the beast's mouth open so rum could be flown in from the bottle. "Drunkard! Drunkard!" yelled the women to the struggling bird. Saga took the rum glass and drank it in a trembling shot. Mardévirin spoke again, yelling in angry anguish. "Throw the damn rum in my gab!" Shaking Saga held the glass by a stiff arm, his brother pouring more alcohol, Saga grappling and gulping the booze in gargantuan gurglings. Mardévirin made a loud satisfied noise. "Very well. Cut." The second rooster met the same fate as the first one. "Petiaye now," said Saga's wife. Without cigarette or rum, Saga was taken by a more gentle voice. "There will be children in this marriage, there will be children. I promise." Saga grabbed a red hen and drowned her in a water-filled pot, the water yellow with turmeric, the symbolic womb sucking in the life given by the chick.

Saga fully recovered his senses and disposed the heads in front of the corresponding sacrificed animal, being handed over four sardine sandwiches and four filled rum glasses destined to the four *gardyens*. "Now we must let the Gods eat in peace. Tonight we will eat." Before the sacrifice, when we had had tea, Saga had shared with me the tenets of his religious life. "In Mauritius, you get two kinds. The *swamis* and the *pousaris*. Those who don't eat meat, do big prayers in Sanskrit. And those who do walks on fire, prayer in Tamil. It's important to do prayer in Tamil, it's my language. Now there are no more *pousaris*. But we keep doing things like them, it's important, it's our custom." When I asked about the fact that there appeared to be no more *pousaris*, Saga replied:

"The thing is that *pousaris* were 'expensive', the *swamis* come from India, they are hired by temple societies, it's a job, they don't ask much when you ask them to do prayers! *Pousaris* had families to feed, no sponsors, so this is why people prefer going with *swamis* even if they don't like many things you do (...) I have a gift you see, something *swamis* don't have, I can call my

saints. Catholics have Saint George and Saint Michel, Indians have Hanumān, we have Mardévirin and Minisprins. They protect people from evil, evil is everywhere in this world. So I call them to protect my family. And I also give a hand to other people if they need me. I am a healer. But I don't ask money, because what I have, it is a gift from God."

I asked him what Mardévirin represented for him and what it meant for him to do something frowned upon by the religious establishments.

"Mardévirin is my God, he comes to me, I don't know how he looks and he speaks creole. He is dumb ! And look, I'll tell you something, if swamis tell you don't do these thing, it's because they dont know how to do it, and instead of saying I don't know they tell you it's not good."

Saga's testimony added more complexity to my vision of Tamil Mauritian religion, especially his comment on the *swamis'* inexpensive costs as a factor in the process of sanskritization. Perfectly aware of the forbidden nature of his worship in the eyes of orthodoxy, Saga was in no open resistance to "*swamis*," showing in fact a great reverence for the religious knowledge of the "good ones." His reason for preferring Tamil to Sanskrit was not motivated by Śaiva or Dravidianist concern. It was just out of respect for the "old language." Rather randomly, Saga repeated three times in the conversation "But this is my house", reminding that the ceremony performed in the yard was part of his duty as a family man. Saga indeed saw himself as a preserver of a lost religious tradition. "It's my mum who gave me my gift, she had it before. Parents are the first Gods. *Matapitagouroudeyivom* they used to say, now people forget that. Mum, Dad. Mourouga and Amène come after."¹¹⁶ With no ideological bias whatsoever, it seemed, Saga was continuing a home-based religious life which was current prior to independence, in which possession, sacrifice and syncretism were essential elements.

¹¹⁶ This is the Sanskrit-derived phrase often used in Tamil, *mātāpitāgururdaivam* ("Mother, father, guru then god.").

Interestingly, Saga's son Ejiven and nephew Sanjiven did see this ritual life as resistance, at least from the standpoint of their participation. Both are ritual drum players, the *tappu* drum being a symbol of a marginal old religion. "What my dad is doing is a must-do and I'll keep doing it when my turn comes. Mardévirin is important, he is our God, we must give him his sacrifice, because that's the way it is," said Ejilen. "Mardévirin used to protect us! They took him out of the temples, he is not the god of Brahmins. We are not Brahmins. We have traditions to protect." In their late twenties, the two cousins had familiarized themselves with Mardévirin through websites and could describe him in details. Saga had no idea how much of the "original" Maturaivīraṇ there was in his familiar Mardévirin, out there guarding his courtyard, still more in his embodied impersonation of the fearful deity. But through his very body, Mamé Saga had brought Mardévirin back to life. A discourse could be read out of this performance: I couldn't help seeing Saga's caricatural portrayal of himself as a heavy-smoking "tough man." In Christianized Mauritian cultural stereotyping (shared also by Hindus and Muslims), the "Madras" is a raunchy *bon vivant* known for being remarkably hard-drinking, that going hand in hand with his reputation for being a "sorcerous idolater." In opposition to moral elites from outside and within, many Tamil men jocularly cultivate this carnal "tough man" image. Saga and his brothers did so very much during the whole day, Mardévirin's call being an affirmation of this identity through the very epicenter of Saga's possessed body. "We eat fire, we drink fire, we walk on fire," suggests a Tamil Mauritian saying, illustrating the Tamil man's fierceness.

The first two statements leading me to question the part of food in this identity-process. From sacrifice to *sanbrani* dinner, flesh was the gathering element of the day.

When questioned about the continuation of animal sacrifices, a temple attendant had just laconically asked me: “We eat meat, why then our Gods cannot?” What someone eats is as much class-constructed as it is gendered. Analyzing cultural norms detailed in Rabelais’ novels, Bhaktin asserts the place of meat in masculine subaltern identity. As the cherished fruit of labor, it makes sense that a carnivorous lifestyle is part of a proud working class identity. Bhaktin equates meat and sex within a semiotic continuum of carnality (Bhaktin 1984). However this theory remains very literary-bound and borders a classist conception of the subaltern man as driven by “flesh.” But within the Hindu imagination as well as in the wider cultural mentality found in the Mauritian Tamil working class, meat is necessary to the gendered conceptions of “strength,” tied to sexual power in the male imagination.¹¹⁷ Vegetarianism has long been associated with female piety and the vegetarian diet is part of the stereotyping of the bourgeois as “idle” and “effete.” Throughout my fieldwork, the very word “Mardévirin” was the proustian trigger for detailed memories of cooking and eating, rather than vice versa. In all my interviews, my attempts to bring back Mardévirin’s story and cult always failed to stop fond recollections of long séances of cooking for and eating ritual curries. In this nostalgia of an assumed carnivorous lifestyle, “Mardévirin” remained a metonymic tag for an assertive working-class male identity marginalized by elite-imposed inhibitions since the “Tamil Renewal.” Sacrificing a rooster to Mardévirin and feasting on it was arguably part of a permanently active “memory” of a particular conception of “being

¹¹⁷ In South Indian mythical imagination, the spilling of blood (echoing semen in a semiotic continuum of fluids) is often understood as a fertilization process, finding therefore its way into the sexual imaginaire (Shulman 1980). Moreover, the bloody sacrifice of animals is also an old element of (male) martial religious culture, warrior gods being offered blood to insure safe battles (Bayly 1989). The consumption of red meat being associated with “fierce” Muslim warriors and lower caste army men in the early modern period, I would argue that such consumption was often seen as the symbolic making of a warrior. I would also argue that in a more modern South Indian imagination, the warrior element faded into a more male-gendered conception of fierceness, through carnivorous habits. For instance, A. R Venkatacalapati indicates that in the 1920s Tamilnad, urban consumption of meat in the street eateries was a public affirmation of an aggressively male subaltern identity vis-à-vis growing upper-caste impetus for vegetarianism (Venkatacalapati 2006).

Madras”, despite the fact that Mardévirin was reduced to a name, stripped of any other identity.

All the ideas expressed above were experienced in the *sambrani* ceremony, when we came back in the evening after the morning sacrifice. The curry was disposed on two banana leaves placed on the floor in front of a wall, along with two glasses of rum. “It’s Mardévirin and Pétiaye, they protect our family, the curry and the rum is a treat for them, tonight they are here like husband and wife, our own parents, and we ask them to bless the marriage.” Starting with Saga and his wife, all those present waved incense in front of the leaves before prostrating. The meal started with the men assembling in the living room and the women in the kitchen. “Eat boy, it will make you strong, Mardé tasted it for you,” told one of Saga’s brothers to his nephew. As the blessing ritual prior to Saga’s son married life, the *sanbrani* was a life-affirming feast, with talks on fatherhood and jokes on sexual prowess, all of this while eating the curry with continuous rum refills. “*Sanbrani* was done better before. The men ate the meal of Mardévirin and the women the meal of Petiaye.”¹¹⁸ Now they mix everything in the curry,” a great-uncle of the family told me, before adding an inuendo, “and you had to leave the best parts for the groom.” In Bhaktinian terms, this “carnalavesque” manly dinner had indeed something of a “victory of the procreating body.”

A friend of mine told me that at the Āgamic Mourouga Kovil of Quatre-Bornes, following the last rituals concluding Thaipooosam *cavadee*, one of the temple officials said: “All right, now let’s go home and give his sardine to Idoumbene.” After the highly

¹¹⁸ The man later explained that the “meal for Mardévirin” meant the roosters while the “meal for Pétiaye” meant the chickens. Unfortunately, I could not spend time with the women during their meal, nor later on, as my request to do so was met with disapproval by the men during the meal, as I was a man. When I met with her many weeks after the *sambrani*, Saga’s wife politely declined my request of interviewing her. Out of ethnographic respect for the family’s rules, I can only provide the male perspective of the rituals described, which unfortunately constitutes a shortcoming for this passage on the gender element of the cultic life described.

strict fast for Mourouga , the gentleman urged to celebrate with a quietly sacrificial moment. It looked like the necessary landing after the spiritual elevation of penance, the worshipper identifying again with the human-like *gardyen* through their shared taste for Mauritian sardine sandwich. In the resistance space of the house, Mamé Saga epitomized this identification with the *gardyen* through so many correspondances. On his wall was enshrined a garlanded Tamil *Om* figure, flanked on the two sides as guardians by Saga's father and mother, the latter having given him his "grace." In such company, this *Om* stood for Saga's dutiful maintainance of the religious old ways. It was the same *Om* that Saga had inscribed on his arm as a tattoo, infusing by it the body that had become Mardévirin so vividly for two minutes. By the officially taboo media of possession and sacrifice, Saga embodied a Mardévirin disembodied of imagery and narrative, making him nonetheless a key presence at a ritual moment encapsulating many *raisons d'être*. In twenty-first century Mauritius, it was only at Mamé Saga's that I was able to truly witness the fragile yet tenacious preservation of the "broken", erased and forgotten *gardyen* religion. However, I would see it resurface one more time, in a reconstructed way, most unexpectedly.

The Fresh Minisprins of Mont-Roches: Gardyen Resurgence through Muniswarène

In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, James C. Scott uses a wide array of historical examples to show how mountainous regions served as refuges and foyers for rebels to political authority, the difficulty of controlling such regions turning rebel communities into realms in their own right, where a religious counter-culture reigned (Scott 1992). From the Caribbean to the Indian Ocean, mountains became maroon kingdoms where flourished the hybrid religions of slaves. It is probably no coincidence that the once-unreachable Réunionese hills of Saint-Gilles-les-Hauts host the *Sapel la*

Mizer, today known from Mauritius to Martinique as the stronghold of resistance against “swamization” under the *pousari maron* Danyel Singaïny.¹¹⁹ But in the twenty-first century, ideological misfits of the all global world have the most uncontrollable valley in which to gather: the Internet. When I met Ejilen and Sanjiven at Saga’s house, they shared with me memories of a rich cultural knowledge considered lost between their grandparents’ and parents’ generations, a knowledge they extensively recovered through the limitless resources of the web. While Mamé Saga could not even portray Mardévirin, his son and nephew could describe him in much visual details, matching various of his Tamil depictions found on the Internet, as well as the main lines of the *katai* narrative. The two young men are very much involved in an assertive counter-culture movement as *tappu* drum players. They have researched *gardyen* worship while looking for tunes and songs on YouTube. For *gardyen* information, their main source was Sanskriti, a Réunionese blog and now Facebook page actively dedicated to the preservation of “popular Malbar religion,” an overt challenge to the erasure of local traditions by reformists from Mauritius and India. Sanskriti’s founder, Patrice Comarassamy, gives credits to Malaysian and Singaporean religious websites for the knowledge on *kulataivams* which he gathered in India and across its diaspora¹²⁰. Until now, such websites connect diasporic worshippers, telling them what they want to know about *gardyens* without daring to ask it to *ayyas*. Another feature of the global interconnection, trips to Singapore and Malaysia - for tourism or professional purposes - may have allowed the young Mauritian Tamils some reconciliation with *gardyen* worship and the culture of South Indian village deities. The latter are quite prominent, to say the least, in the Malay peninsula, quite noticeable along its religious tourism

¹¹⁹ Singaïny jokingly refers to himself as *pousari maron* (maroon *pousari*) and *filozof maron* (maroon philosopher) provocatively suggesting that the *ayyas* are the new colonials.

¹²⁰ <http://grāmadevatās.indereunion.net/actu/gramadevata/interComorassamy.htm>

circuits. “Singapore is the best place for Tamils. Good jobs, good temples. You can be yourself there. You can be a millionaire driving a smashing car and yet you have no problem praying to your Mardévirin and Minisprins! Why can’t it be the same in Mauritius?” a cousin of Ejilen and Sanjiven told me at the *sanbrani*.

Among all these observations, I felt like being a witness to some sort of Mauritian Tamil micro reenactment of the “Arab Spring”, with social media carrying the ideas of an activist youth challenging institutional surveillance. In Réunion, Mardévirin and Catarayene (Kāttavarāyan) became the poster faces of young religious non-conformism. In Mauritius, another *gardyen* was rising as the standard of neo-conformism, again to the detriment of Mardévirin.

During the *sanbrani*, I asked if there was a shrine dedicated solely to Mardévirin in Mauritius. “No, but if you are into *gardyen* stuff, there is Bondie Zak.” Meaning the Jackfruit (tree) God, Bondie Zak was known to be a shrine dedicated to Minisprins, the other main male *gardyen* and officially Mardévirin’s superior in hierarchy. According to the legend, Minisprins had been seen under a jackfruit tree in the middle of Mont-Roches tablisman. The tree had then been worshipped as Minisprins and was occasionally possessed by him. People agreed that the shrine existed already by the 1850s.¹²¹

The day after the *sanbrani*, I went to Bondie Zak. Protected by a yellow stone *enceinte*, the shrine was the size of a courtyard, a modest 6m x 3m one, with the tree standing in the middle, shadowing a small tabernacle where Minisprins was enthroned as a rock wrapped in white cloth just like the Dhi Baba of Northern Indian Hinduism. Three other grottos hosted Amène as a rock, Navran as a mass and Mardévirin as a lime

¹²¹ I owe these historical details to Samoorgum Mourougan, “Mamé Namy”, Mauritian son-in-law of Daniel Singaïny and one of my hosts at the Sapel la Mizer in Réunion.

stone warrior. On the wall was a poster announcing the upcoming “Abisegam of Muniswareen”, which luckily happened to fall the following day. I came back, around 6:00pm. The whole place was crowded, people sitting on many bench rows. The priest eventually arrived. He was a poised man, elegantly wearing his shawl draped across his upper body. He started without delay, performing the *egyom* (Skt. *yajñam*) in the fire pit dressed in front of the tabernacle under the tree. The Vedic hymns over, he consecrated the shrine with coconut water and incense. After a whole hour of oblations, I was convinced I had witnessed the complete Sanskritization of one of the last seats of plantation religion, naïvely wrong as usual. The last *mantra* now uttered, the *ayya* stood up, immediately followed by a group of young *tappu* players frantically beating their drums. The priest took up a yogic posture, breathing heavily in rythm with the percussions. The young musicians started singing repeatedly: “Muñicuvaram Cuvāmi!” accompanying each of the officiant’s louder and louder breaths, until he started shaking in complete trance. People folded their hands and lowered their heads, the god had arrived. The *ayya* circumbulated the tree with frenetic hops, his raised hands shaking in the air and his head moving as if under an electric shock. The drums adopted the beat of a cavalcade to the sound of the chants, while an older man, his arms stretched above his head, was swinging a framed A3 sized print of the god riding his horse.¹²² After many turns, the *ayya* recovered himself. Encircling the rock with incense one more time, he unrobed it forcefully and in a minute tied a scarlet silk with gold liserés around the aniconic god. In my reading, Minisprins had been stripped away of the white *kolom* garb of Dhi Baba. Minisprins had received the robe made for a princely sage. The drummers having stopped, *ayya* Ajegen got hold of a microphone and greeted the

¹²² The depiction of the deity happened to be the imge used by Vineeta Sinha for the cover of *A New God in the Diaspora? Muniswareen Worship in Contemporary Singapore*.

assistance in Tamil, before switching to the flowery *Créole fransize* associated with city people. He congratulated the initiative of the shrine's management team of giving a proper *abisegam* to Bondie Zak, in respect to "Lord Muniswaren." He reminded worshippers of the God's status as servant of Śiva Perumāṇ, a valorous warrior and all the same a wise sage, praising the deity for having watched over devotees.

"But, dear *bhaktens*, it is important to call him Muniswaren. Muniswaren. And do not call him Minisprins, which is a vulgar way to call your god... Long time ago people gave him flesh because people lived on hunting and herding. This is not the case anymore, give what you have, god needs no more. Lemons, camphor, what you have in your heart is enough. Now people of Mont-Roches can worship lord Muniswaren. May God bless you all. *Nanri vaṇakkam*."

Keeping in mind my association between Mardévirin and the colonial order, I noticed that, when compared to the rest of the quartet, Mardévirin truly appeared as the underdog across what existed of the *gardyen* cult in Mauritius. However, I did not expect the white Minisprins to have become such a rising star. I was impressed by Ajegen's eloquent aura that reflected the intellectual reflection that led him to separate *gardyens* from sacrifice. In his early forties, the *ayya* is by day a pharmacist in a State hospital, living in the cosy Belle-Rose neighbourhood, with his wife, two children and parents. Formerly the officiating priest at the Mont-Roches Kovil, *ayya* Ajegen now divides his time between the temple in Saint-Pierre and his private *kōvil* in his courtyard where he regularly performs rituals with the help of his wife. This is where he received me on a Saturday afternoon, sharing his story.

Born in an urban middle-class family which he described as "Viṣṇu devotees mainly involved in the Govinden festival", the teenager Ajegen would often attend the Amène ceremonies in his grandparents' village, growing fascinated by the possession séances of the old *pousari*. Becoming the apprentice of the holy man, the youngster helped his mentor to take care of a small Minisprins shrine where he received "the

grace” of the God. Sincerely answering the call of a more official religious vocation, the pharmacy graduate studied for priesthood between Mauritius and India. After being ordained, Ajegen realized that he did not possess about Minisprins any of the detailed knowledge he had on Mariamma or Mourouga , much like Saga’s unawareness of Maturaivīraṇ. Through the Internet and his travels, Ajegen gathered many sources on Muniswaran worship¹²³, building a sophisticated and elaborate cult shared with congenial worshippers and fellow *ayyas*. That would lead him to be approached by the Bondie Zak congregation to endow their shrine with a structured Muniswaran worship based as much on scriptural knowledge as on the priest’s grace.

Ajegen described his god as the "servant of Śiva Perumāṇ", the master of all sages, model of dharmic righteousness and formidable fighter against all forms of evil. The new deity shared nothing with the white shapeshifter Minisprins that roamed Mauritian tablismans, not even the carnivorous hookah-smoking *muni*s of pre-colonial Aiyaṇār shrines, but the Brahmanical warrior “Muneeswaran” crafted by modern Singaporean Hinduism in an original cult mixing *grāmadevata* rituals with neo-Vedāntic spirituality (Sinha 2005). Very immersed in transnational *guru* culture, Ajegen is a sportive man as well as a proponent of yoga and vegetarianism as physically beneficial. Along with his scriptural command, I could see how the *ayya* had chosen the new “Muneeswaran” as the god who calqued himself on his devotee by possession. A product of neo-Vedāntic gendered religious conceptions, the herculean *muni* constructed by Singaporean temples matched Ajegen’s quiet performance of “Muscular Hinduism.”¹²⁴ According to what I could gather from social media,

¹²³ Including VIneeta Sinha’s monograph used for this thesis !

¹²⁴ Crafted by Peter Van der Veer on the model of nineteenth-century “Muscular Christianity” and developed by Sikata Banerjee (2012), “Muscular Hinduism” refers to the male performance of spiritualized physical strength at the service of an assertive Hindu identity following the gender angst

Muniswaren was becoming the new face of 2010s Mauritian Tamil religion because of this appeal to the modern male Hindu ideal, equating physical and spiritual strength. Muniswaren appeared to symbolically “compact” much of Tamil Mauritian society in the framework of a revamped religion.

Ajegen categorically defended *gardyen* worship. “God is good if you keep him good, it’s evil doers who do evil things with him.” Recognizing the essential ambiguity of *kaveldeivoms* (*kāvaltaivams*), Ajegen shared his desire to clear out their cult of witchcraft and “superstitions,” stating his wish to come back to the “values” of old. I learned by temple-goers that he encouraged the *tappu* drum revival and was close to young culturally-minded activists such as Sanjiven. I personally witnessed his online interactions with young Réunionese *pousaris*. In the process, the whole community, feeling deeply connected, recreated itself through a reimagination of the forgotten religious world of their great-grandparents, giving to the new Muniswaren the place occupied by the Mardévirin of old.

“Young people are really rediscovering Muniswaren!” When it came to “Madurai Viren,” Ajegen only acknowledged his importance in the past, mentioning his tablistan worker grandfather’s devotion to the deity. But Ajegen recognized Madurai Viren’s place next to Muniswaren as part of “tradition” to preserve. Ajegen insisted upon this idea which often appears on social media. From *tappu* to *kulataivams*, these religious choices are always justified and advertised as preservation of “ancestral traditions” and “what our ancestors did in Tamilnadu.” Through Ajegen, I learned that the St-Felix Kovil was about to become the first *kōvil* per se to be dedicated to Muniswaren, the black stone statue being ordered from India. It has also been decided

provoked by colonization. This assertive religious hypermasculinity is today put to the service of radicalized forms of Hindu nationalism.

that the temple would be in the rustic style of village boundary shrines. It seems that after the “Renaissance Tamoule” and its civilizational obsession, there is now a folkloric revivalism from a “gentrifying” working-class, in order to assert a distinct Tamil identity through a nostalgia for “village religion.” Although positing itself as radical vis-à-vis a long-established religious bourgeoisie, this movement does not appear outright revolutionary. First, the wish of being recognizable – in the larger Mauritian Hindu world – through Tamil religious folklore still proceeds from a communal anxiety. Second, this “come back” to village religion asserts a popular religion drawing on the normativity of a “bucolic golden age”, prior to indenture. It still posits India as the sole source of orthodoxy. By seeking in India what was believed to be pre-indenture “ancestral” religiosity, the démarche negates the legitimacy of Tamil religion during colonization in a way quite similar to the work of the 1960s reformers. Both seek an exogenous legitimization of their religious practices. With Mardévirin as its main illustration, the great loser was the very memory of colonial religious life, confirming the discomfort provoked by hybridity in all colonized societies.

Lieu de Mémoire et Lieu d’Oubli

One of the most polyvalent concepts in the theorization of cultural memory is Pierre Nora’s *lieu de mémoire*, the “site of memory,” which can be any subject or object which even the smallest form of collective memory tenaciously ties itself to (Nora 1984). I had expected to find resilient sites of Mardévirin’s memory; I even thought that the god himself could have been the very “lieu de mémoire” for a certain religious sensitivity. What my fieldwork revealed is that what is or can be a *lieu de mémoire* is often, at the same time, a *lieu d’oubli*, a site of forgetting. With the very figure of Mardévirin as an example, a *lieu d’oubli* is the site which collective

consciousness in times of crisis decides to dislocate, erase, replace or even destroy. An active site of memory in Mauritius, Mardévrin was often an unclear and ill-defined entity, a simple detail triggering the recollection of a past cultural life and identity. As an institution abiding by a dominant discourse, the temple was the site of a very selective (and degraded) memory of Mardévirin, a *lieu d'oubli* of Mardévirin's former ritual and material prominence. People are religious *lieux* for what they can or want to remember. Through his possession, Mamé Saga shifted from *lieu d'oubli* to the use of his body as an "embodied site of memory" (Soneji 2012), albeit a very residual and fragmented one. For Ajegen and even Sama, it was the very iconic function of a guardian deity that was the site of both erasing and recollecting. They invested their preferences, giving new faces to the protection function and holy valor's figure. Through this cultural biography of Mardévirin, I hope to have provided an academic *lieu de mémoire* of the trajectory of Tamil diasporic religion in Mauritius.

Conclusion: The Never Ending *Katai*

Maturaivīraṇṇ arguably found in diaspora a rich religious life that he does not have any more at the periphery of Tamil villages' boundary shrines. Prior to his cult's disaffection in India further to the evolutions of modern Indian society, indenture preserved and renewed his importance among uprooted devotees. In the plantation temples of French Antilles as well as in the home shrines of Parisian Indian antillais, Maldévilin still rules as the most important god responsible for protecting the world. In Guyana and its North American diasporic temples, Madurai "Master" Veeran weekly possesses devotees and "tells them off" in Caribbean patois. In Réunion, the god's multiple *padoms* decorate the outer and inner walls of almost every temple, most worshippers eager to retell the love between Mardévirin and Boumi (Bommi). In Singapore, "Madurai Veeran medals" are sold in *pūjā* shops. And now, the oft-renamed god is one of the many topics connecting all the Tamil diaspora through blogs and Facebook threads. In Mauritius, the Lord of Maturai is most of the time a small statue overlooked by devotees during the circumambulation to be performed before entering the sanctum of a goddess' *kōvil*. Rather absent from the *pūjā*-rooms of middle-class Tamil families in New York or Sacramento, Maturaivīraṇṇ seems to be one of "these gods that don't get a visa," to quote Vasudha Narayanan.¹²⁵ Maturaivīraṇṇ's presence or absence is quite a reliable marker of a community' itinerary, from sugar cane fields to artificial intelligence and financial algorithms. In Guyana and Martinique, Mardévirin has arguably been made one of the most important gods by the poetics and politics of colonial religion. As was also the case in South Africa, in Mauritius too, the deity would suffer from the island's proximity to Indian post-reform religion. Perhaps in the

¹²⁵ Vasudha Narayanan, personal communication, February 15, 2013.

same way he reflected the politics of eighteenth-century South India, Maturaivīraṇ also reflects the evolutions and paradoxes of re-rooted Tamil Hinduism. Because of his centrality in the rural space from where emigrants arrived into insular milieus, he is certainly a more eloquent raconteur of religious history than the now ubiquitous *devas* encountered between Vancouver and Saint-Denis of Réunion. Ever-metamorphing figure on the symbolic continuum of fierce protection, the diasporic Maturaivīraṇ is a perfect example of the transformation of a divine figure across cultural contexts. Replacing the early modern *poligars* or replaced by the glocal Muniswaran, Maturaivīraṇ/Mardévirin illustrates the need for an intercessional “middle pantheon,” showing the same resilience as the Catholic saints, despite Vatican II’s revised hagiography. Even left as a mere trace in the Mauritian mind, the servant of the goddess has in many ways - at least so far - proved to be immortal.

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