

From Chaste Wife to Village Goddess

*A study of Reṇukā-Māriyamman and her
myths in and around Kanchipuram*

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Picture on front page: Head of Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvāri, Cantaveḷiyamman temple, Kanchipuram

Abstract

The thesis presents, compares and interprets different versions of the myth of Reṇukā's decapitation, a matricide performed by her son Paraśurāma after provoking her husband's anger by transgressing a sexual norm. Two of the myths presented are classical Sanskrit versions from the epic-*Purāṇic* tradition, the others from the Kanchipuram area in northern Tamil Nadu, namely two oral Tamil versions and one Sanskrit version from the *Kāñcīmāhātmyam*. In contrast to the epic-*Purāṇic* texts, Reṇukā becomes an ambivalent village goddess in the local myths when revived after her decapitation. According to the local myths, Reṇukā is revived as the better-known South Indian goddess Māriyamman and associated with pox and disease, but other goddesses are also connected to the story. Because of the decapitation, the goddesses connected with this myth are worshipped in temples in the form of a disembodied head.

While the thesis highlights differences and commonalities between the epic-*Purāṇic* and local versions of the Reṇukā tale, the analysis is centered on what I distinguish as the most important motifs in the myth, namely the chastity of Reṇukā, her beheading and subsequent revival as a pox goddess. These motifs are exactly what provide the local versions with a distinct Tamil character. For instance, the chastity motif reflects the strict sexual norms imposed on women in Tamil Nadu, however, as I argue, without speaking in favor of them. In the oral myths Reṇukā is revived as half Brahmin-half outcaste, half pure and half impure, since her body was exchanged with that of another decapitated woman of lower caste. In this form she becomes an ambivalent and powerful village goddess.

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ॐ शक्ति

Oslo, May 27th 2012

Notes on Language and Transliteration

Throughout the thesis I have favored Sanskrit religious and ritual terms above Tamil, first of all because of my background as a Sanskrit student but also due to the fact that the indological scholarly literature I wish to be part of largely uses a Sanskrit vocabulary. I also believe this choice makes the thesis more accessible to a wider audience. Tamil terms are however given when I deal with some of my field material, and both languages are given when I consider the terms of particular importance. Much of the Tamil religious vocabulary relies on Sanskrit and is easily recognizable to the trained eye, e.g. the Tamil term for *abhiṣeka* is *apiṭēkam*, *prasāda* is *piracātam*, and so on. The Tamil is transcribed in accordance with the Tamil Lexicon, published by the University of Madras, and Sanskrit according to the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST). As dictionary for Sanskrit translations I have used the Monier Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English dictionary (MW). Sanskrit and Tamil terms are italicized and explained the first time they appear. At the end of the thesis there is a word list for the most recurrent and important Sanskrit and Tamil terms. Here, I also provide Tamil forms of most of the Sanskrit terms.

Proper names of gods and goddesses are given with diacritics. When it comes to the deities that are widely known, such as Śiva, Viṣṇu and Durgā, I use their Sanskrit names rather than the Tamil Civaṅ, Perumāḷ and Turkkai, but the less well-known deities are given with Tamil transcription. I favor the Sanskrit Reṇukā over the Tamil Irēṇukai, and use the names Reṇukā, Reṇukā-Māriyamman, Reṇukā devī and Reṇukā ampāl interchangeably. Proper names of people and places are given without diacritics.

I have tried to translate the Sanskrit texts presented in the thesis as literally as possible to convey an impression of how these texts are written. However, there are also exceptions: I sometimes do not translate relative clauses literally, and I change passive forms into active, gerunds to preterits and from time to time give the names of the deities instead of their epithets (e.g. translating “Śaṅkara” as “Śiva”) in order not to unnecessarily confuse the reader. The Tamil myths are transcribed from my voice recorder with the help of my interpreters and based on my interpreters’ English translations.

Table of contents

1	Introduction	1
1.1	Topic and research question	1
1.2	Motivations	2
1.3	Reṇukā-Māriyamman and the decapitation myth in scholarly sources	3
1.4	Outline of the thesis	5
2	Methodology, field and ethics	7
2.1	What is a myth and why is it important?	7
2.1.1	Interpreting myth	8
2.1.2	Note on translation	10
2.2	The field	11
2.2.1	The temples	11
2.3	The fieldwork	13
2.3.1	The interviews	13
2.3.2	The informants	14
2.3.3	The interpreters	15
2.4	Ethical reflections	18
3	The Goddess	19
3.1	Village goddesses	19
3.1.1	Reṇukā and Māriyamman	22
3.1.2	Connections with other goddesses	24
3.2	Who is Reṇukā-Māriyamman?	25
3.3	Ritual	28
4	The Sanskrit Myths	31
4.1	Epic and Purāṇic accounts	31
4.2	Reṇukā in the <i>Kāñcīmāhātmyam</i>	35
5	Oral Myths	45
5.1	The Paṭavēṭṭamman Temple	45
5.2	The Dhobis' Version	52
6	Reṇukā's revival as a pox goddess	59
6.1.1	Reṇukā-Māriyamman's boon of <i>muttu</i>	61
6.1.2	Practices when having chickenpox	64

7	From chaste wife to village goddess	67
7.1	Chastity.....	67
7.1.1	Reṇukā as <i>pativrata</i> and her sexual transgression	70
7.2	Beheading and head exchange	75
7.2.1	Beheading.....	76
7.2.2	Psychoanalytical interpretations.....	78
7.2.3	Reṇukā and sacrifice	80
7.2.4	Head exchange and revival	82
7.2.5	The ambivalent village goddess	84
8	Concluding remarks	87
	Glossary.....	93
	Bibliography.....	97
	Appendix A: Pictures and maps	105
	Appendix B: Sanskrit texts.....	113

1 Introduction

It is one of those cool, monsoon-wet afternoons in Kanchipuram. It has stopped raining, the sun peeks out from its hiding place in the sky and I decide to go for a short walk in the pleasant weather. As I walk down just another random road filled with cars and people, I am suddenly standing in front of a small roadside shrine. As a constant in contrast to the busy street next to it, the shrine is built around a majestic tree trunk with threads tied tightly around it¹, smeared with kumkum (vermillion) and turmeric powder at its grand roots. Around the tree, there are several erected nāga² stones dotted with kumkum. A bewildered baby bird jumps around between them. Flowers, broken eggshells and used earthen oil-lamps lie scattered about. In front of the tree, there is a small concrete enclosure that houses two pitch-black stone heads. This is Muttumāriyamman and Tumpavaṇatu amman, both of them forms of Reṇukā, “very powerful goddesses”, I was told. They are both dressed in green saris with a red border, and adorned with jasmines and yellow flowers as well as kumkum and turmeric dots. Men and women passing by frequently enter the shrine, stop for a while and lift their hands with joined palms in front of the goddesses, before they circumambulate the tree and leave. One of these women is Adya, who lights an oil lamp before one of the nāgas.” The goddess fulfills your wishes only after testing you”, she explains to me. “You can believe that you have prayed intensively for five days, but nothing happens. It is up to the goddess to decide.” Apparently Adya’s prayers were heard, her granddaughter is soon to get married.

1.1 Topic and research question

“Reṇukā devī was angry and split the earth. She dug her body into the earth so that only her head was visible. As such she became a statue.” (Arumugasamy Gurukkāl, Reṇukā ampāl temple³)

In Northern Tamil Nadu where I conducted my fieldwork, Reṇukā ampāl⁴ is worshipped as a village goddess (*grāmadevatā*) famed for solving a wide range of mundane problems, be it

¹ These threads (*sūtra*, Ta. *cūttiram*) worn around a tree are were dyed in turmeric, providing them with auspiciousness, and represent the prayers and innermost feelings of the people who tie them. For more on the significance of the bound thread in India see Dehejia (2006, 11-2).

² Snake stones (Ta. *nākakkal*) are objects of reverence found in many temples in South India. People claimed that a snake lived underneath this tree, which was also seen as a divinity. The shrine itself was called Nāgāttammaṇ (“Snake goddess”). See picture 7 in appendix A.

³ The temple’s full name is *aruḷmiku aṇṇai rēṇukāmpāl ālayam*, and most temples mentioned in the following carry similar long names. For the sake of simplicity I use their short forms throughout the thesis.

⁴ Also called Reṇukā devī (Ta. Irēṇukai tēvi), Reṇukā amman, Reṇukā paramēsvari.

the want of children, a good exam result or marriage, and she is especially known for curing diseases, nowadays chickenpox in particular. She is considered very powerful by all walks of life, and is worshipped widely both in temples of varying size and in smaller shrines such as roadside shrines and anthills (*purru*).

The most famous myth of Reṇukā is about her decapitation done by her son Paraśurāma and ordered by her husband, which leads to Reṇukā's present state as a goddess. Commonly in Tamil Nadu, Reṇukā is identified with the better-known goddess Māriyamman through this myth, but other goddesses are also connected to the story. The myth of Reṇukā's decapitation is also found in the Sanskrit tradition, the earliest versions from the *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, although here she does not become a goddess when revived. And in further contrast to the Sanskrit myths, according to the oral stories lively flourishing at her places of worship, Reṇukā's head is exchanged with that of a low caste woman when she is revived. These vernacular stories also serve to explain why she (and other goddesses who take on the story – perhaps for this purpose) is represented in her temples bearing the form of a bodiless head⁵, and is worshipped as such.

In total, I heard eleven different versions of what I call the Reṇukā story while in the field, all of them slightly different although revolving around the same plot – the matricide. The thesis is built upon a textual study of two of these oral Tamil myths I collected in the Kanchipuram area, one Sanskrit temple version from Kanchipuram, and two Sanskrit myths from the epic-*Purāṇic* tradition. In the thesis I look at Reṇukā-Māriyamman's expression reflected through her myths, cult and rituals, but the myths will have the primary attention. I emphasize the textual level of the myths, and not their ritual level. Through my primary research question – *How does the Sanskrit myth of Reṇukā manifest locally?* – I will investigate how her myths differ and how they express the goddess. How does the local myths relate to the Epic-*Purāṇic* myths? What are the commonalities and changes in the various myths? Which elements localize the myths? Does the myth reflect social reality, or, rather an ideal social world? And what norms are reflected in the myth?

1.2 Motivations

My motivations for this thesis originally sprung out of a wish to combine two methodologies: textual study and fieldwork. First of all because my own interests span from philological

⁵ Or more commonly a bodiless head in front with a full statue erected behind it. These representations vary, but most importantly there is always a head present. See pictures 7, 8 and 9.

puzzles with Sanskrit texts to contemporary lived religion, especially in India. With a background in religious studies I've mainly focused on Sanskrit the past few years, and I knew I wanted to translate a Sanskrit text dealing with a religious phenomenon. At the same time I yearned to go *out there*, as I am equally interested in contemporary religious expressions. I had had two previous semester-long stays in Tamil Nadu⁶ and my love for the South Indian state called me "home" again.

Secondly, because the investigation of text and context enriches each other. Fieldwork and textual studies is an important and worthy combination in the study of Indology. Historically the written word has been preferred over oral texts in this field, and little concern was given to the texts' contexts. But in recent years, due to a cultural turn in the humanities, this has all changed, and the study of texts is now also a study of social structures that generated the texts, of the application of texts (e.g. in ritual), of performance and reception, and of the text's historical conditions (Michaels 2005, 8). Michaels (ibid.,11) argues that a text is studied most properly when fieldwork is accepted as a "legitimate, adequate and proper (and not just supplementary) method for an appropriate analysis of the contents, functions and productions of texts".

I narrowed the place of research down to Kanchipuram after getting the *Kāñcīmāhātmyam* from my supervisor Ute Hüsken who has done research there for several years, went through the headlines and chose to work on the chapter on Reṇukā. This was because her story, that I remembered being told while in India the last time, spoke to me – I was fascinated by and curious of the powers of the mythological chaste women that enabled them not only to work miracles but to subdue the great gods.

1.3 Reṇukā-Māriyamman and the decapitation myth in scholarly sources

Scholarly studies of Reṇukā-Māriyamman are found in articles, sections of books and PhD dissertations, some of which discuss the beheading myth in less or greater detail. However, scholarly studies of the minor goddesses of folk Hinduism are fairly rare compared to the goddesses of the Sanskrit tradition, and there are so far no entire books dedicated to Māriyamman, who is very popular and widely worshipped in South India. According to Younger (1980, 494), "Māriyamman is the best known of the goddesses who are an important

⁶ Studying one semester (history of religion) with *Kulturstudier* in Pondicherry (2005), and later one semester (Sanskrit) at the Kuppaswami Sastri Research Institute in Chennai, for my BA (2009).

but poorly understood part of the religious life of Tamil Nadu”. So, even though much has been written already, there is still need for more research. This thesis’ place in the scholarly literature will be discussed after a short presentation of some relevant studies concerning Reṇukā-Māriyamman and/or the beheading myth⁷.

Some studies have focused on Māriyamman’s ritual tradition and festivals. In “*A Temple Festival of Māriyamman*” (1980) Paul Younger treats patterns of worship in the Māriyamman temple festival of Samayapuram⁸, and in “*the Goddess and the Demon*” (1981) Beck analyses the annual Māriyamman festival in Kannapuram in which the goddess marries a demon by investigating myth and ritual.

Harman (2011) treats Māriyamman’s role as the smallpox goddess in “*Possession as Protection and Affliction: The Goddess Mariyamman’s Fierce Grace*”. As the title implies, he focuses on rituals of possession and healing.

The PhD thesis of Craddock, “*Anthills, split Mothers, and Sacrifice. Conceptions of Female Power in the Māriyamman Tradition*” (1994) gives important insight in the cult of Māriyamman (mainly Bavāṇiyamman of Periyapalaiyam, Chennai), and her thesis includes much material on myth and ritual related to the goddess. Her book section “*Reconstructing the Split Goddess as Śakti in a Tamil Village*” (2001) is a condensed version of sections of her PhD thesis.

Meyer’s thorough study of Aṅkālaparamēcuvāri (or Aṅkāla amman) (1986) has been a never-ending source of inspiration while working on this project. Meyer gives a detailed survey of the goddess’ core myths and rituals as well as temples, iconography, devotees and castes associated with her. For me this book served as an eye-opener into the cult of a Tamil goddess who shares many similarities with Reṇukā-Māriyamman – including the beheading myth.⁹

Other studies focus more exclusively on the Reṇukā myth. Van Voorthuizen’s “*Māriyamman’s Śakti: the Miraculous Power of a Smallpox Goddess*” (2001) compares oral and written versions of the Reṇukā tale. This article has been a great inspiration while writing this thesis, since van Voorthuizen really does the same thing as I do (but with a stronger focus on gender). By interpreting the oral and Sanskrit myths and the life story of a Māriyamman

⁷ More than these could be mentioned (e.g. Biarreau (1968), Brubaker (1979), Egnor (1984) Dange (1996)), but these are the studies I have made use of in my thesis.

⁸ The same festival is treated in Younger (2001a).

⁹ Reṇukā-Māriyamman also shares the myth of Aṅkālaparamēcuvāri of Mel Malaiyanur (her main temple, Tiruvannamalai district). According to my priestly informant at the Paṭavēṭṭamman temple Reṇukā and Aṅkāla amman are incarnations of each other.

medium, she discusses women's ideals in both the texts and Tamil society and her analysis shows how the Reṇukā myth reflects a social, religious and gender specific context (2001, 249).

Brubaker's (1977) four page article "*Lustful Woman, Chaste Wife, Ambivalent Goddess: a South Indian Myth*" investigates what the Reṇukā tale says about the Indian idealized and stereotyped woman, and explains about the goddess' role as embodying ambiguity.

Wendy Doniger (O'Flaherty) has written much on the symbolism of beheading in the Reṇukā myth. A chapter in her book *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India* (1999) explores the beheading of Reṇukā from the perspective of gender, sexuality and identity, as does the book section "*Put a Bag over Her Head*" from "*Off With Her Head! The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion and Culture*" (1995).

Finally, Shulman's chapter "*Brahmin Gatekeepers*" from "*The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry*" (1985) has proven to be insightful since he writes about a version of the same Reṇukā myth (from the Tamil *Kāñcippurāṇam*) that I translate from the Sanskrit *Kāñcīmāhātmyam*, although Shulman's main focus is on the Paraśurāma narrative.

Apart from these studies, I have also used Stark-Wild's PhD thesis (1997) on Reṇukā's myth and cult in Maharashtra, but unfortunately not as much as I wanted, since it is written in German and my German reading skills unfortunately are limited.

Following in the footsteps of van Voorthuizen, the aim of this thesis is to present, compare and interpret different types of Reṇukā myths: two classical Sanskrit versions from the epic-*Purāṇic* tradition, the others local versions from the Kanchipuram area in northern Tamil Nadu, namely two oral Tamil myths and one Sanskrit myth from the *Kāñcīmāhātmyam*. In the analysis I investigate the myths in light of perspectives from several of the scholars mentioned above. By going through differences and constants in the various myths, the elements that make the Tamil myths a locally rooted myth as opposed to the pan-Indian Sanskrit versions are particularly emphasized.

1.4 Outline

Chapter 2 introduces the methodologies used in the thesis, presents the field and reflections regarding my fieldwork in Kanchipuram as well as some ethical considerations.

Chapter 3 deals with the goddess Reṇukā-Māriyamman. After a brief introduction about village goddesses, I explore the connection between Reṇukā, Māriyamman and some other goddesses and address characteristics of the goddess and aspects of her worship such as ritual and offerings.

Chapter 4 introduces the Sanskrit myths from the epic-*Purāṇic* tradition and the *Kāñcīmāhātmyam* and goes through their content.

Chapter 5 introduces two oral myths I was told in the field and goes through their content.

Chapter 6 explores the connection between the goddess and pox by looking at mythology, perceptions and practices when affected with chickenpox.

Chapter 7 deals with the motives of chastity, beheading and revival, and explores them from different perspectives.

Chapter 8 sums up and addresses the research questions posed in the introduction.

2 Methodology, field and ethics

The material used in this thesis is gained from using two sets of methodologies that in the end combine text and context. First, a textual¹⁰ study of the Reṇukā stories in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, *Mahābhārata* and *Kāñcīmāhātmyam* and the oral myths I later collected in the field, and I used the anthropological methods of observation and interview to get access to these stories and other material in the cult of Reṇukā/Mariyamman in Kanchipuram. I will first discuss myths, their interpretation and how I went on about it, and then my fieldwork.

2.1 What is a myth and why is it important?

“To understand the goddess, one has to be able to see her with the eyes of the devotee and to accept her on as many levels as the devotee wishes to place her. These levels are most clearly expressed in the myths. The myth is the stage on which the most diverse elements are allowed to interact. [...] Where we might separate myth from a historical fact, [the narrator] will join them, mix them into a space which gives him access to both the historical world and the mythical world. That is the space in which goddess and devotee meet.” (Meyer 1986, 3)

The complex nature of the goddess is expressed in the mythological sphere. I argue, following Meyer (1986), that oral tales from folk religion and literary accounts can illuminate each other and lead to new insight first of all about the goddess herself and how she is perceived by her devotees, but also about the levels¹¹ of the myth itself, and finally about cultural values and religious beliefs in the society where the myth is transmitted. In line with Wendy Doniger (O’Flaherty)¹² I see myth as a “story that is sacred¹³ to and shared by a group of people who find their most important meanings in it; a story believed to have been composed in the past about an event in the past¹⁴ [...] that continues to have meaning in the present because it is remembered” (O’Flaherty 1988, 27).

In her study of the goddess Ankālaparamēcuvari, Meyer lists some points that illustrate why myth is important: First of all, myths give a depiction of the complex nature of the deity. Second, they allow us to discover recurring patterns, images and themes that help us define the deity. Third, myths show us which of the Hindu myths the narrator is familiar with

¹⁰ I speak of texts in a broad sense that includes oral texts and not only written representations.

¹¹ C.f. that myths are “multi-layered”, discussed below.

¹² Only some of her books are published under her surname O’Flaherty, which she used until the late 1980’s.

¹³ Sacred, then, is to have some kind of “religious meaning”, that is, the myths “speak of the sorts of questions that religions ask, stories about such things as life after death, divine intervention in human lives, transformations, the creation of the world and of human nature and culture – and, basically about meaning itself”. (O’Flaherty 1988, 28)

¹⁴ Or, more rarely, in the future.

and how he changes them through building them into other myths. Fourth, the deity lives as much in the myths as in temples and rituals. It is a sphere in which the deity acts and it cannot be separated from him or her. (Meyer 1986, 3)

But, I wish to add that besides investigating and analyzing the myth of Reṇukā I am of the opinion that the stories presented here, some of which have not been presented to an academic audience before, have great value in themselves and I hope they will be enjoyable for the reader, as the rich topic they are.

2.1.1 Interpreting myth

While interpreting the myths presented in this thesis, I use the pluralist (“toolbox”) approach used by Wendy Doniger, as explained in her introduction *The Myth of Method in Mythology in Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts* (1980). This approach is justified by the fact that since myths are multi-layered, different shapes become visible by means of different methods. With multi-layered, I mean that myths are about many different things at the same time. Doniger explains: “[M]yths are [...] about life and art and the universe and the imagination [...]. A myth is like a palimpsest on which generation after generation has engraved its own layer of messages” (O’Flaherty 1980, 4). And, different aspects of a single myth naturally demand various methods of enquiry. Put in another way: a profound subject requires that one looks at it from many angles in order to see the complexity (or, if you like, the whole, if that is even possible) of it better. Doniger describes the toolbox approach as keeping in mind what others scholars have done in order to carry as many tools as possible, and then reaching for the right tool at the right time (ibid., 5). One should use a range of interpreting tools to squeeze as much as possible from the myth in question. Thus both theory and method fall under the toolbox category. In doing this, one should look to ritual and to other myths, to one’s own understanding and to the insight of others in order to shed light on the different meanings of a single myth (ibid., 12). The following paragraphs sets on describing some of the tools I have used working with the corpus for this thesis.

I find the structural approach both useful and suggestive. Briefly, Lévi Strauss argued that there is a certain logic to myth that corresponds to the way it is possible to speak a language without knowing anything about syntax or grammar. This logic or “grammar” that myths are built up from is based on binary oppositions such as life-death, night-day and so on. The Reṇukā myth is filled with such semantic oppositions; particularly dominant is the dichotomy of head and body (this will be discussed in section 7.2). Lévi-Strauss also argued

that “every version [of a myth] belongs to a myth” (Lévi-Strauss in Tull 2008, 259). This refers to the fact that a text is part of lived life through generations, and naturally it will develop and change. Through retelling the myth, it is transformed and kept alive, and all existing versions contribute to the understanding of one single myth. This is interesting since I present different versions of the same story (or parts of them) in order to compare and understand them better. Like Shulman (1980, 15) says: “It is only by comparing the many variants of a myth that we can arrive at an understanding of the true importance of the motifs and the underlying conceptions that they convey.” What is excluded in these various myths is also of importance. By presenting several versions of the same myths, I intend to show how the motifs in the myth change and develop.

I also draw on a functionalist view, used much in anthropology – what a myth *does*. The meaning and purpose of the myth is linked to its origin and persistence. According to Malinowski, a pioneer of the functionalist school, myth “is not merely a story told but a reality lived” (Malinowski in Bowie 2006, 273). Human beings experience myths in a particular social context, and need them to codify and express their social life (Bowie 2006, 274). Myth corresponds to the needs of people both on social and individual levels, and helps establish a sense of meaning, identity and social belonging. Functionalism in myth can be seen on several levels. As I will argue in sections 7.2.4 and 7.2.5, the myth serves to explain the ambivalence embodied in the village goddess, as well as the social reality of interdependence between high and low castes. I also argue (in section 7.1) that the Reṇukā myth reflects the social norms imposed upon Tamil women from early age by highlighting the ideal of the perfectly chaste wife (*pativratā*, Ta. *cumaṅkali*), although the story not necessarily serves a didactical purpose and glorifies these ideals.

Finally I will look at symbolic interpretations of the Reṇukā myth by using the psychoanalytical perspectives of Doniger (1980; 1995; 1999) and Craddock (1994). Symbols can be defined as multilayered signs¹⁵ (Gilhus 2006, 95), and they are arbitrary cultural constructs. A symbol is linked to social processes and structures, and hence its meaning is not static, it can change with regard to who uses it and when it is used. (ibid.) It follows that in order to decode the symbols in myth one needs to know the cultural setting very well. As I will argue in chapter 7.2.2, I do not find the theory of psychoanalysis easily applicable to a late medieval Indian setting, and equally important, I think psychoanalysis includes an inherent danger in over interpreting the myth. Still, I will look at these theories in my

¹⁵ “flertydige tegn.”

discussion of the symbols in the Reṇukā tale to show how this myth can be, and has been, interpreted.

Finally I wish to stress that by presenting many versions of the same myth, both oral and literary, I do not want to search for or present an “original” or “genuine” Reṇukā myth that is the basis for the others. I consider them all equal, and I do not consider the myths from the Sanskrit tradition of more value or more authentic than the stories I was told while on fieldwork. However, I have chosen to start with the stories that are found in the Sanskrit text and then proceed to *sthalapurāṇas* and finally oral tales not because this suggests an actual temporal succession or degradation of these myths, but the Sanskrit texts were a natural starting point for me since I started working on them before I went to India, and hence this thesis is built up similar to the way I proceeded working with the myths myself.

2.1.2 Note on translation

The translation of the chapters in the *Kāñcīmāhātmyam* (*KM*) (and also the passages from *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* and *Mahābhārata*) was both a philological and a hermeneutic task. I find these closely linked. By philological I mean that I translated the texts as literally as possible¹⁶, and when interpreting the myths I entered the field of hermeneutics, which can be defined as the theory of interpretation (Green 2010, 411). This *KM* has not, to my knowledge, been translated to English before. I did my translation work in several turns. First, I transcribed the chapter from Telugu script to roman script to make it more accessible for me¹⁷, and then I translated it to English twice while I was still in Norway. When I went to India, I translated it once more with Prof. T.V. Vasudeva at the Kuppuswami Sastri Research Institute (KSRI). He gave me many enlightening perspectives on my previous translation, and we also had some fruitful discussions on the passages where we disagreed. Further, he was able to explain some things in their wider cultural context that were difficult to understand as I first translated them at home in Oslo. Finally, when I returned to Norway, I brought the chapter from the *KM* into its final form.

The *Mbh* and the *Bhp* have already been translated into English, but I also chose to translate these passages from Sanskrit myself, in order to use my own language throughout the thesis and to compare the vocabulary.

¹⁶ Cf. “notes on language and transliteration” in the beginning of the thesis.

¹⁷ I am not fluent in reading Telugu script, but I learnt it to read the chapter in the *KM*. My transcription work was thoroughly done and re-checked several times to make sure that the transcription did not contain any mistakes. During the translation(s), I frequently turned to the original to re-read the *ślokas*.

2.2 The field

I conducted my fieldwork in Kanchipuram within a period of approximately one and a half month altogether¹⁸ during the fall semester 2011 which I entirely spent in Tamil Nadu. In Kanchipuram I mainly visited temples and conducted interviews with priests, caretakers and devotees of Reṇukā temples. Most of the temples in which I did interviews I visited several times, and I participated in many *pūjās* as well as other special “functions”, the most important one being the annual *Navarātri* festival glorifying the goddess’ triumph over the buffalo demon, which is celebrated in a grand manner in many of the goddess temples. I argue that it was important for my project to participate in such events in order to be exposed to what goes on in the temples, and I felt welcomed and appreciated as I consecutively was invited to different celebrations. During my many hours of waiting for both interviews and festivities, I sat among the devotees or the trustees and observed what happened in the temples. This enabled me to partake in both their celebrations and everyday temple life, and the people who visited the temples became in turn accustomed to my presence.

Apart from the weeks in Kanchi, I spent two weeks at KSRI in Chennai, and I also spent some time visiting some other relevant temples on my travels through the state, the big and famous Māriyamman temples in Samayapuram (near Trichy) and Tiruverkadu (near Chennai) being the most important of these as my informants frequently spoke of them as “head offices” of the goddess.

2.2.1 The temples

Kanchipuram (or Kanchi) is situated in Northern Tamil Nadu about 72 km southwest from Chennai. It has a population of 153 140 people¹⁹ and the town itself covers about 24 sq.km (Seshadri 2003, 7). Kanchi is considered one of India’s seven holy cities²⁰, and is famous for its many temples, both Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava, several of them big and important pilgrimage sites²¹. It is also one of India’s most important *śaktipīṭhas*, a place of worship dedicated to the

¹⁸ I was there in two turns, the first turn a month in a row and about 3 weeks later I came back to conduct a few more interviews.

¹⁹ Numbers from 2001, http://censusindia.gov.in/Dist_File/datasheet-3303.pdf.

²⁰ The *saptamokṣapurīs* (lit. “seven cities of liberation”), also called the seven *tīrthas* (lit. “road”, “bathing place”) or *kṣetras* (lit. “field”), are enumerated in a *śloka* of the *Garuḍapurāṇa*: “*ayodhyā mathurā māyā kāśī kāñcī avantikā purī dvāravatī jñeyā saptaitā mokṣadāyikāḥ*” (2,38,5). This translates “Ayodhya, Mathura, Maya (Haridwar), Kashi (Varanasi), Kanchi (Kanchipuram), Avantika (Ujjain) and Dvaravati (Dvaraka); these are known as the seven cities granting liberation”.

²¹ E.g. Ekāmranātha temple (Śiva), Kailāsanātha temple (Śiva), Kacapeśvara temple (Śiva), Varadarāja perumāḷ temple (Viṣṇu), Vaikuṅṭha perumāḷ temple (Viṣṇu), Kumārakoṭṭam temple (Murukan).

Goddess, represented here by the famous Kāmākṣī ammaṅ temple. The temples I frequented though are smaller and simpler ones that primarily attract residents of the neighborhood. Some of these temples are situated in the midst of the town in residential areas while others are further away in more rural parts of Kanchi, such as the Tumpavaṇatu Ammaṅ temple, which is reached by short ride southwards on a tiny road alongside empty stretches, bushes and paddy fields. Most of the temples inside the town itself belong to specific communities that live nearby each place. However, all the temples, with no exception, emphasized that the temple was for everyone who wished to worship there, and no single particular group²².

The findings of the thesis are mainly built upon interviews and observations from ten different temples or shrines in and around Kanchipuram²³, all related to the story of Reṇukā in some way (for a list of the temples I visited and their location, see map 1). All the temples are fairly small, but the size varies from the simple open-air roadside shrine described in the introduction to the Cantaveḷiyammaṅ temple with several sub shrines, *vimāna* (pyramid shaped tower on top of the sanctum), a *maṇḍapa* (outdoor pillared pavilion) for the people who stayed in the temple affected with pox, a small tonsuring hall and a shed where the devotees might dress themselves in nīm²⁴ leaves in order to get cured, and a temple tank nearby. Another simple open-air shrine that will be discussed later is situated on the very edge of a lake and contained an-iconic stone images of the main deity and her seven children as well as some *nāgas*. Most of the temples, however, were once simple shrines, which gradually developed into the form they have today, with surrounding walls, proper roofs (that are not thatched) and often a small courtyard. These fairly small temple compounds all contain a various number of sub-shrines²⁵ in addition to the goddess in the sanctum. The ones with courtyards each had a temple tree (*sthalavṛkṣa*)²⁶, and some of them had big *porrus* colored with turmeric and *kumkum*.

²² If this was in fact the case, is difficult for me to say, but I did encounter Christians, Muslims, Brahmins and non-Brahmins in these temples, so it indicates a certain openness.

²³ Two of these temples are in fact a bit further away – one in Pallur, ca. 20 km north of Kanchi, and one in Uthukadu, ca. 30 km east of Kanchi. See map 2 in appendix A.

²⁴ *Azadirachta indica*, Reṇukā-Māriyamman's sacred tree. I will elaborate on the significance of the nīm tree in chapter 6.

²⁵ Most temples had separate shrines for Gaṇeśa and Murukaṅ (with or without his two wives), the navagrahas (9 planets) and a guardian deity like Kāttavārāyaṅ or Maturaivīraṅ with their consorts, but also for several other deities varying from temple to temple.

²⁶ These trees are indigenous to each temple. They are considered holy, and people make prayers by them. The tree expresses powers of fertility and growth as well as decay, and it connects the sky, earth and netherworld, representing the *axis mundi*. The pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*) is considered especially holy, but e.g. the Cantaveḷiyammaṅ temple had a nīm tree as their *sthalavṛkṣa*, since this tree is considered Māriyamman's tree.

Apart from the temples in Kanchi I visited the big Reṇukā ampāl temple in Padaivedu²⁷, which is mentioned throughout the thesis because of its significance to my informants in Kanchipuram. They frequently referred to Padaivedu as a head office of Reṇukā/Māriyamman, and more importantly as the very place the Reṇukā story actually happened. Moreover, the Padaivedu Reṇukā²⁸ was the family deity of some of my interviewees who worship here each year. This is a fairly big and busy temple, and a popular pilgrimage site. It is beautifully situated in the midst of several lofty mountains, and the road that leads to Padaivedu is running along endless green banana groves and rice paddies, in a scenery pleasing to the eye. The temple structure here is similar to the bigger south Indian temples, with two *gopurams* (monumental entrance gates), a *dhvajastambha* (flag post), *balipīṭha* (pedestal for offerings), several *maṇḍapas* and a temple tank. In addition, there is a temple kitchen, rest house and accommodation, bathrooms, a marriage hall, a tonsuring hall and a shed for cooking *poṅkal* offerings. Besides the goddess, there were several shrines dedicated to other deities. Unfortunately I was not able to conduct an interview when I visited because all the priests were busy with the *Navarātri* celebration, so my information here is gathered from an English *sthalapurāṇa* containing the Reṇukā myth²⁹.

2.3 The fieldwork

2.3.1 The interviews

My fieldwork was a combination of interview and observation as described in Natvig (2006, 204): interviews and observation with people and social groups within their own social, cultural and physical space. Most of the interviews were planned in advance, but some were also spontaneous conversations with people in the temples. Mostly they took place in the temples themselves, be it sitting on the floor in front of the sanctum or some back room, but a couple of times we went to the informants' house if they lived nearby. I rarely conducted an interview with only a single individual present – typically, a group of people who were already there sat around and listened, and interrupted if they wanted to add something to the conversation. These listeners ranged from family members, trustees and devotees to workers

²⁷ Village near Arani in the Tiruvannamalai district, situated ca. 70 km from Kanchipuram and home to a famous Reṇukā temple.

²⁸ One of the temples I frequented in Kanchi, the Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ temple, houses in fact a form of this Reṇukā in Padaivedu. The name Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ is a derivation of the name Padaivedu.

²⁹ See also <http://www.renugambal.com/>.

in the temple and co-priests. I tried to have what Thagaard (1998, 89) describes as a partially structured approach³⁰, where the topics of the interview were set beforehand, but the order of my questions was decided as the interview went along. The interviewee was asked to speak quite freely about the Reṇukā myth and temple history from the beginning, and then I asked more specific questions towards the end. The Reṇukā story was the topic I had told my interpreter(s) was of most importance, and I also wanted to know the story of each temple I visited, so to be sure I got what I came for, I started with the informant telling me about these topics. This freedom, however, often led to long irrelevant (to the thesis, that is) digressions, and I frequently had to keep pushing the interview back on track. Sometimes both the interviewee and the interpreter were very eager to tell me things, and it felt unnecessary and also disruptive to ruin their flow of thoughts when they were so enthusiastic. Quite often the interviewee was eagerly looking at the interpreter as he translated to catch the very second he was able to continue his talk. These digressions might have been easier to avoid without the interpreter as an intermediary, as I would have been more in charge of the conversation. On many occasions this freedom of speech left little time to the specific questions I wanted to ask in the end, and in retrospect I see that I could have done this differently to get more out of each interview, for instance starting with the questions that did not require the longest answers.

I recorded most of the interviews with a voice recorder in order to transcribe them afterwards. Since I had this security, I (mostly) did not take any notes at the temples. This allowed me to be more present and forthcoming in the interview situations. A couple of times, however, the interviews were more like informal, short conversations, and then I did not bring forth the voice recorder, but wrote down some notes after the talk. Whenever I got home from a new place, I made drawings of the temples and some notes as to remember the situations better. Moreover, I am an eager photographer and took hundreds of pictures, which help me remember each temple more vividly (see appendix A).

2.3.2 The informants

My most elaborate interviews were conducted with persons closely associated with the respective temples, most often the priest. A few informants however are quoted more than the others in the thesis, and deserve special mention: Mr. Venkatesh, priest of the Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ

³⁰ “Delvis strukturert tilnærming.”

temple, is very well versed in mythology, and gave me hours of valuable material. Mr. Srikumar Gurukkaḷ from the Cantaveḷiyammaṅ temple is a younger priest, but he of knew everything that went on in the temple, and taught me much about practices when affected with chickenpox. Mr. Vishnukumar, the oldest trustee in the Reṇukā ampāḷ temple, is an eager and enthusiastic man who himself asked for a follow-up interview after our first conversation because he wanted to talk more. The priests of the various temples, and especially the elders, were in my experience consistently very familiar with the myths of Reṇukā and the history and practices of the temples. I also interviewed some devotees, but many of them were not aware of the Reṇukā myth, and hence not able to answer many of my questions. The interviews with devotees were therefore much shorter. Most of the people I encountered simply knew that the goddess is very powerful, and that is why they came for worship³¹. But no rule without an exception: Bhuvaneswari from the Karumāriyammaṅ temple, an old woman who is an ardent devotee of the goddess, gave me a long and interesting interview when I visited her home near the temple.

2.3.3 The interpreters

During my stay in Kanchipuram, I worked with two interpreters/research assistants, Mr. Subramanian, and his daughter Srividya³². Subramanian was my main interpreter and the one who arranged my appointments for interviews, but when he was occupied his daughter assisted me in his place. Further, I specifically asked for her to join me when I interviewed some female devotees, as she was approximately my age, and I felt that it would be easier to get the women to talk to me if my interpreter were a woman. In retrospect I do think it was easier for the women to approach us spontaneously and out of curiosity when I was with Srividya, although I interviewed a couple of women with Mr. Subramanian also, and these were actually more elaborate interviews.

Srividya was also the one who helped me transcribe my interviews afterwards, which turned out to be really helpful. I could ask her to clarify anything I wondered about what the informants had told me, be it about Tamil culture and customs, religion or language. During

³¹ Cf. Younger (1980, 504), who observes that devotees approach Samayapuram Māriyammaṅ knowing little about myth (or, not speaking about it), but because of her powers (*śakti*).

³² Mr. Subramanian has worked for several years as my supervisor Ute Hüsken's research assistant, and that is how I got in touch with him. His daughter Srividya who was in the beginning of her twenties stayed at home with her parents during the period I was in Kanchi waiting for her placement in a software company in Chennai.

these hours of transcription she offered her insight and experience as a Tamil girl and these chats were very valuable for me.

Due to my lack of knowledge of the Tamil language, I was completely dependent on the interpreters during the interviews, and for arranging appointments beforehand. The people in the temples rarely knew any English at all, and if they did, it was very limited. Being so dependent on the interpreters was a challenge, for several reasons. First of all, I had to work when they were able to assist me and adjust to their schedule since Mr. Subramaian made all the appointments with the priests. Moreover, the informants constantly postponed the interviews, and I ended up with a lot more spare time than I had planned. Indeed, postponing the interview, “*nāḷaiḱku, nāḷaiḱku*”³³, became the rule rather than exception. I kept thinking that if I had only known more Tamil than some polite remarks, I could have used the time I had on my own more constructively. Not being able to communicate with anyone on any significant level without assistance made me feel trapped and paralyzed. Another challenge was that not knowing the language forced me to trust the interpreters’ translations completely and prevented me from participating in any discussions around this. I had to take their words for granted without any involvement of my own judgment. I found this quite frustrating. Although I am eternally grateful for their help with translations and trust their competence, there is so much more to a language than the meaning of words. Not knowing much Tamil left me unable to catch different layers of meaning in the informant’s choice of words. I am sure this second layer of language was present occasionally, especially as we spoke a lot about religious or spiritual matters, and there were probably many references I was unable to catch and connections I was unable to grasp. I frequently asked “what is this word in Tamil?” when my interpreters translated, to at least keep track on if whether the informants used the same terms about the same phenomenon. Moreover, the dialogue itself becomes amputated when it has to be interrupted and translated as the interview goes on, and it lacks the natural flow a dialogue usually has. Only once I was able to interview a devotee in a temple entirely in English, and I couldn’t help but feel the difference between this one interview and all the others – this one actually felt like a conversation. Another problem I realized was that there were often people present who intervened in the interviews and this tended to lead to people talking at the same time. Whenever this happened, I always missed something, as the interpreter (naturally) was unable to translate several voices at once, and I didn’t know whom

³³ Obviously the Tamil equivalent of *mañana mañana*.

to focus on, who told the most interesting story. On tape these discussions turned out to be untranslatable.

Though I deeply wished I did not have these limitations regarding language, I had to accept this lack of control. It could not have been any different, as I had neither time nor opportunity to learn Tamil properly beforehand.

Apart from translation and transcription, my two interpreters also gave me valuable guidance on how to behave in the temples, with regard to e.g. participating in *pūjās* and having *darśan* (the auspicious viewing of the deity). This advice ranged from how much money I should donate to what colors not to wear and how and when I should eat the banana given as *prasāda* (food offered to the deity and then distributed to the devotees for consumption) – simply how to behave politely in different settings and not like an ignorant westerner. They also gave me advice on how to approach certain delicate issues during the interviews, such as that of caste, which is not talked openly about.

While in the field, the experience with the two interpreters was rather different, although I was able to work well with both of them. Mr. Subramanian has worked several years as an interpreter, and was very experienced. He was structured, knew what to do, took control of the situations that arose and all I had to do was follow him to each place where the interview was arranged. This security was comforting for me since I had never done field interviews before, and it felt as if I had a safety net in having a skilled interpreter, especially during the first interviews. Mr. Subramanian also frequently asked follow up questions to the informants where this was natural, which I appreciated, whereas Srividya rarely did. She was as new at this as I was, and I think this connected us in a different way when the two of us went to temples together. We were two young women who shared a common experience of doing something new, getting into a new role. Srividya was much more cautious, almost a bit shy or obedient so to say both towards the informants and me, and she confronted me with every decision instead of taking charge of the situation. Naturally, this had to do with age, gender and experience, but it made me feel more in charge when I was with her.

2.4 Ethical reflections

The ethical dilemma most apparent to me was that of informed consent of the informants, and informing them about what I did. Since I did not arrange the interviews myself³⁴, the whole negotiation process and information in advance went through Mr. Subramanian. Although I know that he told them all that I wrote a thesis about Reṇukā devī and got their consent to participate, only afterwards I learned that some temples had hesitated to give me an interview. This was because some of them weren't under government control³⁵, and they were afraid to lose their independence if I happened to be connected to the government. In a couple of instances Mr. Subramanian had persuaded them saying that I was not going to write about such matters, but one Reṇukā temple that I desired to include in my thesis since it was very old and also very well known in Kanchi, altogether declined the request for interview due to this. When I became aware of this issue (approximately at the end of my first month), I told Mr. Subramanian not to push them. However, most people were willing to speak to me, and most of them also seemed happy to be able to do so.

As the interviews went along, I realized that Srividya told the informants in Tamil that I was from Germany, not Norway, and both of my interpreters continued to tell the informants that I wrote a PhD thesis, not an MA, even though I made it clear for them several times that I in fact was not a PhD student. After a couple of reminders I was presented as a Norwegian, but some informants are still under the impression that they contributed to a German PhD. I don't regard this a major detail although I wanted to be honest about where I came from, but it turned out that quite a few informants didn't know anything about Norway after all. It also seemed that telling them I wrote a PhD just was an explainable way to say that I wrote a thesis about Reṇukā devī, so after a while I let this go un-discussed.

In the thesis I decided to present a picture that is as close to reality as possible, hopefully without crossing any ethical lines. This includes giving the real names of the temples and shrines I visit and the deities residing there³⁶. I argue that not doing so would alter the data too much. For the sake of protecting the informant's integrity, however, they are not mentioned with their real names.

³⁴ All the interviews with the priests were arranged beforehand; those with devotees were most often spontaneous.

³⁵ Temple administrations in Tamil Nadu are supervised by The Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Board if the temple has an annual income of more than Rs. 10,000.

http://www.tn.gov.in/policynotes/archives/policy2004_05/hrce2004-05-1.htm

³⁶ The temples are generally named after the main deity.

3 The Goddess

“She has come mainly to destroy evil things atrocities. She is focused on that good things should happen.” (Bhuvaneswari, Karumāriyamman temple)

Reṇukā is listed among the *grāmadevatās* both by her devotees and by most scholars who have dealt with her, and she is usually considered a form of the well-known South Indian village goddess Māriyamman. In this chapter I will first give a general overview of the qualities of village goddesses, before I proceed to the connection of Reṇukā with Māriyamman and other goddesses, and lastly I will describe the goddess’ characteristics as well as some rituals connected to her cult.

3.1 Village goddesses

According to Fuller (1992, 42), the *grāmadevatās*, literally “village goddesses”, are “the most important category of localized forms [of deities]”. They are numerous, and in Tamil Nadu usually called *ammaṇ* (Ta. "mother"). The *grāmadevatās* are tutelary, or guardian, deities of social units and/or villages and towns, and protect the people from adversity and illness. Common features of these goddesses are that they are unmarried (or at least represented in temples without a consort); they are often described as *ugra* (fierce) and demand and accept non-vegetarian offerings and animal sacrifice (*bali*). A ferocious goddess is unpredictable and punishes if not propitiated, and she is characterized as *hot*³⁷. Her sexual energy is heightened, and she is potentially violent, destructive and angry. Her priests are often, though not always, non-Brahmins of lower castes³⁸. A goddess might also take on her hot and fierce form only occasionally, e.g. manifested in an aniconic form such as a pot during some festival, and be pacified or appeased during most of the year, in her iconic, cool form inside the temple (Flood 1996, 194). Hence, the traits mentioned above are not applicable to all village goddesses; the picture is far more complex and the goddesses’ nature more ambiguous. But as a general rule, the *grāmadevatās* are distinguished from the higher and benevolent (*śānta*) wifely goddesses (e.g. Pārvatī, Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī, consorts of the great gods) who are exclusively auspicious, by being of a more independent and ferocious character.

³⁷ Generally the *hot* deities are associated with passion and anger that can manifest in epidemic disease like smallpox, whereas the *cool* deities are associated with purity and detachment. The characteristics of a “hot” goddess will be further explained in section 7.1. For a detailed discussion on the concept of temperature in South India, see Beck (1969).

³⁸ For example the big and famous Māriyamman temples in Thiruverkadu and Samayapuram have Brahmin priests, and so does the Reṇukā ampāl temple in Padaivedu.

The goddesses being categorized as either *ugra* or *śānta*, although one goddess can (and does!) assume both forms, is easiest explained through the concept of *mahādevī*, one Great Goddess whose *śakti* or female energy manifests with two expressions – a fierce one, when she is destroying evil, and a pleasing form to bless her devotees. This ambivalence is expressed in the *devīmāhātmyam*³⁹: “With your gentle forms that roam about in the triple world, and with the exceedingly terrible ones, protect us, and also the earth⁴⁰”. Thus the goddess is localized in various forms as *a* goddess with whatever name and character, but at the same time she is transcending the boundaries of physical space by being an aspect of *ādiparaśakti* or the primordial supreme energy. This might all sound to theoretical and by the book, but the fact is that most of my priestly informants regarded Reṇukā-Māriyamman a part (*aṃśa*) of Pārvatī, who again was regarded an *aṃśa* of *ādiparaśakti*. As Mr. Vishnukumar from the Reṇukā ampāl temple put it: “There is *ādiparaśakti*, and from that there are *aṃśas*: Umadevī [i.e. Pārvatī], Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī. From that came the other deities. When there is any problem, we pray to solve it, and a part of her [i.e. mahādevī’s] body comes.” However, this was nothing the informants emphasized without me asking specifically about it, and this was the priestly view of her nature⁴¹.

The *śakti* is the active energy of any deity. When it comes to the great male gods, *śakti* is personified in the wife of the god, who acts on his behalf. This is because according to Hindu thought the male principle (*puruṣa*) is the conscious, whereas the female principle (*prakṛti*) is the creative. The conscious is dependent on the creative to act. Therefore goddesses are said to possess more *śakti* than the gods, and women more than men. In other words *śakti* is the very power that enables the goddess to act and partake in the world, and to interact with and respond to her devotees. It is the goddess’ *śakti* that has the power to cure, heal and create. The devotees can affect this power and get a response to their prayers through ritual interaction with the goddess.

The village goddesses with local origins can also be moved higher up in the hierarchic pantheon and out of her original territory through the process of sanskritization, so that she is worshipped more widely and amongst broader categories of people, such as Brahmin communities. As many studies indicate, Māriyamman is one of the goddesses who have

³⁹ Also called *Durgā saptsatī*, a Sanskrit text from the 5th century CE that belongs to the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* and glorifies the Great Goddess.

⁴⁰ *saumyāni yāni rupāni trailokyē vicaranti te yāni cātyantaghorāṇi tai rakṣāsmāms tathā bhuvam*, DM 4.25, quoted in Coburn (1991).

⁴¹ Notice the internalized hierarchy implicit in Mr. Vishnukumar’s statement: First come the Brahmanical gods, and from them the forms of the village goddesses.

increased in popularity among urban people. Craddock (2001, 147) says: “Originally a low-caste goddess, emerging from the agricultural milieu in which the majority of Indians still live, [Māriyamman] now draws devotees from urban as well as rural areas and across caste lines”. Waghorne (2001, 233) argues likewise: “Once studied as a ‘village’ goddess served by low caste priests, Māriyamman’s mercurial rise in popularity over the last decades and the growing wealth and importance of her temples speak of her popularity among urban people”. These signs of Sanskritization and urbanization is what I found had happened in many cases of Reṇukā and Māriyamman temples I visited during my fieldwork. Many informants were proud to highlight the recent growth and popularity of their temple. Since more money was spent on maintenance and renovation, the temples expanded, and were able to celebrate festivals in grand manners compared to before.

In several temples *gurukkaḷ* Brahmins⁴² acted as priests for the goddess and here she was given purely vegetarian food, a clear sign of the Sanskritization process⁴³. Brahmins were also found among her worshippers (also where she was served by non-Brahmins). As, in fact, were Christians and Muslims – this is because these village goddesses are considered very powerful and are approached by all kinds of people with regard to solving practical matters and mundane problems of any kind. For example, I met two young women in the Cantaveḷiyamman temple, one Christian who had recently converted to Hinduism because of marriage and one Muslim. They stayed in the temple with their small children who were affected by chickenpox. After trying to treat the pox at home with little result, they came to the temple due to rumors of the goddess’ power to cure this illness. Since the goddess is “problem oriented” she draws her devotees from across castes and across religions, something *every* temple priest I interviewed emphasized when I asked them who comes for worship. The problems people come for are in particular disease, but the village goddess is also prayed to for finding a suitable marriage partner, getting children, a house or a job. The higher gods, like Viṣṇu and Śiva, are not as likely to be concerned with these matters, as they are less accessible, busy as they are with cosmic deeds and maintaining the world. Moreover, health and wellbeing are in female concerns the Indian traditions, and the woman is seen as responsible for the health of the whole family (Harman 2011, 186). Therefore it is women who prepare the *ponkal* (mixture of boiled rice and lentils) on the temple grounds, a popular

⁴² Officiating Brahmin priests of goddess temples are called *gurukkaḷ* (*kurukkaḷ*), whereas non-Brahmin priests of goddess temples are called *pūjāri*.

⁴³ Brahmanical worship includes substitutes for the sacrificial animal, such as a pumpkin or coconut. In contrast animals such as goat, hen and buffalos are offered to many non-Brahmin goddesses.

offering to the goddess, and bring their children to the temple to stay with them when they suffer from chickenpox. The temple can be seen as a predominantly female sphere – although I shall not over-generalize because of course many of Reṇukā-Māriyamman’s devotees are men, as are all her priests. But, the (village) goddess also takes this female role of being concerned with health and prosperity.

Even if the status of Māriyamman has risen, she was referred to as a village border goddess (Tam. *kirāmayellaitēvatai* or *piṭāri*) by her devotees, and many of her incarnations are guards of social units, be it single streets, communities, or the whole of Kanchipuram. Tumpavaṇatu Amman for example, whose temple lay in the outskirts of the city, is according to the temple’s priest one among the eight “official” border goddesses of Kanchipuram. There are eight goddesses, all forms of Kālī, representing the eight directions (the quarter directions are also counted), and in the middle of the eight is Kāmākṣī, the principal Goddess of Kanchi⁴⁴.

3.1.1 Reṇukā and Māriyamman

Māriyamman is one of the most common and popular *grāmadevatās* in South India. She is worshipped in almost every village of Tamil Nadu (Whitehead 1976, 32), and known (to scholars) as the South Indian goddess of smallpox⁴⁵, although she is also connected to rain and fertility. Māriyamman in a particular place will be regarded as different to Māriyamman of another place: she is the same goddess in the sense of having the same name and characteristics, but is still regarded as various different localized forms opposed to one another. There are hundreds of important Māriyamman temples, and she is commonly referred to as “Māriyamman of this and that place”. She has many identities and encompasses many stories –one of them is Reṇukā, mother of Paraśurāma.

Before proceeding, a remark must be made on Indian goddesses and identity. Michaels (1998, 224) writes that the concept “identity” is a western psychological category, and while the strength and weakness⁴⁶ of identities is strongly emphasized here in the west, the matter is different with regard to the nature of these goddesses. A village goddess like

⁴⁴ Who these official border goddesses are, varies. For instance, according to the local myth, Cantaveḷiyamman is one of four goddesses guarding the cardinal points of Kanchipuram who were appointed by Kāmākṣī when she performed *tapas* and was not able to guard the city herself (Biardeau 2004, 115).

⁴⁵ Māriyamman’s role as a pox goddess will be discussed in chapter 6.

⁴⁶ An identity is considered *strong* if an individual is able to draw boundaries to delineate himself from others and can assert himself with regard to others, when he possesses special abilities and his own immutable character” (Michaels 2004, 224).

Māriyamman/Reṇukā is not easily reduced to one single aspect. Since goddesses can easily assume each others' identity and manifest themselves in numerous forms and at several places at the same time, their qualities and stories frequently and inevitably overlap, and hence they don't fit into the western notion of a strong identity. On the contrary, the goddess is considered strong exactly because she *transcends* these boundaries – “because she absorbs contradictions, because she basically has infinitely many identities and does not *need* any boundary lines” (ibid., 226, my emphasis).

With this as a backdrop, in the area I conducted fieldwork, Reṇukā and Māriyamman seemed almost impossible to separate⁴⁷. Her devotees saw Reṇukā as the same as Māriyamman, who frequently takes on the identity and life story of Reṇukā – the beheading myth that serves to explain how the goddess came into existence. I was given several explanations about this connection. Most people held the conviction that Reṇukā was the name of the chaste woman who after getting her head exchanged became transformed into the goddess Māriyamman⁴⁸. Indeed, this is why she has the name Māriyamman, which according to Tamil folk etymology means “the changed mother”⁴⁹ – her body and head got mixed up with another woman. She might have different names in various temples, but I was frequently told that wherever I saw a goddess worshipped as a head, she would be a form of Māriyamman who takes on the Reṇukā story, whatever name she was given. In some temples she also kept the name Reṇukā, and the deity there was referred to as Rēṇukā ampāl⁵⁰, Rēṇukā tēvi (Reṇukādevī) or Rēṇukā paramēcuvāri amman (Reṇukāparameśvarī), but in other temples she had other names, such as Tumpavaṇatu amman (the goddess of the forest of *Tumpai*-flowers⁵¹), Cantaveḷiyamman (derivation uncertain) or Paṭavēṭṭamman (the goddess of Padaivedu). Moreover, Reṇukā devī shares the similar or identical iconography as Māriyamman⁵²; she is depicted with white skin, dressed in a sari and garlanded, sitting in half lotus posture (Ta. *valatukālai ācaṇam*). In her four hands she is holding a *triśūla* (trident, Ta.

⁴⁷ With this I mean that in general all Reṇukās I encountered, were considered to also be Māriyamman, but not necessarily the opposite. There are many Māriyamman that are *not* connected to the Reṇukā story, and although it was common in the area I visited, not all Māriyamman were represented with a head in the sanctum of her temples.

⁴⁸ This topic will be treated throughout the thesis, in particular in chapters 5 and 7.2.

⁴⁹ The Tamil verb *māru* means “to change”, but this verb has the alveolar *r*. Māriyamman is however spelt with the dental *r* and is not derived from the verb. *Māri* in Tamil means rain, but none of my informants linked her name to rain. In Sanskrit *māri* carries the meaning “smallpox, pestilence and death” (*MW*).

⁵⁰ *Ampāl* (goddess) or *amman* (mother, goddess) were the words most informants used when they spoke of the goddess, *ampāl* being a more Brahmanical term than the generic *amman* (Allocco 2009, 539).

⁵¹ *Leuca Indica*, a small white flower.

⁵² Since there are several famous forms of Māriyamman, her iconographies vary. Reṇukā commonly shared the iconography of Karumāriyamman of Thiruverkadu, who also takes on the Reṇukā story. See pictures 5 and 6, and pictures 8 and 9 for comparisons with the *mūlamūrti* of Paṭavēṭṭamman and Cantaveḷiyamman.

cūlam), a knife (Ta. *katti*), a *ḍamaram* (two-headed drum shaped like an hour-glass) with a snake wound around it and a bowl (*kapāla*, Ta. *kapālam*) that the informants said was for the goddess to give *kumkum* to her devotees⁵³. The iconography of the goddess in pictures is how people imagine the goddess, as the shape of the *mūlamūrti* (the stone image inside the sanctum) is not seen easily in the temples where the sanctum is dark and the image covered in cloth, jewelry and flowers⁵⁴.

3.1.2 Connections with other goddesses

Some people also regarded Reṇukā and Māriyamman as different, even if they shared the same story. Some considered them two different *avatāras* among the seven sisters (Ta. *capta kaṇṇikaḷ*, probably related to the Sanskrit *saptamātrkāś*, the seven mothers), guardian deities of village temples often represented as seven enshrined stones. The list of who these seven goddesses are is not the same in each place⁵⁵.

Tumpavaṇatu amman was the only Reṇukā I have encountered or heard of that was considered a form of Kālī. This is her fierce form, and her peaceful form (that she usually assumed), was Māriyamman.

The goddess Ellaiyamman is also represented in some temples by a head (and some places not), and occasionally connected to the Reṇukā story. *Ellai* (Ta.) means border or limit, so she is the goddess who protects people within certain borders, in other words a common feature of the *grāmadevatās*. Ellaiyamman has her counterpart in Yellamma, who is considered a form of Reṇukā in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Reṇukā is also popular in Maharashtra⁵⁶.

The Reṇukā story is also occasionally connected to Aṅkālaparamēcuvari or Aṅkāla amman, the ferocious goddess of Mel Malayanur who dwells in the graveyards. She is widely worshipped in Tamil Nadu⁵⁷, but of somewhat less fame than Māriyamman. She was, according to some informants, a later birth of Reṇukā, or her sister. My informant

⁵³ Some scholars have interpreted this bowl as to contain blood (e.g. van Voorthuizen 2001, 250).

⁵⁴ The pictures of Māriyamman are widespread – they hang in the temples, are printed on the temple's signs and invitations, is found on the websites of the bigger temples that have one, on CDs, DVDs and pamphlets, and are sold to devotees at the bigger Māriyamman temples and in religious supermarkets.

⁵⁵ One list I was told includes Karumāriyamman, Reṇukā, Aṅkala amman, Umamaheśvarī, Nāgakaṇṇikaḷ, Vārāhī and Pārvaṭī.

⁵⁶ I do not have the space to go into these details here, but for a study on the Reṇukā-Yellamma cult see e.g. Gurumurthy (2005).

⁵⁷ Aṅkalaparamēcuvarī has been studied thoroughly by Eveline Meyer (1986). She also discusses the Reṇukā myth.

Bhuvaneswari, a devotee of Karumāriyamman, told me that Reṇukā and Aṅkala are different because Aṅkala amman “is mainly for taking away evil spirits”, and because she is more ferocious.

In other words, diverse goddesses are seen as either sisters or as different births and forms of one each other. What seems important is the *connection* between them - they overlap and intersect (cf. Craddock 2001,147). However, some features are distinguishable for Reṇukā that make her Reṇukā (or Māriyamman) and sets her apart from other goddesses.

3.2 Who is Reṇukā-Māriyamman?

“She is a very powerful (*cattivantai*) goddess. Whatever prayer you do here, you get the fruit of it.” (Subramaniam, Tumpavanatu amman temple)

Reṇukā devī is a goddess whose expression is diverse - sometimes peaceful, sometimes ferocious, a healer and protector, yet simultaneously the giver of disease. In other words, she embodies ambivalence and paradoxes, something that is also expressed through myth – which I will discuss later. The main attributes of the goddess Reṇukā are shared with Māriyamman, namely disease (including removal of black magic), rain and fertility. Apart from this, people approach her with regard to family and everyday matters of the household.

The majority of Reṇukā’s incarnations I encountered, are peaceful and accepted only vegetarian *naivedya* (food offerings). The main specialty for her is a millet porridge called *kūl*, but she also receives rice, sweets and *poṅkal* offerings, among other things. The *poṅkal* is commonly prepared in the temple grounds itself, in an earthenware pot on a small fire. Tumpavanatu amman is also offered dried fish, since, according to myth, this is what she got at the *dalit* community who gave her refuge during her flight from Paraśurāma. In the same temple, occasionally, depending on people’s prayers, *bali*⁵⁸ consisting of goat or hen is given to a secondary deity, Ellayamman, outside the temple complex. Previously this was done in front of Tumpavanatu amman herself, but this is not practiced anymore.

Cantaveḷiyamman is a ferocious form of Reṇukā-Māriyamman whose temple is situated almost on the border of the city for its protection, and she receives *bali* outside her temple walls. This also depends on the frequency of people’s prayers, and is a regular practice. The *gurukkaḷ* told me that people might pray to her for welfare of the house and

⁵⁸ Note that *naivedya* and *bali* are two different things – so even if a goddess regularly receives non-vegetarian offerings during *pūjā*, she does not necessarily receive blood sacrifice (*bali*).

especially cure of diseases, be it of cattle or the household, and when the prayers are fulfilled, they bring a goat or a hen for sacrifice.

To the goddess Ponniyamman, a form of Reṇukā in the small village Uthukadu some 30 kilometers away from Kanchi, *bali* of goat, hen and also two or three buffalos are sacrificed on the last day of her annual festival during the month of Māci (mid February-mid March). This festival will be addressed in section 5.2. All other Reṇukās celebrate their annual festival in the month of Āṭi (mid July-mid August) in the hot season, linking her further to heat and disease, as this time of the year traditionally was when the smallpox and fever epidemics hit the strongest (Allocco 2009, 298), and still is the time when most people catch chickenpox.

Her *arcana* (worship) is commonly performed in Sanskrit, but Reṇukā-Māriyamman is very found of *pampai*⁵⁹ songs, and these are performed in Tamil. The love of this music is also anchored in mythology; in some versions of the Reṇukā tale she sought refuge in a Śiva temple where the *pūjāri* used these drums, or at the house of the fishermen caste, who hereditarily play the *tappaṭṭai* (one headed drum beaten with a stick). Some temples hired musicians to perform *pampai* songs on auspicious occasions, while other temples did it themselves. Mr. Vishnukumar told me that *pampai* music lures the goddess as a snake is drawn to the flute, and that she possesses people more frequently when this particular music is played during ceremonies in the temple⁶⁰.

Reṇukā was from time to time associated with snakes. According to Mr. Vishnukumar she was born as the cosmic serpent Adhiśeṣa's daughter in a previous birth, and in her birth as Reṇukā she was born in a *puṛru*⁶¹. This is a trait Reṇukā shares with Karumāriyamman, the black Māriyamman of Thiruverkadu, so named because she manifested as a black cobra from an anthill. Srikumar gurukkaḷ also claimed that Reṇukā manifested as a snake when her worship was neglected, and came to people in their dreams to remind them.

In the sanctum of most temples, Reṇukā was represented as an erect, full statue (*mūlamūrti*, Ta. *mūlapēram*) with a head (*śiras*, Ta. *ciram*) in front of it⁶², both made of stone. Commonly the head alone received worship. According to myth, the head part of Reṇukā is

⁵⁹ Devotional songs accompanied with *pampai* and *uṭukkai* (types of drums)

⁶⁰ Mr. Vishnukumar's last claim was verified when I witnessed a piercing ritual in the Paṭavēṭṭamman temple where more than a dozen devotees were possessed as this music was played.

⁶¹ This is where the snakes live, and *puṛrus* (anthills) are very common features in goddess temples in Tamil Nadu. Most of those I visited, had one, and these are worshipped as divinities. In some temples the residing snake would sneak out at night to have *darśan* of the goddess. For a study on snake worship in Tamil Nadu, see Allocco (2009).

⁶² Occasionally it was two heads, such as in the Tumpavaṇatu amman temple and the Nāgātammaṇ roadside shrine (Muttumāriymman and Tumpavaṇatu Amman).

the important one, as her body was changed with an outcaste's body. Once this happened, she (or divine forces) buried her body underneath the earth so that only the head was visible. Mr. Venkatesh, priest of the Paḍavēṭṭammaṅ temple, said: "The head is Reṇukā devī, and then there is the total form given to her [the *mūlamūrti*]. That is Māriyammaṅ. She is given a form and seen". This confirms the pattern that Reṇukā was the chaste woman who, according to myth, dug her body into the earth and got turned into the deity Māriyammaṅ. In the Cantaveḷiyammaṅ temple, however, the *gurukkaḷ* gave the opposite information, that the head portion was the form (Cantaveḷiyammaṅ) and the full statue Rēṇukaparamēcuvāri, but still the *pūjā* was performed to the head alone. One informant, Bhuvanēsvarī (a devotee from the Karumāriyammaṅ temple), came with an interesting variation – according to her, the head belonged to Reṇukā, while the *mūlamūrti* was the other restored woman in the myth, with Reṇukā's body and the outcaste's head, who also achieved some positive powers.

While some of these heads of Reṇukā were installed in the temples, others were *svayambhū*, meaning they had manifested by themselves. After the heads had manifested (or were installed), the *mūlamūrti* was installed as the temple grew. This means that the head commonly was installed before the *mūlamūrti*. Most temples also kept a procession image (*utsavamūrti*, Ta. *urcavapēram*) for festivals and processions, commonly made of *pañcalohana*, or five standardized metals. For example, about 200 years ago, according to the history of the temple, Reṇukā ampāl of the Ceṅkuntar community possessed a lady and revealed that she was residing where the temple is situated today. People of this community were originally weavers who made cotton and silk saris, an important and thriving industry in Kanchipuram, which apart from its nickname "the City of 1000 Temples" is also called "the Silk City". Only recently, the youngest of this community have begun studying or in other occupations. After the goddess spoke through the lady of the community, a head spontaneously unearthed at the place they used for drying threads. They kept it under a nīm tree, and built a thatched roof over it. The goddess from then on protected their industry, and gradually the temple grew to its present state.

The two heads in the Tumpavaṅatu ammaṅ temple were found while ploughing the area where the temple is today. Previously this was a forest area covered with white *tumpa* flowers, and the people of the Tumpavana village nearby cleared it to do agriculture. The two heads that emerged there got stuck in the plough and started bleeding from the nostrils as they were hit. The people of the village built a small temple around the images, which developed into its present form.

Since the *svayambhū* heads of the goddess are emerging from the earth itself, she is thereby identified with the soil, and linked to the fertility of the land and the crops and the cyclic pattern of the year (Craddock 2001, 160; Flood 1996, 196). Craddock argues that the soil is the locus of life and death in agricultural societies, and the very violence of the ploughing and reaping is what allows new life to come forth again (*ibid.*). Hence the goddess is identified with the cycle of life and death. Māriyamman probably originated as a Dravidian village goddess concerned with fertility and rain, although such origins are difficult to trace. One of her main concerns even today is fertility – both of people and the land. Some informants claimed that the very day her main festival that is celebrated in the month of Āṭi was over, rain started pouring down. A couple of temples had special festivals for Gaṅgayammaṅ in order to make it rain, and here Reṅukā was worshipped mainly for other concerns, like progeny, marriage, and disease. Disease, and chickenpox in particular, is a one of the main reason why people come to her temples, either to pray, or to stay there for several days until they are cured.

3.3 Ritual

I have already briefly addressed the *pūjā* and occasional animal sacrifices at some of Reṅukā-Māriyamman's temples. Still, even though animal sacrifice is not performed in some of her temples where she is vegetarian, this type of sacrifice is still closely associated with the goddess (cf. Craddock 1994, 166) and performed with substitutes. For example, in the Brahmanical Reṅukā temple in Padaivedu I witnessed the chicken offering ritual of “throwing a live fowl on to the top of the temple”, where devotees buys a live chicken in the temple that is whirled around and thrown up on the roof. The chicken is then brought down again and resold to other devotees for the same purpose. Craddock (*ibid.*, 167) links this ritual to replacements of the animal sacrifice.

At many temples, especially during festivals, devotees pierce their cheeks or tongue with one of the holy weapons of the goddess – a spear (Ta. *vēl*), trident (*triśula*, Ta. *cūlam*) or dagger (*katti*). During the festivals some also drag small temple chariots (*ratha*, Ta. *tēr*) from hooks inserted in their backs, or have lime fruits sewn onto their body. Others wear elaborate structures of ca. 50 spears pierced into their upper bodies. I witnessed all these types of piercing at the Paḍavēṭṭammaṅ temple, during an annual piercing ritual where more than a dozen devotees were possessed and pierced before they carried the goddess installed in a pot

in procession through the streets near the temple⁶³. The ritual lasted for hours and was accompanied by intense drumming and songs praising Māriyamman. The piercing is considered a vow (*vrata*, Ta. *viratam*) to the goddess⁶⁴: the devotee has a problem, approaches the goddess and vows to pierce him or herself if she fulfills the wishes of the devotee. Some are also pierced to drive away evil spirits. They go to the goddess temple to be possessed by the goddess or some other deity who drives the spirit away, and are pierced with a *vēl* through their tongue as a sign of purification and of telling the truth. This piercing is regarded a renewal of vows, which makes the devotee again to come under the influence of the goddess, and after chasing the evil spirit away the person can come occasionally to renew the vow⁶⁵.

Another common ritual is to shave your hair and donate it to the goddess⁶⁶. The Cantaveḷiyammaṅ temple had a special tonsuring shed for the devotees to do this. In the bigger Māriyamman temples, like the Karumāriyamman temple in Thiruverkadu, I saw piles of hair lying around the building for shaving and all along the way to the parking space. To offer one's hair can be interpreted as symbolically offering one's head and hence surrender completely to the goddess. This can also be done in fulfillments of a vow. It is also common to perform the child's first *cūḍākarāṇa*, the head-shaving life cycle ritual (*saṃskāra*) in the temple, something I witnessed in Padaivedu (along with the *karṇavedha*, the piercing of the ear).

Apart from this, devotees perform other rituals like hanging wooden cradles in the temple tree for the wish of getting children and cooking *poṅkal* and appropriate food offerings to the goddess. Sundays and Fridays are the special days of the goddess. On these days her temples are particularly crowded as it is more auspicious to visit during these two days. Māriyamman's cult is also characterized by possession, something I witnessed both at the Cantaveḷiyammaṅ temple, where a woman spontaneously was possessed as she entered the sanctum and spoke out loudly and swayed giddily before she fell down on the floor, and during the piercing ritual in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ temple where the deities were invoked in the participants. Rituals pertaining to the cure of chickenpox will be addressed in section 6.1.2.

⁶³ This procession is the one on picture 16. Apart from the man who carries the goddess, the pierced devotees walked after all the women carrying pots and are unfortunately not visible on the photo.

⁶⁴ Another previous practice when undertaking vows was hook swinging, which was a central ritual in the Māriyamman cult during the 19th century. The practice was banned by Madras Presidency in 1894. (Oddie 1986)

⁶⁵ According to my informant Mr. Venkatesh, who led the piercing ritual I saw in Kanchipuram, the Tamil term for the piercing ritual is *alakukaṭṭutal*, meaning "to settle accounts".

⁶⁶ The practice of donating hair is also done at temples of male gods, but it is especially connected to goddess shrines (Craddock 1994, 168).

4 The Sanskrit Myths

There is a story behind [why the goddess is worshipped as a head], you know. It is there in the scriptures. (Balasubramanian, devotee, Cantaveliyammaṅ temple)

In this chapter I will present the myth of Reṇukā as it is found in various Sanskrit sources.

Following Shulman (1984), I find it helpful to classify the myths presented in this thesis into three categories, although with slight variations from Shulman’s own classification⁶⁷. First, the classical Sanskrit variants, namely the epic-*Purāṇic* versions; second, a local temple variant from the *Kāñcīmāhātmyam*; and third, the oral local folk variants. These classifications are helpful first of all because of the different genres of the texts, but also because there are variations between them when it comes to contents in the Reṇukā tale. This will be discussed as we proceed. This chapter will deal with the first two classifications: first I present the epic-*Purāṇic* versions of the Reṇukā tale, before proceeding to a local version found in the *Kāñcīmāhātmyam* (*KM*). The oral tales will be discussed in chapter 5.

4.1 Epic and Purāṇic accounts

Material on Reṇukā is found in several Sanskrit sources, best known are the versions of her beheading in the *Mahābhārata* (*Mbh*) and the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (*Bhp*), the epic version probably a bit older than the *Purāṇic*. The beheading story is also found in the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* and the *Reṇukāmāhātmyam* that form part of the *Sahyādrikaṇḍa* of the *Skandapurāṇa*, where Reṇukā is praised as the one great Goddess who is identified with Pārvatī. Other *purāṇas* also contain material on Reṇukā as well as Paraśurāma, but without the matricide episode: the *Brahmavaivartapurāṇa*, *Brahmaṇḍapurāṇa*, *Narasimhapurāṇa*, and *Padmapurāṇa*. Before proceeding to the stories from *Mbh* and *Bhp*, I will give a brief background on the epics and the *Purāṇas*.

Both the epics and the *Purāṇas* form part of the Sanskrit literature called *ithāsa* (“thus it was”) or *smṛti* (“[to be] remembered”, i.e. texts of human authorship), in contrast to the “revealed” (*śruti*, lit. “heard”) Vedic literature. The texts took form roughly during the same period that Flood (1996, 20) calls the “epic and *Purāṇic* period” (ca. 500 BCE-500 CE). This was when the cults of Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and Śaktism along with the mythologies of the

⁶⁷ Shulman (1984) classifies the Paraśurāma myth into “große, mittlere und kleine” versions, i.e. the classical Sanskrit versions, local temple versions, and “Paria” or local village variants. Shuman does not define the latter category as necessarily oral, but for our purpose I think the distinction between written and oral local myths are beneficial, in order to draw a sharper line between the *KM* and the other local myths.

great gods of Hinduism that are worshipped today began to take form. This period sees the early development of sectarianism, theism and *bhakti* (devotion to a favored deity), and this is reflected in the epic and *Purāṇic* literature.

The *Mahābhārata* (“the great [war] of the Bhārata dynasty”) is an epic narrative of the great war between the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas, and is one of the two great Sanskrit epics of ancient India along with the *Rāmāyaṇa* (“Journey of Rāma”). The *Mbh* is estimated to have reached its final form by the early Gupta period (ca. 4th century CE), although parts of it are much older (up to ca. 400 BCE) (van Buitenen 1973, XXV). Being the longest epic poem in the world, it contains over 100 000 *ślokas* (double verse lines) in 18 *parvans* (books), and is composed using the structure of “frame tales”, or stories framed within stories⁶⁸. Besides the narrative storyline of the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas, the epic also contains much philosophical, doctrinal and devotional material, as well as other stories.

The *Purāṇas* (“ancient stories”) are the most important source of Hindu mythology, some of them clearly sectarian, and they are concerned with myths, cosmologies, legends of saints, genealogies of deities and kings, law codes, descriptions of ritual and pilgrimage sites, science and history (Flood 1996, 109; Michaels 2004, 59). According to tradition there are 18 major (*mahāpurāṇas*) and 18 minor (*upapurāṇas*) *Purāṇas*, although today we find several more, and which ones are included in the diverse lists of the 18, varies slightly. The *Purāṇas* are problematic to date, as they originated in oral form and were later transformed into their (several) final written forms. Some of their contents might be very old and some very modern, but they were completed roughly between 400 – 600 CE (Tull 2008, 257). Now all the major Sanskrit *Purāṇas* are found in so called “standard prints”, but there are great variations in the diverse versions of each *Purāṇa* (and *upapurāṇa*).

In all the epic and *Purāṇic* stories, the Reṇukā tale forms part of a bigger framework where her son Paraśurāma (“Rāma with the axe”) is the main character. The Paraśurāma legend is an epic-Purāṇic myth about the *avatāra* (incarnation) of Viṣṇu⁶⁹, who was born to rid the Earth of sinful *kṣatriyas*. This legend will not be taken into further account here, as it is too extensive and not directly relevant to the topic of the thesis⁷⁰. But within the narratives of Paraśurāma, we find the story of his decapitation of his mother Reṇukā. These epic and

⁶⁸ Some of the stories within the narrative are the *Bhagavadgītā*, the romance of Nala and Damayantī and the story of Śakuntalā.

⁶⁹ According to the standardized purāṇic list of ten *avatāras*, Paraśurāma is number six. In the *Mahābhārata* he is not yet considered an *avatāra*, nor has the epithet *paraśu* (axe) entered his name.

⁷⁰ Briefly, the main events of the Paraśurāma legend are his birth, the decapitation of Reṇukā, and the killing of king Kartavīryārjuna and the *kṣatriya* race, although the contents of his story also differ in the various sources. For a thorough study of Paraśurāma, see Gail (1977).

Purāṇic stories of the matricide are not very elaborate and most importantly, Reṇukā's transformation into a goddess, a major feature characterizing all the oral stories I encountered at her temples is absent in all epic and *Purāṇic* versions of the myth.

I will now present my translations of the accounts of the Reṇukā story as found in the *Mbh* and *Bhp*. In the *Mbh* the story is as follows (*Mbh* 3.16, 1-18):

[1] Jamadagni, the great ascetic versed in recitation of the Vedas, performed austerities and out of his meritorious piety he subdued the gods. [2] He went to king Prasenajit, the ruler of men, and requested [Prasenajit's daughter] Reṇukā [as his wife], and the king gave her to him. [3] Then, after taking Reṇukā as his wife, Jamadagni stayed in the hermitage and performed austerities along with his faithful wife. [4] Four sons were born to her and Rāma as the fifth, but though he was born the last, he was the first among them. [5-7] Once when all the sons were gone to gather fruits, Reṇukā, the very chaste wife⁷¹, went to bathe, and while going she unexpectedly saw the king of Mārttikāvataka named Citraratha⁷² sporting in the water along with his wife, prosperous and garlanded with lotuses. By seeing this, Reṇukā was desirous of him⁷³. [8-9] Due to this transgression she absentmindedly moistened herself in the water. Trembling she returned to the hermitage. Verily, her husband realized [what had happened], and seeing her destitute of her firmness and deprived of her devout beauty, that great ascetic, the powerful man, blamed her with the word "shame!" [10] Then Jamadagni's oldest son named Rumaṇvat came, as well as [the other sons] Suṣeṇa, Vasu and Viśvavasu. [11] One after the other the holy one instructed them to kill their mother, but perplexed and bewildered, they did not say anything. [12] Then, out of anger, he cursed them and they were deprived of their consciousness: instantly they became as if stupid, resembling beasts and birds. [13-14] Thereupon Rāma, the killer of hostile heroes, came to the hermitage and the great ascetic Jamadagni said to him with immense anger: "Kill your sinful mother, and do not hesitate, son!" Then Rāma took his axe and cut off his mother's head. [15-16] Thus, O king⁷⁴, the anger of Jamadagni, whose soul is great, went away and serenely he said: "This horrible action was performed on my command, son. Choose out of desire, O knower of dharma, whatever you wish in your heart." [17] Paraśurāma wished for the revival of his mother unaware of the killing and [himself] unstained by the sin⁷⁵, and also the natural state of his brothers. [18] And the great ascetic Jamadagni granted him unrivalledness in battle, long life and all his desires, O Bhārata.

The story continues with the king Kārtavīryārjuna stealing Jamadagni's divine cow, and thereafter he kills Jamadagni. Paraśurāma, lamenting his dead father, in return kills Kārtavīrya

⁷¹ *niyatāvratā*.

⁷² Citraratha is the king of the *gandharvas*, celestial musicians who are married to the Apsaras ("nymphs").

⁷³ *tasya sprhayām āsa reṇukā*.

⁷⁴ The whole story of Paraśurāma is narrated to king Yudhiṣṭira, the eldest of the five Pāṇḍava sons, by one of Paraśurāma's followers. Yudhiṣṭira was also known as Bhārata (descendant of the Bharata line), cf. the last line.

⁷⁵ *sa vavre mātur utthānam asmṛtiṃ ca vadhasya vai pāpena tena cāsparśam*. Van Buitenen (1975, 446) translates this verse: "He chose that his mother would rise alive, that *he* forget the murder and be untouched by the crime" (my emphasis) but I argue, following van Voorthuizen (2001, 64-5) and Stark-Wild (1997, 14), that it is more likely that Reṇukā is made to forget the matricide than Paraśurāma. This is also more suitable grammatically: *asmṛti* being a feminine noun carrying the meaning "non-remembrance, forgetting" fits grammatically with *mātur*, "of [his] mother". Other Sanskrit texts (*Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa*, *Bhagavatapurāṇa*, *Reṇukāmāhātmyam*) mention this wish too. Goldman (1977, 22) translates that Rāma wishes for "her forgetfulness of her murder; his (i.e. Paraśurāma's) absolution from the sin". I find it plausible that the wish regarding removal of sin concerns Paraśurāma who killed his mother, although it could as well be Reṇukā that is made to be devoid of sin resulting from her lapse of chastity.

and his sons, and rids the earth of the kṣatriya race 21 times over⁷⁶. Let us now turn to the Purāṇic account, which is very similar.

The *Bhp* is a Vaiṣṇava text that propagates *bhakti* to Kṛṣṇa in particular, and it concerns the different *avatāras* of Viṣṇu. Here the Reṇukā myth is even less detailed. In the previous chapter the *Bhp* relates Reṇukā's marriage with Jamadagni, and that they had several sons, the youngest being Paraśurāma. (BhP 9.16, 2-8)

[2] Once, Reṇukā went to the river Ganges, and she saw the king of *gandharvas*, garlanded with lotuses, sporting in the water along with the apsaras. [3] Seeing the play, Reṇukā who had gone to the river to [fetch] water, was somewhat desirous⁷⁷ of Citraratha and forgot the time of the sacrifice. [4] After realizing the delay, frightened of the sage [Jamadagni's] curse, she returned, placed the water pot before him and stood with folded hands. [5] The sage, after realizing the infidelity of his wife, was angry and said: "Oh sons! Kill this sinful woman!" Thus addressed, none obeyed. [6] [But] Rāma, ordered by his father, killed his brothers along with his mother. Duly he knew the supernatural powers of the sage, resulting from penance and meditation. [7] Pleased, the son of Satyavatī [Jamadagni] pleaded him a boon. And Rāma chose the revival of those who had died and that they should not remember the killing. [8] Instantly they arose, healthy as from a deep sleep. Rama killed his kin knowing the power of his father's penance.

The framework for these two stories are alike – the chaste wife goes to the river to fetch water and sees someone (here, the king of *gandharvas*⁷⁸), becomes slightly desirous and loses her chastity. In the *Bhp* version she forgets the time of Jamadagni's sacrifice as well and prevents him from fulfilling his ritual duties in time. Then, on the command of Jamadagni Reṇukā's head is severed by her son Paraśurāma, and in the end she is revived due to Paraśurāma's boon and made to forget the whole happening. The epic-*Purāṇic* ending echoes Kṛṣṇa's teachings in the *Bhagavadgīta*, nothing really happened – no one was *really* killed⁷⁹.

The contents of the myths will be further analyzed as we go on and especially in chapter 7, but for the time being, let me emphasize one important feature of these Sanskrit stories: throughout the whole story, Reṇukā is nothing but a human being. In both versions presented until now, Paraśurāma wishes for his mother to forget about the matricide⁸⁰, and her life continues in the everyday sphere of the hermitage. But, in all oral versions I encountered

⁷⁶ According to some sources (e.g. the *Narasimhapurāṇa* and *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa*), the lamenting Reṇukā beat her chest 21 times after Jamadagni's death, and this is what made Paraśurāma vow to slay the *kṣatriyas* exactly 21 times.

⁷⁷ *kimcic citrarathasprhā*.

⁷⁸ The significance of seeing a *gandharva* will be explained further in section 7.1.1.

⁷⁹ Like Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna: "Anyone who believes this a killer, and anyone who thinks this killed, they do not understand: it [the embodied self] does not kill, it is not killed. It is not born, it never dies; Partha [i.e. Arjuna], how can that man who knows it to be indestructible, invariable, unborn, and imperishable bring about the death of anyone? Whom does he kill?" (*Bhagavadgīta*, 2.19-22)

⁸⁰ This is also the case in the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* and *Reṇukāmāhātmyam*.

of the story⁸¹, as well as in the *Kāñcīmāhātmyam* that I will turn to now, Paraśurāma does *not* make such a wish, allowing other events to unfold: Reṇukā remembers the unjust beheading and is transformed into a goddess.

4.2 Reṇukā in the *Kāñcīmāhātmyam*

Now I will continue with yet another Sanskrit story of Reṇukā that differs from the two versions we have already seen in several aspects. In the *Kāñcīmāhātmyam* (*KM*), there is one chapter dedicated to the Reṇukā story (26), as well as one for Paraśurāma⁸² (27). This is a local rendering that serves to explain the presence of two *līngas*, one established by Reṇukā and one by Paraśurāma, in a small village named Pallur⁸³ on the border of Kanchipuram and Vellore district⁸⁴. The Reṇukā story here stands on its own, and in contrast to the accounts of Reṇukā in the *Mbh* and *Bhp*, she is in the *KM* transformed into a goddess in the end. But before we proceed to the story itself, a brief introduction on *māhātmyams* in general as well as the *KM* is called for.

The *māhātmyams* are a sub-category of local *Purāṇic* texts called *sthalapurāṇas*, mainly containing local versions of Hindu myths, composed to proclaim the greatness and holiness of particular shrines and places of pilgrimage. These texts are found both in vernacular languages and in Sanskrit. The *māhātmyam* texts often claim to belong to one of the major *Purāṇas*, thus increasing their authority. In fact, however, they are often not parts of the standard editions of these *Purāṇas*, and their relevance remains largely local. This is also the case with this *KM*; it claims to belong to the *Skandapurāṇa*⁸⁵, while in fact it is not a part of the standard print. Historically, the study of these texts has been largely neglected due to their reputation as inferior, set out by the 19th and early 20th century indologists such as Winternitz (d. 1937) who states that “[t]he majority of the *māhātmyas* [...] is, on the whole, inferior literature” (Winternitz 1981, 556). But recently, scholars such as David Shulman (1980, 1985) have contributed greatly to the study of South Indian *māhātmyams*.

⁸¹ Van Voorthuizen (2001, 266) reports similar findings.

⁸² The story of Paraśurāma in the *KM* tells how he was tricked into a fight with Śiva disguised as an outcaste after establishing a *śivalīṅga* in Kanchipuram. The thesis will, due to lack of space as well as not direct relevance to the discussion, only contain the translation of the Reṇukā chapter.

⁸³ My fieldwork indicates that the *līngas* are situated in this village. However, as will be discussed below, this does not confirm with Shulman’s (1985) findings.

⁸⁴ The village Pallur is today in Vellore district on the road to Arakkonam, near the border of Kanchipuram district. Previously it belonged to Kanchipuram, but the borders have changed. See map 2.

⁸⁵ Cf. the colophons after each chapter: *om ity ādimahāpurāṇe śrīskande śaṅkarasaṃhitāyāṃ kāñcīmāhātmye reṇukēśvaramahimānuvarṇanam nāma saptaviṃśo ’dhyāyaḥ* etc.

It is in the Purāṇic *sthalapurāṇas* and *māhātmyams* that we find the rich mythological tradition that developed in Tamil Nadu. Sharing the common Hindu pantheon with the classical Sanskrit *Purāṇas*, the Tamil myths often copy their stories as well as elaborating on them and providing them with a local character. The identification of shrines by means of these local myths, move the myths themselves into the very land of Tamil Nadu.

We find that the local myths differ from the classical Sanskrit corpus in several aspects even though they contain the same characters; indeed, Shulman argues that what distinguishes the Tamil versions the most from the myths in the classical Sanskrit corpus is the “localization of mythic action” (Shulman 1980, 40). In this way, a deity is identified both as belonging to the classical pantheon, and as a local manifestation of that very deity. Furthermore, the deity’s divine presence is connected to a physical place, a sacred space (*kṣetra*) highlighted in the *māhātmyam* or *sthalapurāṇa*, where a devotee can come to seek help from the deity for his or her mundane needs. As is the case with this chapter in the *KM*, the story serves to legitimize a local shrine as well as localizing Reṇukā as a goddess⁸⁶.

The *Kāñcīmāhātmyam* (“glorification of Kanchipuram”) is a Sanskrit text from the temple town of Kanchipuram in northern Tamil Nadu, proclaiming the greatness of holy places in Kanchi. The *KM* is of uncertain age, but may be at least 250 years old. I draw this conclusion because I take the text I am in possession of, namely a Śaiva Sanskrit *Kāñcīmāhātmyam*⁸⁷ printed in Telugu script 1967, to be a print of the *māhātmyam* Zvelebil mentions in his *Tamil Literature* (1975, 248). This *māhātmyam* inspired the 18th century poet Civañāṇamuṇivar (alternatively called Civañāṇayokikal, d. 1785) and his student Kacciyappamuṇivar to compose the *Kāñcīppurāṇa* written in Tamil, which is a rather close translation of an older Sanskrit *KM* that has not yet been studied critically (cf. Dessigane, Pattabiramin, and Filliozat 1964, 7; Zvelebil 1975, 248; Gail 1977, 212)⁸⁸. What is found in chapters 45 and 46 in the *Kāñcīppurāṇa* is content wise more or less identical to the myth of Reṇukā and Paraśurāma in chapters 26 and 27 in the *KM* that I am in possession of, based on Shulman’s translation of the Tamil text as well as Dessigane et al.’s synopsis of the contents of the respective chapters. I have also checked the headlines of the *KM* against Dessigane et al.’s (1964, VII) chapter concordance based on the colophons of a 1889 edition of the Sanskrit *KM*

⁸⁶ Note that Reṇukā is a popular deity throughout South India and not only in Kanchipuram.

⁸⁷ There is also a Vaiṣṇava *KM* claiming to belong to the *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa*, but this does not appear to contain the story of Reṇukā. This *KM* has been studied by Marie-Claude Porcher (1985).

⁸⁸ The *Kāñcīppurāṇam* however, has been studied and translated into French by Dessigane et al (1964), and the Reṇukā and Paraśurāma chapters of the Tamil text (45-46) that are of concern to us have been translated into English by Shulman (1984, 1985).

(also in Telugu script), and the contents of the two *māhātmyams* correspond very closely. Hence, this 1967 edition of the *KM* in Telugu script is likely to be a reprint of an older *KM* that might date back to before the *Kāñcīppurāṇa* was composed sometime during the 18th century.

In this *māhātmyam* version of the Reṇukā tale, Reṇukā becomes a goddess after her resurrection, a trait common to all the oral versions I encountered during my fieldwork but that is missing in the orthodox Sanskrit renderings. However, as we shall see when we proceed to oral tales, still one point that is so crucial in the oral accounts is lacking also in this Sanskrit myth: namely the exchange of heads with an outcaste woman when Reṇukā is resurrected. Therefore, in accordance with the classification presented in the beginning of this chapter, the story from the *KM* holds a middle position between the orthodox Sanskrit versions and the oral versions also in terms of content: in the *Mbh* and the *Purāṇas* she is made to forget the matricide and nothing really happens, but in the oral myths her head is put on an outcaste's body when she is resurrected, and bearing that form she becomes an ambivalent goddess.

Here follows the Reṇukā story from the *KM* in full (*KM* 27,1-67):

The greatness of [the *liṅga*] Reṇukeśvara

Kāśīka said:

[1] I shall now declare, O best of Brahmins, another [*liṅga* called] Reṇukeśvara⁸⁹ that is situated at the southern shore of the river, previously worshipped by Reṇukā. [2] Verily, there was a mother called Reṇukā, the best among maidens, a faithful wife dear to Jamadagni, and daughter of king Abhedyavarman. [3] Jamadagni, the best among sages, married her in a *svayamvara*⁹⁰, and she loved the sage lord for a long time.

[4-6] Once, the Haihaya king Kārtavīrya⁹¹, best of kings, in person resembling the autumnal moon driving away the darkness, [was] desiring that very beautiful woman, perfectly acquainted with fresh youth, who had arrived at the big tank for the sake of fetching water. Afflicted by the arrows of the God of love, he himself verily stood before her, that young man endowed with excessive beauty, the king above all. [7-9] She, engaged in looking at her own feet, did not see him. But he stood above the water in order to show his own beauty: handsomely formed like a new love god, [his height] measuring a palm tree in the sky. Then, that very day, drawing the water towards herself with her hands in the effort of making [the water] into a ball⁹², the chaste wife of the sage observed his reflection, his very

⁸⁹ The text says “another *liṅga*” because the previous chapter in the *KM* concerns Paraśurāma establishing a *liṅga* called Paraśurāmeśvaram.

⁹⁰ Self-choice of groom.

⁹¹ Reṇukā's tempter in the *KM* is Kārtavīryārjuna, the Haihaya king, who in the *purāṇas* is the one who kills Jamadagni after stealing his magical cow, provoking Paraśurāma to kill the entire *kṣatriya* race 21 times.

⁹² *piṇḍīkaraṇaveśāyām*. This compound has two alternative translations: the effort [*veśa*, incorr. for *veśa*: work, activity] of making [the water] into a ball [*piṇḍīkaraṇa*], or, the effort [*veśa*] of collecting [water], where *piṇḍīkaraṇa* is taken as merely “collecting”. Monier Williams solely give *piṇḍīkaraṇa* the meaning “making into a lump or ball” cf. the common meaning of *piṇḍa/piṇḍī* (“ball, lump”), but *piṇḍī-* √*kr* can also mean “to

shadow, in the water. [10] Her own mind was slightly brought into the subjection of the God of love, and again after only a moment she restrained herself. [11] Again, that wife of the sage was ready to bring water home. [But now] the water was not rolled into a ball as before, [it fell] through her hands to the ground! [12-14] Then, frightened, that chaste woman thought thus in her mind: “What shall I do, what shall I bring, what is my refuge, what becomes of the weak-minded? After seeing that I have gone in vain, without holding the required water collected for the *pūjā* and thinking me defiled, the sage [Jamadagni] will be angry! Oh, embodiment of compassion and the goddess [i.e. Śiva and Pārvatī], protect me, coming for refuge!” Thus indeed she thought, out of fear. [15] After taking the water in a pot, that chaste wife was weak and disgraced. Frightened she slowly went to the vicinity of the sage. [16] After placing the pot with water beside the sage, he saw her standing with her hands folded in obeisance out of devotion because of the delay of time. [17] And that eminently pious man fell into severe meditation. Totally devoted to reflection with his mind, he realized the wickedness of the Haihaya [Kārtavīrya]. [18-21] Provoked after seeing his wife with a heart slightly unsteady from the sight of his beauty, he said to his son Rāma: “O, child Rāma whose arms are mighty! The Haihaya desires your mother, and he is a very mighty king, a youthful lord with great strength in his shoulders. Your mother’s heart was slightly moved by his sight. Inevitably, he will take her away without considering us, surely! Cut off her head on my command. Do not doubt me! The king has laid eyes upon her. [You] who can distinguish [between good and bad] must do it without delay!”

Paraśurāma’s killing of his own mother on the command of his father

[22] After taking his own mother outside the hermitage on the command of his father, nearby Rāma cut off his mother’s head. [23] Alas! Beyond any doubt, womanhood is misery, as is youth, being endowed with beauty, and being dependent on a Brahmin! [24-25] Then, Rāma approached his father with regret and bent down before him repeatedly. Devoted to his mother and filled with repentance, he said: “O venerable father, take pity on me so that there will be no blame on me here in this world as one who has killed his mother!” [26-29] After hearing his words, the sage Bhṛgu⁹³ spoke to Rāma: “Rāma, today I have learned that you are a son of a kṣatriya princess. And you have so much devotion towards me, even so, listen, son! This action of killing a mother is hated among men and does not lead to heaven. Therefore, let it not be any disgrace on your behalf resulting from the act of killing your mother. Quickly, restore her head on my command and awaken her! Then, after bowing before her with folded hands, endowed with modesty, immediately send her forth [with the words] “O, mother, go wherever you wish!” and come to my vicinity.” [30] Thus the sage whose mind was overcome by compassion commanded his son. For anger is an unavoidable enemy of all creatures. [31] Great anger alone kills knowledge, conduct and virtues. For an angry person there is no need of penance, conduct, donations or vows. [32-33] [His] repetition of prayers, oblations and worship of gods become ruined. How can he be happy? Rāma, who had performed the action of an outcaste and in his mind thinking about anger in this manner, thereupon joined his mother’s head together with the trunk on his father’s command and revived his own mother. [34] He bowed before her with folded hands [and said] “O mother, go wherever you wish on this earth!” [35] Reṇukā, thus addressed, was

concentrate, press together”, and the adjective *piṇḍita* (verse 11) has the alternative meanings “heaped, collected”. However, as Reṇukā’s ability to carry water without a vessel in the form of a water-ball (a power gained from her chastity) is documented elsewhere (Brubaker 1977, 60; Dange 1996, 387; Doniger 1999, 205; Younger 1980, 508), and because of the emphasis in the following verses that Reṇukā was unable to collect water as before and forced to bring it in a pot (as opposed to other means), I choose the first and most literal alternative.

⁹³ Here, Bhṛgu is used for Jamadagni, who was a descendant of the great sage Bhṛgu.

afflicted with grief. She transgressed her husband's command and approached his vicinity. Bhṛgu saw her and addressed his son Rāma again. [36] "Kārtavīrya desired your mother when she was away from me, Rāma.

The event of removing Jamadagni's head, done by Kārtavīrya

At that very time, she became a low woman [*nīcā*]. Leave her outside the hermitage!" [37-38] After saying so, Bhṛgu immediately went into meditation. But king Kārtavīrya realized that the sage had left his anger, and in the meantime he cut off Jamadagni's head and left. Reṇukā, became severely afflicted by pain [and] was worn to a shadow by the separation from her husband. [39-40] After seeing her son's devotion [towards Śiva⁹⁴], permitted by Paraśurāma⁹⁵ she herself raised a *liṅga* right here in Kanchipuram in order to obtain a boon from lord Śiva, fully endowed with devotion and faith and with a happy mind. Just like her son, she worshipped the enemy of the three cities [Śiva] with flowers and so on. [41] Once, after bathing lord Śiva [i.e. the *liṅga*] with water from the clear river, the Lord showed her graciousness. [42] From a distant place, she saw the Lord, the remover of pain whose glory is thriving, along with Pārvatī and she worshipped the undecaying one worthy of praise. Reṇukā said: [43] "You are the father of all the worlds, and this daughter of the mountain is their mother. For which reasons have I, whose self-esteem is lost, been ignored by the mother and father? [44] For I have been put to shame in numerous ways in this world, father. I have come to you for protection. I am born [here] because of you, O Lord. [45-47] Today I perform this eminent action known as *pūjā* [worship] to you. My husband who was versed in all the *Upaniṣads* would always speak of you, O Śiva, as yielding the benefits of enjoyment and liberation, as the remover of pain, as the bestower of glory, as the resort of men and living creatures, as the Lord, the supreme god, the universal soul, the eternal one. A lord who is an enemy of words would not be dear to my husband, nor fulfill his wishes! [48-50] [One can] always express one's own favorable *stotras* [praises] towards the one who is dear to all, out of desiring in ones mind wealth, cattle, money and grain, a daughter even, or a son, the breath of life and all the sense organs. [My husband] would always speak of you as the imperishable, immortal and undecaying destroyer [Hara], as the cause (*pada*) of the support (*dhṛti*) starting from the netherworlds and [reaching] to the sky, [and as the cause] of the support of the sun and the moon. This support is commanded by divine will. [51] My husband would always speak of you in this manner to me, O Lord, remover of grief! Therefore, who knows your glory, O God, Lord of the worlds? [52] The auspicious ones who praise you, Pārvatī's husband, become pleased and enjoy divine pleasures. [53] And in this matter you indeed protected my son Rāma previously. Protect me, O supreme lord, save me, you father of the worlds! [54] O mother of all, protect me! Mother of all, mother of all, daughter of the mountain-king! Salutations to you both forever! May you be pleased, Śiva and Umā!" [55] Then Śiva, husband of the mountain-born [Pārvatī], glorified in this manner by the words of the sage's dear wife, looked at Pārvatī with a considerate smile. [56] "O child Reṇukā! Tell me your desire that abides in your heart. The mountain-daughter [Pārvatī] will certainly bestow it all upon you!" [57-58] After hearing these words, Reṇukā asked the Lord: "O, omniscient one, I am afflicted with grief! I have incessantly acquired a state of misery. [I am] conquered, distressed and wearied, O you who take mercy on the afflicted! Therefore, Lord god; protect me out of tenderness, O Ocean of compassion! [59-61] Let me be a divinity among men, conferring the beatitude of visible benefits! Make me so that I become

⁹⁴ This verse is referring to the Paraśurāma chapter of the *KM* (26), in which Paraśurāma serenely worships a *śivaliṅga* in Kanchipuram.

⁹⁵ According to Hindu law a widow should answer to her sons once her husband is dead. In other words a woman is always dependent on the men surrounding her. According to the *Mānavadharmasāstra* "As a child, she must remain under her father's control; as a young woman, under her husband's; and when her husband is dead, under her sons." (5.148, Olivelle 2005)

celebrated in the Kaliyuga, Śiva! [And] may your presence always remain at the *liṅga* I established, along with the goddess, your body of attendants [*bhūtagaṇas*], and your sons. May you be the yielder of enjoyment and liberation for all creatures at this place!” Thereupon, the destroyer of the three cities [Śiva] happily gave her what she desired. [62-63] On the words of the mountain-born [Pārvatī], the Lord made her a goddess granting visible benefits for mortals born in the *kaliyuga*⁹⁶, especially for those who are devoid of the moral codes [dharma] and austerities of class and stage of life [*varṇāśrama*]⁹⁷. After giving her the name Māri⁹⁸, the lord spoke again: [64-66] “Previously, in the war with Bāṇa⁹⁹, I created the severe illness known as boil, combined with fever. You shall be known as overpowering with this [disease] on earth, O Māri!¹⁰⁰” After saying so, he disappeared along with the goddess. Verily, like this she indeed went thither to Kāñcīpuram as a goddess, bearing sword and shield, luminous ornaments and a snake-girdle, and her extraordinarily beautiful form is surrounded by Gaṇeśa and Pōttu Rāja¹⁰¹. [67] Therefore, the sight of the *liṅga* Reṇukeśvara, grants enjoyment and release, and especially kings’ accomplishment of victory on the battlefield.

The localization of the action in the *KM* myth that was absent in the epics and *Purāṇas* (apart from the mentioning of the river Ganges in the *Bhp*) shines through the latter part of this story. The place of the hermitage still goes unmentioned, but after Jamadagni’s death Reṇukā goes (as, we are told in chapter 26, did Paraśurāma) to Kanchipuram in order to establish and worship a *śivaliṅga* there. This event of Reṇukā installing and worshipping a *liṅga* is obviously modeled on the well-known story of Kāmākṣī, the reigning goddess of Kanchipuram who is a form of Pārvatī, and Ekāmbaranātha, who is a form of Śiva. According to this legend, Kāmākṣī establishes and worships a *śivaliṅga* of sand under a mango tree¹⁰², which she later saves from the overflowing Vegavātī River by a protective embrace¹⁰³. Śiva then manifests as Ekāmbaranātha, and they marry. Interestingly, with the single exception of Mr. Vishnukumar of the Reṇukā ampāl temple, I did not encounter *anyone* in Kanchipuram who had heard of Reṇukā establishing a *liṅga*. Mr. Subramanian, priest of the Tumpavaṇatu Amman temple, rejected the question with certainty: “Only Kāmākṣī has done *pratiṣṭhā* [consecration, setting up] of *śivaliṅga*. She only made a *śivaliṅga* and prayed to him.” Others

⁹⁶ According to scriptures, *kaliyuga* is the last of the four cyclic ages the world goes through. This period is characterized by moral downfall and considered the time when men are the furthest possibly away from God.

⁹⁷ That is, those who are not under the scriptural injunctions, namely the fourth and lowest *varṇa* (class), the *śūdras*.

⁹⁸ Here we are told that Śiva makes Reṇukā into the goddess Māriyamman once she is deified, cf. section 3.1.1.

⁹⁹ Bāṇa is an *asura* (demon) who was a devotee of Śiva. In the *KM* the creation of pox diseases is accredited to Śiva in the war with this demon. However, consulting the *Purāṇic* encyclopedia, Prof. T.V. Vasudeva and the Internet, I have not found anything allowing me to investigate this further. As we will see in chapters 5 and 6, my informants gave other explanations to why Reṇukā becomes associated with this disease.

¹⁰⁰ The goddess is considered simultaneously the giver and the remover of this disease. This will be explained further in chapter 6.

¹⁰¹ Pōttu Rāja is a subordinate deity often represented in the temples as a post or stake.

¹⁰² The name of Śiva in Kanchipuram, Ekāmbaranātha “Lord of the one mango tree”, derives from this story.

¹⁰³ Kāmākṣī embracing the *liṅga* is painted on the wall of the entrance *gopuram* of the Ekāmbaranātha temple, and small statues depicting this are sold at several places in Kanchi. The story is well known to the inhabitants of Kanchipuram.

simply denied that Reṇukā had done so. That the people I interviewed in Kanchipuram did not know the story of the *liṅgas* might be due to the fact that the *liṅgas* are not situated within the city of Kanchipuram itself. Curiously, the interview with Mr. Vishnukumar, the only one I met who had heard of the *liṅgas*, was actually my very first interview, and he directed Mr. Subramanian and myself to Pallur, a small village about 20 km north of Kanchipuram, where we found the two *liṅgas* in question. The two shrines in Pallur, named Reṇukeśvaram (Ta. Ireṇukeccaram) and Paraśūrāmeśvaram (Ta. Paracirāmeccaram) were under renovation (ongoing since 2006), the Reṇukeśvaram shrine still in bad shape¹⁰⁴. The small brick building of the shrine was overgrown with trees and bushes, and due to danger of it falling apart, the *liṅga* was temporarily placed outside under the open sky. The Nandī¹⁰⁵ lay headless in front of it. Awaiting donations, the trustees plan to renovate the Reṇukeśvara shrine in the future as well, but the other *liṅga* was prioritized. Hence, the Paraśūrāmeśvara shrine some 30 meters away was now nearly completely renovated and a priest performed *pūjā* there daily. The people we met told us they did not know for how long the shrines had been deserted, nor did anyone who lived nearby, so evidently it had been so for quite a while. Nor did they know how old the temple was, but based on the type of stone used in the temple building they claimed it was at least 800 years old. Of course, this is impossible for me to verify.

As briefly mentioned in footnote 83 (p. 35), my findings in Pallur do not agree with Shulman's mentioning of the respective shrines being situated "within the Brahmin temple complex focused on the god Śiva" (1985, 120)¹⁰⁶. I do not know where he got this information, but as far as my own fieldwork was concerned, none of the people in Kanchipuram that Mr. Subramanian asked (that is, before we were directed to Pallur) knew of *liṅgas* bearing these names within any Śaiva Kanchi temple. Nor are the *liṅgas* mentioned in the list of 108 *śivaliṅgas* in Kanchipuram (in Seshadri 2003, 97-102), containing *liṅgas* from both the city's major Śaiva temple complexes, as well as its smaller temples. Moreover, the people we met at the Pallur shrine who were in charge of the renovation told us that these indeed were the two *liṅgas* mentioned in the *Kāñcīppurāṇa*, and they gave us a reprint of the story in the Tamil *Kāñcīppurāṇa* written in modern Tamil¹⁰⁷. There was also a small (now dried up) river close to the shrines, and if we recall the first sentence of the *KM*, the *liṅgas* are

¹⁰⁴ See pictures 18 and 19.

¹⁰⁵ Nandī, the bull, is Śiva's vehicle and present at his temples.

¹⁰⁶ Also "[...] ein 'Volks'-Heiligtum innerhalb eines brahmanischen Tempelkomplexes". (Shulman 1984, 123)

¹⁰⁷ The *Kāñcīppurāṇa* is written in an older and poetic style of Tamil.

“situated at the southern shore of the river”¹⁰⁸. Based on these findings, I argue that the *līngas* are in fact *not* within a Brahmin Śaiva temple complex as suggested by Shulman, but further away in the small village of Pallur.

After establishing the *līnga* in Kanchipuram, Reṇukā serenely prayed to it, and Śiva and Pārvati appeared before her. In the following paragraphs in particular is the Śaiva sectarian feel of the story striking. The epic and *Purāṇic* accounts of the story mostly belong to the Vaiṣṇava tradition¹⁰⁹, after all Paraśurāma is an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. This rendering however, is genuinely Śaiva in orientation, and both Paraśurāma and Reṇukā are ardent devotees of Śiva¹¹⁰. Moreover, village goddesses like Reṇukā are generally associated with Śiva, and as we saw in the previous chapter, often seen as forms of Pārvatī.

By the time Reṇukā makes the prayer to Śiva she is a widow, and she considers herself unjustly harmed. In contrast to the *Mbh* and *Bhp*, Reṇukā *remembers* the unjust deeds done to her, which makes the basis for her wish. As will be discussed in detail in chapter 7, all Tamil women are believed to possess extraordinary powers (*śakti*) that may cause life, wealth and prosperity, but also ruin and death (cf. Wadley 1980, 153), depending on the woman’s marital status and condition of fertility (Reynolds 1980, 37). On the auspicious end of the scale, we find the married woman (Ta. *cumaṅkali*) with positive powers, and on the other, the dangerous and inauspicious widow. Reṇukā’s fall from high status to sorrow and humiliation leaves Reṇukā with an ambivalent and unpredictable *śakti*, that might make her even more powerful than the great gods (as we shall see happen when we proceed to the oral tales). Moreover, when she is deified in the *KM*, she is a widow, “a unique development of the myth and one that links her immediately to the Tamil village goddesses” (Shulman 1980, 127). Widows are in Tamil Nadu (as in India in general) considered highly inauspicious; indeed they are “the most inauspicious of all beings” (Wadley 1980, 155) and have a potentially fierce form of *śakti*. Van Voorthuizen (2001, 262), argues that women who die virgins, unwed, barren, divorced, adulterers or widows are likely to transform into minor fierce goddesses (*ammaṅ*, *devatā*) or malevolent spirits (*pēy*). On her own request, Śiva makes

¹⁰⁸ The rivers Palar and Vegāvatī are important in the history of Kanchipuram. However the present day city is on the northern shore of these rivers and Pallur is even further north, meaning that the river mentioned in this verse cannot be one of these two.

¹⁰⁹ The 18 major *Purāṇas* are classified as belonging to either aspect of the *trimūrti*. The *Bhp* is a Vaiṣṇava *Purāṇa*, and all other *Purāṇas* in which Reṇukā is mentioned are either Vaiṣṇava or Brāhma, except the *Reṇukāmāhātmyam* from the *Skandapurāṇa*, which is Śaiva. As mentioned, the *KM* also claims to belong to the *Skandapurāṇa*. The epics are also primarily Vaiṣṇava in orientation (Flood 1996, 104).

¹¹⁰ Paraśurāma is also a devotee of Śiva in some of the *Purāṇas*: the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa*, *Brahmavaivartapurāṇa* and *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa*, where he gets his axe from Śiva. Gail (1977, 227) calls this an “open” Vaiṣṇavism.

Reṇukā a goddess present in Kanchipuram granting benefits to her devotees during the *kaliyuga*. That she particularly was concerned with *kaliyuga* was a belief some of my informants shared: Rājalakshmi, a devotee of Karumāriyamman explained to me: “Her main reason for coming into this world is to correct the bad things that take place here. As far as *kaliyuga* is concerned, it is increasing. So to control that, [the goddess] has taken form.” Next, Śiva states that Reṇukā in particular is a goddess “for those who are devoid of the moral codes and austerities of class and stage of life”¹¹¹, namely the lowest class of *sūdras*, who by Brahminical scriptural injunctions are excluded from Vedic studies and ritual and shunned by the upper classes. This is a fact that holds true to a certain degree: As discussed in section 3.1 Reṇukā-Māriyamman is traditionally and commonly (but not always) served by non-Brahmin priests of lower castes, but Reṇukā-Māriyamman is now worshipped more widely and amongst broader categories of people. Her devotees come from all strata of society, even Christians and Muslims approach her in time of disease, as she is considered a very powerful goddess who gives visible results in everyday mundane matters. After the deification, Śiva gives Reṇukā the name Māri. This confirms the pattern of the oral myths, which I will turn to now, where Reṇukā becomes the goddess Māriyamman once she is revived, however with her head placed upon the body of an outcaste.

¹¹¹ *varṇāśramācāradharmarahitānām viśeṣataḥ*.

5 Oral Myths

While in the field I collected eleven oral Reṇukā tales of various lengths. In this chapter I will present two of these oral versions of the Reṇukā story: The first myth from the Pāṭavēṭṭammaṇ temple, a small and humble, but busy, non-Brahmanical Goddess temple in Kanchipuram, the second from a small village called Uthukadu, 30 km east of the city. I narrowed the presentation down to two myths because of space, but contents from the other myths will also be included in the discussion when necessary. The myth from the Pāṭavēṭṭammaṇ temple was chosen because it was by far the most elaborated Reṇukā myth. Besides, content wise it is quite similar to the other myths I was told, and therefore a good example of a Reṇukā myth from the Kanchipuram area. The myth from Uthukadu on the other hand, contains a significant difference from all other myths, which is why I felt the importance of including this particular version of the story.

5.1 The Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ Temple

Sitting on the back of Mr. Subramanian's scooter he drives towards the Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ temple. We follow the southern main road that leads out of the city, drive over a bridge, turn right at a church, and reach the small temple after half a minute's ride along a tiny, dusty side road. I step off the scooter and leave my shoes, lift the end of my sari tripping bare feet over the monsoon-wet ground and inside the temple building. It is not very big, an open square room where the goddess is situated in a small sanctum in the middle, looking straight out on the road past her lion and trisula, and there are a few more additional shrines around her. Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ is a peaceful (śānta) goddess. She is represented as a full statue with a head in front, both of which are beautifully adorned with yellow and white flowers, and she will be further decorated after we leave, since it is the middle of the navarātri festival. Tonight, Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ will be clad in ice and cotton and disguised as a paṇilīṅka (ice liṅga), so Mr. Venkatesh and his wife are waiting for a massive ice-block to arrive. Mr. Venkatesh, the priest, has not arrived yet, as he is busy with festival preparations. His wife lets us have darśana of the goddess. I bow my head before Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ with joined palms to the sound of the bell and my eyes meet hers before I wave the āraṭi fire onto my eyes, drink a sip of the tīrtam (abhiṣeka water of the goddess) and pour the rest over my hair. Then I apply a dot of red kumkum on my forehead and put some jasmines in my hair. We circumambulate the

sanctum and wait. When Venkatesh arrives on his scooter, he, Subramanian and I sit down on the floor between the sanctum and the navagraha shrine. The interview is conducted there, accompanied by the outside rain and vehicles and ox carts occasionally driving by.

This was not my first meeting with this small temple and Mr. Venkatesh. I had been privileged to visit it exactly two years ago, on the occasion of the last day of *navarātri*¹¹². This year I would enjoy more astonishing and amazing experiences here, including *darśanas* of the goddess in various elaborate *alaṃkāras* (decorations of the goddess), and observing a piercing ritual accompanied by hours of intense drumming and praise songs to the goddess.

Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ is the goddess Reṇukā, who is a form of Māriyamman. She bears this name because her main temple is in Padaivedu¹¹³, the village that is regarded the very place her life story took place, as I was told by many of my informants. Mr. Venkatesh, her main priest, is a non-Brahmin who belongs to the ceṅkuntar Mutaliyār community, and it was his grandmother who built the temple and installed the idol there. Despite being small and modest, this temple is very popular, and celebrates festivals in a grand manner. During the functions I saw, there was a long line of devotees far down the road waiting to have *darśana* of the *alaṃkāras*¹¹⁴.

Venkatesh is a well-versed priest (something I also saw during the hours long piercing ritual where he was the lead singer) and during our two extensive interviews he narrated the stories of five of Reṇukā's incarnations to me, detailed and with affection. Unfortunately I cannot include them all here, but here is Venkatesh's story of Reṇukā and her transformation into Māriyamman¹¹⁵.

Venkatesh's myth

Brahma and Sarasvatī had an argument, and he caused her to be born in a low family. She cursed him back: "wherever I am born, even in a low family and if you are a Brahmin, I will marry you!" So Sarasvatī was born in a low family and Brahma as the son of a priest. The priest, who knew all the Vedas and the 64 arts, foresaw that the son would marry a girl of a lower community when he came of age. Daily when the boy's mother sent him to the temple

¹¹² *Vijayadaśamī* (lit. victory on the 10th [day]), when the goddess' triumph over the buffalo demon is enacted in many goddess temples.

¹¹³ Padaivedu is in Tiruvannamalai district, ca. 60 km from Tiruvannamalai.

¹¹⁴ There were more devotees than we saw during Navaratri in 2009, and they advertised the festival more elaborately. The *alaṃkāras* were more elaborate or "fancy" too, meaning the temple clearly received more donations this year. See picture 11 for the Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ temple decorated with lights for *navarātri*. The picture shows the entire temple from outside.

¹¹⁵ According to Venkatesh this story presents two incarnations: Reṇukā (before the beheading) and Māriyamman (when revived). The birth of Satiyanasūyā is retold below. The other two incarnations were Aṅkāla amman and Calcutta Kalī.

with *naivedya* to god, she cried because of her son's fate. So it happened that one day on his way to the temple, the boy slipped, and returned home. He found his mother crying, and asked her why. She told him what his father had foreseen. The boy said: "do not cry for this! To avoid the curse, I will start going from temple to temple as a *yatri* [pilgrim]." Thus the son became a *yatri* so that he would not marry. One day he came to a kingdom and wished to do a *homa* [sacrifice] there. Day after day, people from different houses of lower families came with wood¹¹⁶. Now Sarasvatī was born in one of these families, and when her day came, it was raining heavily. She was drenched, and felt comfortable in the heat of the *homa*. Since she was wet her entire body was visible, and they both lost control. Afterwards the boy thought: "before the sun rises, I should leave this place." But the lady was pregnant and immediately she got a girl-child¹¹⁷. They left the child and went away together. Like that they had seven children, the first was the goddess of Samayapuram and the last was Auvaīyār¹¹⁸. Now out of the seven, one was the goddess at Uthukadu¹¹⁹. The dhobis [cloth washers] nearby saw the child and gave it to the king, who had no issue. As time went by, the sage Nārada decided to marry the sage Jamadagni to this girl. Her name was Reṇukā and Nārada performed their marriage.

They had 4 children, the last one called Paraśurāma. After that, they only concentrated on *tapas* [penance]. Jamadagni asked Reṇukā to go to the bank of Ganges to get water. She replied: "you denied my father's offer of dowry when we got married, how can I fetch water without anything?" He replied: "if you are a good wife to me, you can bring water by any means." She went and made a pot out of mud, fetched water, and *pūjā* was performed. This was the daily routine. One day she was fetching water; a *gandharva* was in the sky, whose image was visible in the water. She thought: "is there such a beautiful person on this earth?" She lost her chastity [*karpū*] and the pot broke. The sage saw this by his *jñānadr̥ṣṭi* [spiritual powers] and became angry. He called his first son and told him his mother had lost her chastity, and ordered him to kill her. But he won't kill his mother who has given birth to him, so he curses his son into a dog. Jamadagni calls the second son. He also refused to kill her, since the mother is the first temple for any child. He cursed him into a gypsy [*Narikkuravar*¹²⁰], and that is why dogs and gypsies are like brothers. He called his third son. He was ready to obey, and the sage praised him as a good son and blessed him with prosperity. Once he gave his blessing, the son changed his mind. But the blessing was given, and nothing could be done. So he and his family became the loom-people over here, the *sah* community¹²¹ of Jamadagni *gotra* [family line]. He called his fourth son, Paraśurāma. He would obey if he was granted three boons, and the sage agreed. Seeing Paraśurāma on his way to kill her, Reṇukā ran away. He chased her to the dhobi people who were washing clothes. They hid her between the clothes. From there she ran to the fishermen's house. They also saved her. Then she ran to the colony where the low caste people reside. A woman there gave her refuge and hid her. Paraśurāma arrived and killed the woman. Reṇukā devī came out and asked: "What have you done!" He chopped her head off also, went to his father and

¹¹⁶ The firewood is to be brought and given by people of the lower castes.

¹¹⁷ There is a saying in Tamil: "The pregnancy of a sage does not stay a night" (*riṣi piṇṭam iravu taṅkātu*).

¹¹⁸ Samayapuram is home to a famous Māriyamman temple. Auvaīyār is a female Tamil poet saint from the Sangam period (ca. 300 BCE – 300 CE).

¹¹⁹ Uthukadu is situated ca. 30 km east of Kanchipuram. According to Venkatesh, this was the birthplace of Reṇukā. A myth I collected in Uthukadu will be presented in the next section.

¹²⁰ The Narikkuravars are a nomadic tribe, originally hunters and gatherers, nowadays particularly selling beaded ornaments but also jackal teeth, peacock feathers, herbs, medicines and so on, and they are also begging. They are called "the gypsies of Tamil Nadu", and believed to be the ancestors of the Romani people, a few of whom moved south and not west. For more on the Narikkuravars see http://www.wiki.indianfolklore.org/index.php?title=Introduction_to_Narikuruvar_Digital_Archive, and http://www.wiki.indianfolklore.org/index.php?title=09_Aug.-10_Aug.

¹²¹ Sah is a community that specializes in hand loom silk saris. Silk shops with the surname Sah had commercials all over Kanchipuram. Whether or not they were Jamadagni *gotra* remains uncertain.

asked for the boons. First – his dead mother should come alive. Next, he should be at his mother’s side. Third, he should not be cursed as a son who had wronged his father. Jamadagni gave him his *kamaṇḍalu* [vessel carried by ascetics] and asked him to sprinkle water on his mother in order to give her life. He became so happy that in the joy he interchanged the women’s heads. The lady’s head was attached to Reṇukā devī’s body and vice versa. It was *māri* [changed]. When they woke up, they realized the change. Paraśurāma went to Jamadagni and told him what had happened. Jamadagni said: “Nothing can be done. She cannot be accepted inside the hermitage again.” He gave his son the *navadhānya* [9 grains]¹²² and said: “Give this to your mother. She has to find a way to survive with this!”

Reṇukā devī asked: “If I go into the village, will anyone accept me? I have the body of a scheduled caste and the head of a Brahmin! How can I survive with the *navadhānya*?” Jamadagni replied: “Use them as *muttu* [pearls]. Since you have changed and then come, call yourself Urumāri [*uru* = body, shape, *māri* = changed]¹²³. Whomever you put the beads on will have fever for three days, *muttu* the fourth day, and the fifth day they will have allergy on their body. They must only eat items like buttermilk, tender coconut and *panagam*¹²⁴. Once you get *pūjā* it will calm down.” She took the *muttu*, and went to *devaloka* [heaven]. First she went to lord Śiva and put the *muttu* on him. He was not able to bear the pain, so he gave her his *śūlam* [trident] and milk cow. The *muttu* got reduced, and she went to brahmaloka and put the *muttu* on lord Brahma. She got a boon from him that wherever she puts the *muttu*, Brahma should not come. Brahma writes the fate of each person, but where she goes and puts the *muttu*, he should not interrupt. This is the goddess’ domain. Brahma has no authority to decide the destiny of people once she has put the *muttu*. Then she went to Vaikuṇṭha and put the *muttu* on lord Viṣṇu. She took pity on him seeing his pain and he gave her his disc and conch in order for her to reduce it. Then she went to Yamaloka and put even more *muttu* on Yama, all the nine grains she put on him. He was not able to bear it and called all the *vaidyas* [doctors], but they were not able to diagnose him out of the 4448 diseases¹²⁵. At that time the goddess came on Yama’s wife [i.e. she possessed her] and said: “I have put the *muttu* on you, but I will also make it come down. Do not throw your rope [i.e. kill anyone] where I have put the *muttu*. Build a temple for me and offer me *kūḷ*.” So Yama built a temple for her in Padaivedu, and the wife of Yama was the first person on which the goddess came. After *pūjā* was performed, the *muttu* came down. Reṇukā devī sat in the temple and her body went into earth. Only the head part was outside. This was her form. Even now if someone is affected, Paraśurāma will be beside them as their own son and accept the *muttu*.

Much of the content in Mr. Venkatesh’s story is quite different from the epic and *Purāṇic* stories, although they share the same plot. There are also many differences from the more Sanskritized *KM*, which also is a local version of the Reṇukā tale. The most important difference in this myth as opposed to all Sanskrit versions is Reṇukā’s head exchange with a low caste woman. Further, Mr. Venkatesh tells how Reṇukā-Māriyamman became the pox goddess. In the following paragraphs I will go through the contents in this myth, but the larger motifs of chastity, beheading and revival as a pox goddess will be treated more thoroughly in chapters 6 and 7.

¹²² The *navadhānya* are *pūjā* items offered to the *navagrahas* (9 planets): wheat, rice, pigeon peas (*toor dāl*), mung beans (*mung dāl*), chickpeas (*chana dāl*), kidney beans (*rajma dāl*) and sesame.

¹²³ From this comes the saying “*urumāri koṇṭa karumāri*” – she whose form changed became Karumāri.

¹²⁴ *Panagam* is a drink of water mixed with jaggery, cardamom and lime or lemon.

¹²⁵ According to the 18 Tamil *siddhas* who specialized in medicine there are 4448 classified diseases.

Venkatesh’s account starts in the divine world with a quarrel of Brahma and Sarasvatī, who are born in the human world due to a mutual curse. Inevitably, as the curse predicted, they become parents of 7 children, one of whom is Reṇukā. Thus, although Reṇukā appears as a human being before her deification (as she does in the *KM* too), her origin is still (semi-) divine. Brahma and Sarasvatī then leave her at Uthukadu. Here we see the first local anchoring of this myth: Uthukadu is only a short drive from Kanchipuram, and houses a relatively famous Ellayammaṅ temple¹²⁶. The dhobis find her there and hand her over to the childless king. The motif of Reṇukā being a “leftover child” raised by the king with no issue was also part of the myth Mr. Vishnukumar told me (that is not included here due to lack of space). According to him, Reṇukā was born in a *purru*, discovered by a hunter and given to the childless king who raised her. This corresponds with Reṇukā being a king’s daughter in the epic-*Purāṇic* versions and in the *KM*¹²⁷, but makes at the same time Reṇukā’s origin somewhat more “mystical” in the oral tales. The dhobis who find Reṇukā in Venkatesh’s story are new characters for the first time encounterer of this myth, but they appear very frequently in the oral Reṇukā tales I was told. The dhobis are a caste group among the *dalits* that specialize in washing clothes. Quite often (although in the myth retold above it is a “colony¹²⁸ lady”) it is a dhobi lady that is beheaded along with Reṇukā, and whose body gets attached to Reṇukā’s head and vice versa. Other versions merely say it was an outcaste without mentioning any further caste affiliation.

The tale now follows the structure of the epic-*Purāṇic* myth until Reṇukā is beheaded, although with certain elaborations. Reṇukā marries Jamadagni, and they have four children, the youngest being Paraśurāma. Reṇukā’s daily routine is to fetch water for Jamadagni’s *pūjā*, while making a pot out of mud by the power of her chastity. Once, she sees the reflection of a *gandharva* in the water and thinks about his beautiful appearance, and from that moment on her chastity is broken, as well as her powers. Jamadagni realizes this using his spiritual powers, and orders each of his sons to kill her. The three eldest sons all refuse to do so, and are turned into a dog, a gypsy and a *sah* weaver. But Paraśurāma on the other hand, sets out to kill his mother on the promise of three boons. Killing a mother is a great sin¹²⁹, but so is disobeying one’s father. Jamadagni lays the greatest burden of all upon his son when asking

¹²⁶ For instance, the Tumpavaṇatu ammaṅ temple houses a shrine to Uthukadu Ellayammaṅ.

¹²⁷ According to the *Mbh* Reṇukā’s father is king Prasenajit, to the *Bhp* king Reṇu and to the *KM* king Abhedyavarman.

¹²⁸ The colony is a residential area for low caste people.

¹²⁹ According to Kane (1968, 94), a Brahmin “had to undergo penance till his last breath” if he killed his own father, mother, full brother, teacher of the Veda, a Brahmin who has studied the Veda or consecrated sacred Vedic fires.

him to kill his mother. A mother is held in particularly high regard in Indian culture. The *Mānavadharmasāstra* states that “the teacher is ten times greater than the tutor; the father is a hundred times greater than the teacher, but the mother is a thousand times greater than the father” (2.145, Olivelle 2005). That Paraśurāma knew for certain beforehand that he would get the boon(s) (and therefore planning to use it in order to set things right again) is a difference between the versions we encountered in the previous chapter, where Paraśurāma either obeys with no hesitation and gets the boon(s) only afterwards, or obeys “knowing the supernatural powers” of Jamadagni, but without any real assurance other than expecting to be granted them. When confronted with the dilemma between obeying his father and killing his mother Paraśurāma chooses the latter, but not without remorse. In the *KM*, where he has not secured his boons beforehand, Paraśurāma begs Jamadagni for mercy after killing Reṇukā, when realizing the bad karma he has obtained. Jamadagni confirms the severity of the crime by stating that killing one’s mother is “hated among men and does not lead to heaven”, and asks him to revive her. In the *MB*, Jamadagni states spontaneously after calming down that this “horrible action” was actually his own fault and grants Paraśurāma boons. However, having Paraśurāma know beforehand that he will be given an opportunity to reverse things makes the Paraśurāma character in the oral version appear milder, even though committing a grave sin.

After being promised the boons, Paraśurāma first chases Reṇukā to the dhobis, then to the fishermen, and lastly to the colony, where Paraśurāma cuts off both Reṇukā’s head as well as that of the outcaste woman that hid her. This chase, which eventually leads to Paraśurāma killing two women instead of one, is a particular feature only found in the oral myths. Most versions I was told varied slightly regarding what kind of low caste people who hid Reṇukā, but commonly the dhobis were involved at some stage. Apart from setting the scene for Reṇukā’s head exchange with a low caste woman, these stories explain the goddess’ desire for certain kinds of *naivedya* and music. According to Srikumar gurukkaḷ of the Cantaveḷiyammaṅ temple, Reṇukā first fled to the house of a shoemaker, where she was offered *kañji* (rice gruel), and then to the house of a dhobi lady who offered her *kūḷ* before they were both beheaded. In the Tumpavaṅatu ammaṅ temple, I was told that she ran to the dhobis first and hid there, and then to the *ūrkkāvalaṅs* (a *dalit* group who guard the city), where she was offered dried fish and then was beheaded along with an outcaste woman. The foods mentioned in these stories were offerings to the goddess in the respective temples (although *kūḷ* was given to Reṇukā-Māriyammaṅ in all her temples, being one of her main

offerings). According to Mr. Subramanian, priest in the Reṇukā ampāl temple of the ceṭṭiyār community, Reṇukā hid behind a *līṅga* in a Śiva temple where the *pūjāri* played *pampai* and *uṭukai*. Since this temple belonged to the fishermen, she enjoys music of the drums as well as *cilampam*¹³⁰, an instrument hereditarily used by the fishermen.

The chase ends in the decapitation of Reṇukā along with a low caste woman. After cutting off both women’s heads, Paraśurāma asks Jamadagni for the boons. The first boon is that he will be by his mother’s side. This is why there is a statue (*mūrti*) of Paraśurāma at Reṇukā’s left hand side in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ temple¹³¹, which is said to take on the *muttu* or pox pearls from the sick people who come to the temple to get cured. The other boons of Paraśurāma are that his mother shall regain life, and that he will not be cursed as a son disobeying his father. In his joy of getting his mother back Paraśurāma changes the head of Reṇukā with that of the colony lady and vice versa when he revives her: Reṇukā now bears the head of a Brahmin on the body of a scheduled caste. Actually, the epic-*Purāṇic* Reṇukā is *kṣatriya* by birth and not a Brahmin, as is Reṇukā in the *KM*. However, in the oral Reṇukā myths, my informants emphasized the Brahmin-*śūdra* dichotomy to the extent that I argue what seems important is the mixture of the highest and lowest castes. In Indian society the extremes of class are the Brahmin and scheduled castes, and having Reṇukā pose as a Brahmin in the stories enables a stronger emphasis on the distinction of high and low than if she were a *kṣatriya*. In addition, in South India there are mainly Brahmin and *śūdra* groups. This means that having Reṇukā become half Brahmin half *śūdra* reflects the actual social status quo. As I mentioned, according to the oral myths, Reṇukā-Māriyamman’s changed body most often belongs to a dhobi, but sometimes (as here) also to an outcaste woman in more general terms.

In Venkatesh’s words, Reṇukā is changed (*māri*) after the head exchange and from that time on known as Māriyamman. Jamadagni cannot accept Reṇukā as his wife bearing the body of an outcaste¹³², and she has to find another way to survive. He sends her away after giving her the *navadhānya* to use as *muttu* (lit. “pearls”). To “put *muttu*” is the common way

¹³⁰ *Cilampam* is a percussion instrument, a handheld brass ring with bells inside. I saw *pampai*, *uṭukai* and *cilampam* being used during rituals e.g. in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ temple and the Reṇukā ampāl temple of the Ceṅkuntar community.

¹³¹ See picture 8.

¹³² Note that Paraśurāma remains by her side even though Jamadagni rejects her. The Apastamba dharmasūtra says: “[...] even if [the mother] has fallen from caste, [the son] must always serve her” (1.28,9) and Vasiṣṭha dharmasūtra “a mother is never an outcaste to her son” (13.47) (Olivelle 2000).

to describe the goddess giving pox diseases¹³³, where the pustules are seen as Māriyamman's pearls, and a common name for Māriyamman is Muttumāriyamman. Reṇukā then goes to *devaloka* and tests the *muttu* on the great Brahmanical gods who give her boons and weapons in order for her to remove their unbearable pain. The boons Māriyamman gets from Brahma and Yama are particularly interesting. By disabling Brahma to write the fate of those affected with pox and disqualify the death god Yama to take their lives, Māriyamman establishes the pox diseases as her own domain completely, where not even a great god can interrupt. Māriyamman alone is in charge of giving and removing *muttu* and in control of death¹³⁴, without intervention from anyone. This is why people come to her temples to get cured from this particular disease, and are generally skeptical towards doctors and modern medicine healing the pox. Yama then builds a temple and performs *pūjā* for Reṇukā-Māriyamman in Padaivedu where she settles after immersing her outcaste body into the earth so that only her head is visible. Again Mr. Venkatesh anchors the myth locally, this time to Padaivedu, which houses a famous Reṇukā temple of great esteem to many of my informants. The goddess there is said to have special powers, and moreover the place is “situated so that it has microcosmical powers”, according to one informant. A part of the Padaivedu *sthalapurāṇa* will be addressed in the next chapter.

5.2 The Dhobis' Version

After about an hour-long rickshaw ride eastwards from Kanchi, we reach the Ellayamman temple in Uthukadu, the small village pointed out to me by Mr. Venkatesh as the birthplace of Reṇukā¹³⁵. The sun is strong today and the sky clear blue, making the heat excessive. Two women sit outside the temple cooking poṅkal on provisional fires while a cow pokes around in a small pile of garbage. It soon becomes clear that Ellayamman here is not connected to the Reṇukā story, but as we circumambulate the temple after darśana a white-clad man with a red dot of kumkum on his forehead approaches us and introduces himself as Santosh. Santosh is a goldsmith living nearby, and offers to tell us about the goddesses in Uthukadu. We learn from him that Ellayamman's sister Ponniamman, who has a small shrine 2 km away in a

¹³³ My one English-speaking informant also used this expression: “All goddesses [...] give the pearl. Which ever god you worship, they give you the pearl”.

¹³⁴ In Venkatesh's myth this is just explicitly stated by the fact that Yama does *not* have the right to kill anyone affected by pox (meaning that this is Māriyamman's domain). But e.g. in the account cited by Beck (1981, 126-7) Reṇukā obtains the “right to kill some people on earth with her pearls of smallpox” from Yama.

¹³⁵ However, the people I interviewed at Uthukadu did not share this view.

place called Erikarai, is the local goddess who takes on the Reṇukā story. Santosh suggests taking us to Ponniyamman's shrine after a visit to the colony and the dhobis' quarters, where Ponniyamman is taken during her annual procession.

The roads in the colony are filled with concrete houses and thatched huts alike. We stop at a small Māriyamman temple emptied of people, but as soon we arrive a large crowd gathers curiously around us. An old woman brings the key and we go inside. Two sickles lean against the door to Māriyamman's sanctum. This Māriyamman is a full statue with no head in front. The people outside the temple are talkative and seem aroused by the scene we are creating this morning. From the colony we proceed to the dhobis' quarters, where a group of dhobis gather around our rickshaw that has stopped in the middle of the sunny street. This is the family who hereditarily keep Ponniyamman in their house during her annual procession through the village. Two old women eagerly speak all at once and tell us the story of the goddess we are about to visit. We proceed and reach the Ponniyamman shrine after a short rickshaw ride alongside endless green fields with grazing herds of cattle and buffalos, and passing women on the road with huge bundles of firewood on their heads. A trisula on the side of the road indicates the presence of a goddess, and we have to walk through a field before we reach her shrine, which lies on the shore of a giant lake. The Ponniyamman shrine is in the open and built around a giant tree with several colorful ribbons tied around its branches. The walls are painted in red and white stripes¹³⁶. The goddess herself has the form of a two-meter long aniconic stone and lies horizontally beneath the branches wearing an orange sari and a garland¹³⁷. Beside her are her seven children, also represented as seven aniconic stones, and some nāga stones. Ponniyamman lies here in order to prevent the lake from flowing over and harming the village.

As I discussed in the previous section, Reṇukā usually hides either at a dhobi's house or in the colony when chased for having her head cut off. There she is beheaded along with a woman of either group. But what happens when the dhobis themselves tell the story? In Uthukadu I visited the street where the dhobis lived, and spoke to some dhobi women who told me their version of the Reṇukā story.

The Reṇukā tale I was told by the dhobis in Uthukadu differs from all other stories I was told during fieldwork in one important aspect. According to them, Reṇukā bears the *head*

¹³⁶ Walls painted in red and white stripes are a common sight in South Indian temples, the red color symbolizing vitality and the white well-being and stability (Beck 1969, 553-4,558).

¹³⁷ See picture 17.

of an outcaste woman on her own Brahmin body. In Venkatesh’s account of the myth, as in all other versions I have encountered¹³⁸, Reṇukā gets her own head placed on an outcaste’s *body*. Then she is revived and deified as Māriyamman. In this way, bearing her own head on an outcaste’s body, she has become half Brahmin–half outcaste. That the *head* belonged to Reṇukā and the *body* to the outcaste woman was taken for granted by most informants, but some also elaborated why, e.g. Mr. Subramanian, a devotee of Cantaveḷiyamman: “The heads were exchanged. And who is the mother [of Paraśurāma]? Where the brain is. So where the head is only is his mother.” That the head was the original bodypart belonging to Reṇukā and not the body was the view held by all informants in Kanchipuram, Brahmins and lower castes alike. The opposite was never an alternative. That Reṇukā bears a Brahmin head was also given as a reason for why the head alone (which is “pure”) is worshipped in temples.

In the dhobis’ account, Reṇukā is known as Ponniyamman, a goddess of rivers¹³⁹, who is a form of Pārvatī. Further, Jamadagni is replaced by lord Śiva.

The dhobis’ version

It is given in the scriptures; it was we who gave her refuge. [...] We gave refuge to Ponniyamman. She went to fetch water to perform *abhiṣeka* [ablution] to lord Śiva. At that time a saint [*cuvāmiyār*] was traveling in the sky in the *garuḍavāhana*¹⁴⁰ [Karutaṅ]. She didn’t even see him directly. She sees the shadow and thinks he is beautiful. Everyday she fetches water making a pot of raw clay to do *abhiṣeka* to Śiva. The moment she thinks this the pot broke. It was lord Śiva who was angry, stating that she fancied the saint. So Īcuvaraṅ [i.e. Śiva] himself comes to kill her. Ponniyamman is Pārvatī and they have a son called Paraśurāma. He instructs him to kill her, and says if he obeys, he’ll be granted a boon. Paraśurāma chases her and first she takes refuge in a dhobi’s house. From there she runs and takes refuge in a house in the colony. When Paraśurāma cuts her head off, he chops both his mother’s head and [that of] the lady in the colony. He brings a head to prove that he has slain her, but by mistake he brings the wrong head. Śiva asks what he wants, and he says that he only wants his mother. Since he exchanged [the heads], it became the body of his wife and the head of the colony lady. Śiva rejected her and did not allow her inside the house. From there she left Śiva and came to Erikarai [2 km from Uthukadu]. She took the seven children [of the colony lady whose head she bears]. That way she reached this place. [...] Wherever you go in Erikarai, you will find Ponniyamman.

¹³⁸ This holds true for all other versions I was told in the field, as well as all those I have encountered in scholarly sources. However, some accounts of the Reṇukā story also mention that the *other* woman was revived as well, bearing Reṇukā’s body and the outcaste woman’s head, and according to some of these myths the other woman also becomes a goddess (see e.g. Dange (1996, 387-9)). But in this myth, bearing the outcaste’s head is Reṇukā’s continuation, and the other woman is left out of the story. Most of my informants did not mention what happened to the other woman, which may leave the impression that she was not revived at all. However according to Mr. Vishnukumar she became Mātaṅki, a female demon, and according to Mr. Arumugasamy she burnt herself and turned to ashes since she was not accepted by the fishing community where she lived with her changed body. After her death she is regarded a minor deity among the fishermen and dhobis.

¹³⁹ The name Ponniyamman (which denotes a river goddess) might derive from the river Ponni (another name of the Kaveri river), flowing southeast from the Western Ghats through Karnataka and Tamil Nadu before reaching the Bay of Bengal.

¹⁴⁰ The eagle Garuḍa is the vehicle (San. *vāhana*) of Viṣṇu,

The first thing the dhobi women who narrated the myth do is to refer the story to scriptural authorities for strengthening its authentication. This also has to do with legitimizing the dhobis' role in a local ritual, where the very family I interviewed hereditarily gives Ponniyamman shelter during the eight days of the annual festival, in which the Reṇukā story is reenacted. The dhobi women emphasize that this is the way it was and will continue to be – since the scriptures say so (however without specifying *which* scriptures). During this festival (*utsava*) in held the month of *Māci* (mid. February – mid. March), the procession route of Ponniyamman is identical to Reṇukā's journey while being chased for beheading in the myth. During the festival, Ponniyamman is taken in procession for eight days, installed and brought in a pot¹⁴¹. The first Wednesday after *amavasya* (new moon day), the *kāppu* thread¹⁴² is tied around the pot and she is first brought to the *Piṭāri* temple (which is to be addressed shortly) and then to the Ellayamman temple (Ponniyamman's sister, whose temple is the main attraction in the village). Here she gets permission from the goddess to go to the dhobi's house, where she stays for eight days during which she is taken for hours long processions through the village twice a day. The eight day she is offered *kūl* and brought to the colony, wearing a blindfold. The reason for blindfolding the goddess while she visits the colony, is that she considers the colony her “mother's house” (*tāy vīṭu*)¹⁴³ since she was beheaded there. Since Ponniyamman carries a head belonging to a colony woman, she feels a strong connection to the colony and might not want to leave again if she were not blindfolded. While in the colony, the pot-making community makes a Paraśurāma idol of clay that is brought back along with Ponniyamman. The festival ends with Ponniyamman and Paraśurāma being taken to the Ellayamman temple where *bali* of goat, hen and three to four buffalos¹⁴⁴ are offered to Ponniyamman outside the walls of the temple complex. The morning after, both the pot and the Paraśurāma idol are dissolved in the lake nearby.

Returning to the story, Ponniyamman has a daily routine of fetching water for *pūjā*, here not for her husband, but for herself. For doing this, she makes a pot each day out of raw clay. Once she sees the shadow of a saint passing by in the sky in the *garuḍavāhana*. Admiring its beauty, the pot breaks, and her husband Śiva is angry. The chastity we know of

¹⁴¹ Installing the goddess in a pot is a common way of carrying her during processions. This pot contains water and a stick decorated with *nīm* and other flowers. For more details on the tradition of goddesses as pots, see Vatsal (2006).

¹⁴² The ritual thread rubbed with turmeric, tied in the beginning of the festival and removed at the end.

¹⁴³ The “mothers house” is a phrase used for the natal home of a girl, in contrast to the home she marries into.

¹⁴⁴ Buffalo sacrifices to the goddess are a pan-Indian phenomenon. Though banned by law to perform in Hindu temples (as is animal sacrifice in general), they are still performed, but outside the temple complexes as per the law. Sacrificing buffalos can be interpreted as a ritual enactment of Durgā killing the buffalo demon (cf. Craddock 1994, 167), the archetypical Indian goddess myth.

from the previous accounts is not stated explicitly here, but nevertheless symbolized in Ponniyamman's powers to form a pot of clay, which breaks when she thinks the saint's shadow is beautiful. Śiva then commands their son Paraśurāma to kill her and promises him a boon. Ponniyamman first runs to the dhobis for refuge, then to the colony. There she is beheaded along with an outcaste woman. Paraśurāma brings the wrong head home, and when he is granted his boon, that he wishes his mother back, he places the head of the outcaste woman on his mother's body. But why an outcaste *head* this time? Obviously, the story is told by the dhobis, themselves an outcaste group. Having Ponniyamman receive an outcaste head instead of a body identifies the goddess further with them; she is *their* goddess¹⁴⁵. I also argue that bearing an outcastes head makes Ponniyamman a more "poor" figure. Doniger (1999, 206-7) speaks about the impurity of Reṇukā bearing an outcastes body¹⁴⁶. It seems that carrying an outcaste *head* makes Ponniyamman even more impure. In contrast to Māriyamman in Mr. Venkatesh's story who stands up for herself and revenges the injustice done to her by giving the great gods pox, Ponniyamman gets exiled twice (as we will see shortly) without rebelling, and is forced to settle in a remote place far from the village's settlements. As far as I know she does not take on a boon to infect people with pox. In all, the Ponniyamman story rather resembles a forlorn goddess than a mighty Māriyamman with powers to subdue the great gods.

After Ponniyamman is revived with an outcaste's head on her own body, Śiva rejects her and refuses her to enter their home. The goddess then takes the seven children of the other beheaded woman and settles in Erikarai. The Ponniyamman shrine in Erikarai is a modest open-air shrine where no regular *pūjā* is performed. The shrine itself is situated in an uninhabited and desolate area, surrounded by paddy fields as far as the eye can see on one side and a quite big lake on the other. Ponniyamman is not represented in the form of a head in Erikarai although she takes on the Reṇukā story; here she is found in lying posture, because she is preventing the lake from flowing over. According to the local story, she was originally housed in another temple situated between Erikarai and Uthukadu, but one day it rained heavily and some other *piṭāris* (Tam. border goddesses) came to her temple for refuge. That

¹⁴⁵ Santosh, our goldsmith "tour-guide" for the day, also shared the view that Ponniyamman carries an outcaste head. This might be the general perception in the area, and not just of the dhobis.

¹⁴⁶ E.g. "the fused woman is a monster, *impure* and destructive, disease incarnate" (Doniger 1999, 206-7, my emphasis). She also mentions the account of the Reṇukā story quoted in Meyer (1986), where the body Reṇukā's head gets attached to belongs to a menstruating woman, making her even *more* impure.

day the *piṭāris* took over Ponniamman's temple and drove her away¹⁴⁷. Ponniamman has now been sent away from her home *twice* – the first time her husband wouldn't accept her, the second time the other village goddesses chased her away. She then took her seven children and went to the lake in Erikarai. Since she was afraid that the lake would flow over and damage the village because of the heavy downpour, she laid down near the water like a protective wall, and here she lies even today.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. the Tamil saying “*oṅṭi vantēri piṭāri ūr piṭāriya vērātice*” (One *piṭāri* that comes to halt in a place, drives away the *piṭāri* already residing there).

6 Reṇukā's revival as a pox goddess

As Srividya and I enter the gate of the Cantaveḷiyammaṅ temple, the special atmosphere hits me. This busy temple and its residing goddess have made quite an impression on me during my weeks in Kanchipuram. Compared to many of the smaller goddess temples in Kanchi, it is fairly big, with an outdoor area housing several sub-shrines. This temple is never empty. A family of five sit on the ground near the entrance; the woman and youngest child have tonsured their heads. More people sit inside the maṇḍapa in front of the sanctum and an old woman sweeps the ground. Two women hurriedly circumambulate the sanctum wearing wet saris and their hair loose. Some young boys run towards me and want me to photograph them, they are overjoyed when I do. And then there are all the sick people resting in a separate maṇḍapa to the left of the sanctum, some looking at me curiously, others asleep. Some women shake their heads and signal to me that my sari is nice. The heat is strong, and the flies many. We are met by Srikumar gurukkaḷ who takes us to have darśan before the interview.

Inside the sanctum, Srividya and I stand on each side of the door-frame of the inner stone chamber, where Srikumar waves the āraṭi lamp in circles before the goddess as he chants Sanskrit mantras and rings the bell. The black stone statue is adorned with several garlands, indeed her shape is almost not visible under them, and a red and orange sari. The head in front is also garlanded, and dressed in a red and yellow cloth. There's a small stone lion in front of the head, all covered in kumkum. The sanctum is narrow, warm and sweltering; several chandeliers are burning inside. The atmosphere is intense, and it smells sweetly of camphor. Drops of perspiration hit the ground before me, and my heart is pounding from the pulsating energy emerging from this narrow stone sanctum. Cantaveḷiyammaṅ is a fierce goddess, and considered very powerful. Her lidless eyes are wide open. They are shimmering mother-of-pearl in sharp contrast to the black statue, and her sharp gaze pierces right through me.

Cantaveḷiyammaṅ, whose temple is situated on the city border northwest in Kanchipuram, is famous for curing pox¹⁴⁸. Actually, this was the only goddess temple in the town where

¹⁴⁸ In all the goddess temples I visited, the goddess cured pox. Still, it seemed that the Cantaveḷiyammaṅ temple was somewhat more famous for this. First of all, the temple was bigger, and housed more facilities for the sick people, including a maṇḍapa where they could stay (whereas in other temples they slept on the floor) and a shed to dress in nīm garments. Second, my main informant here, Mr. Srikumar gurukkaḷ, emphasized the temple's

people affected with chickenpox still stayed while I visited, as the spring season is the peak time for outbursts of the disease, and I was there during autumn. Mr. Srikumar gurukkal emphasized the goddess' ability to cure during our first interview:

“This temple is famous for curing pox. [...] People who are not feeling well or are infected with the pox virus, or people who have problems with eyesight and people with problems related to black magic pray and stay in the temple for being relieved of it. But the main thing they come for, is pox.”

To cure disease is one of the attributes of Reṇukā-Māriyamman, and the cure of pox in particular. Indeed, this attribute seemed so central that the early missionaries and travellers named her “the goddess of smallpox” or “the smallpox goddess”, a reputation lingering even today, 35 years after the eradication of smallpox in April 1977 (Ferrari 2010, 144)¹⁴⁹. Now one can ask oneself whether this title is accurate today, considering that the disease is extinct. Following Ferrari (2010) who debates this (in his words “orientalist”) title with regard to the North Indian goddess Śītalā¹⁵⁰ in his article “Old Rituals for New Threats”, I wish to stress two points why this title is not fully appropriate when it comes to Māriyamman. First, her devotees never call Māriyamman “the smallpox goddess”. I heard no one call her this, as I explained in chapter 3: Tamils call her *ammaṇ* or *ampāl*. Second, the goddess has many other attributes, including curing several other diseases, of which smallpox was a particularly dangerous one, and the term “smallpox goddess” falls short and is simply not comprehensive enough¹⁵¹. However, being relieved of *chickenpox* is today a main reason why people come to her temples, so I will not reject the title “pox goddess” completely. Also, many myths I was told, including Mr. Venkatesh's account retold earlier in this chapter, explained how Reṇukā-Māriyamman became associated with pox¹⁵². This means that the narrators found this epithet particularly important. Still, I wish to stress that to her devotees Reṇukā-Māriyamman is also much *more* than a “pox goddess,” and I find it important to be aware of and reflect upon the

fame for curing pox very clearly from the beginning of our first interview, while in other temples I often had to ask specifically about this before the informants told me. See picture 13 of the *mandapa* and picture 12 for an overview of the temple from inside the main entrance.

¹⁴⁹ For instance, Van Voorthuizen (2001) titled her book section “Māriyamman's śakti: the miraculous power of a *smallpox goddess*” (my emphasis). I myself use “pox goddess” here, a reason for this will be stated below.

¹⁵⁰ Śītalā (lit. “the cool one, she who cools”) is the North Indian goddess of smallpox and shares many features with Māriyamman.

¹⁵¹ Younger (2001b, 100) argues likewise: “The missionaries who first observed Māriyamman worship were indeed so often told that offerings to her were to ward off smallpox that they described her as the ‘smallpox goddess’ [...]. Whereas that kind of functionalist label was probably never an adequate account of what Māriyamman meant to her worshippers, it is particularly inappropriate today when smallpox has been eradicated, and few worshippers even remember that she was ever closely associated with a concern about that particular disease.”

¹⁵² The myths do not distinguish between smallpox and chickenpox (we will see the folk etymology later), and neither do I when I entitle her “pox goddess”.

title's limitations before using it, as I by doing so support a scholarly tradition still contributing to maintain an outdated and perhaps inappropriate title.

According to my informants in Kanchi, apart from chickenpox the other afflictions Reṇukā-Māriyamman cures are in particular eye-diseases (such as blindness¹⁵³), removal of black magic and chasing away evil spirits. Other scholars mention that she cures fevers (Harman 2011), tuberculosis (Egnor 1984, Harman 2011), epidemic diseases (Beck 1981), deadly diseases (van Voorthuizen 2001) or sickness in general (Younger 1980). When it comes to these diseases though, people do not stay in the temples to be cured as they may when they have severe cases of chickenpox¹⁵⁴.

6.1.1 Reṇukā-Māriyamman's boon of *muttu*

In Mr. Venkatesh's myth, Māriyamman gets the *navadhānya* from Jamadagni to use as pox pearls (*muttu*) after she has been revived, since he will not accept her as his wife anymore in her changed form bearing the body of an outcaste. She then goes on to put *muttu* on the great Brahmanical gods who suffer greatly and give her boons in order for her to reduce it. Māriyamman requests that Yama builds her a temple and offers her *kūḷ*. He follows her order, and after performing *pūjā* for her in her newly built temple, she submerges her body into the ground and becomes a statue. The great Brahmanical gods have, after being threatened by Māriyamman's pearls, left the domain of pox to her alone, and no one can intervene in her affairs. Mr. Venkatesh told me that this was the reason why people approach the goddess rather than doctors when they are affected with chickenpox¹⁵⁵ – no one can do anything anyway, except the goddess herself. Even when a person dies, Mr. Venkatesh said, he or she stays with Māriyamman in *Marivācal*¹⁵⁶. In other words, he or she does not go to heaven or hell like other people.

I was told another story of how Reṇukā became the pox goddess by Mr. Subramanian, priest in the Tumpavaṇatu amman temple. This excerpt is quite similar to Mr. Venkatesh's, apart from Reṇukā receiving the *muttu* from Śiva and without her testing it on the gods:

¹⁵³ Previously blindness was a side effect from smallpox (Beck 1981, 131).

¹⁵⁴ A common practice in the bigger Māriyamman temples such as Samayapuram and Thiruverkadu is selling small metal body parts representing the devotee's problem (arms, legs, eyes and so on) to donate to the goddess.

¹⁵⁵ Chickenpox is not a deadly nor a dangerous disease such as smallpox was, although it can be severe if caught by grown-ups. Tamil people do generally not see doctors while affected. Though the disease has no actual cure, one can ease the symptoms with medicines such as painkillers, but this is not common. For reducing the symptoms the sick use nīm leaves and follows certain purity rules.

¹⁵⁶ *Marivācal* is Māriyamman's realm. "*Vācal*" means "entrance" or "gate".

[...] The head of the outcaste lady was placed on the body of Reṇukā devī. Once she got life, she went to Jamadagni who said: “Your head and body are different, I cannot accept you [as my wife again]! You have become low [*nīcan*].” Reṇukā devī asked: “What can I do?” and he replied: “Ask lord Śiva.” She then goes to Lord Śiva and asks for remedy: “Because my head and body is now different, I don’t know what to do!” That is when he gave seven pearls [*muttu*] in a basket, and one bamboo stick, and sent her out: “Go and put the pearls on anyone you wish, and after seven days you remove it. After that, they will start to worship you and treat you as a god.”

From these stories, it is clear that Reṇukā-Māriyamman gets the *muttu* to use as a boon for her own endurance. The pox pearls make her remembered and worshipped in order for the goddess to survive: she is dependent on being fed by her devotees, who again are dependent on the grace of the goddess. The informants also confirmed this. Mr. Vishnukumar said: “When people do not pray, she comes in form of disease to remind them. [...] So in one way she makes us give offerings to her, to remember her.” Srikumar gurukkaḷ told me: “Normally you don’t get the disease, only when we don’t maintain or care for doing *pūjā* and all.” The goddess infects people with pox in order that they remember her and perform *pūjā*. Srikumar, however, had another explanation than Mr. Venkatesh as to how Reṇukā became the pox goddess:

In earlier days, the *ammaṇ* temples were located in the outskirts of the city¹⁵⁷. The temple was kept closed, and no *abhiṣeka* or *pūjā* was performed there. Because of this [the goddess] gets ferocious. As days passed by the whole city was affected by a pox epidemic. Everyone in the city was affected by the pox except a boy. His mother asked him to go out of the city during the night. Ampāl was there on the way in the form of an old lady. The old lady asked the boy if he could help her out with an itching in her scalp. The boy went and moved her hair, and he saw a thousand eyes. He was shocked, and fainted. Thereupon the old lady woke him up and told him: “go and tell your mother to do *pūjā* to the deity in the temple.” After this all got cured. The goddess gives the disease to us. It does not come out of our body; she puts the pearls [*muttu*] and takes it away. That is why she is called Muttumāriyamman.

In accordance with these stories, it is generally believed that the goddess *gives* pox as well as *takes it away*. The *muttu* is seen as the blessing of the goddess, who possesses the body of the diseased and manifests in the pox pearls, which are considered a sign of the goddess’ presence. According to Alocco (2009, 291) the disease is seen simultaneously as the grace (Ta. *aruḷ*) and rage (Ta. *ukkiram*) of the goddess. Worshippers of the goddess link the Tamil word for pox, *ammai*, to the term *ammaṇ*. Srikumar Gurukaḷ explains: “Its name itself is ‘*ammai*’, indirectly it means ‘goddess’ (*ammaṇ*). She gives it and cures it.” There is a distinction between *ciṇṇa ammai* (lit. smallpox) and *periya ammai* (chickenpox, lit. big pox), but generally when people speak of pox today, they use the word *ammai* without either prefix.

¹⁵⁷ So located because they guarded the city.

From the above it is clear that there is a significant distinction between the Tamil and the western concept of disease. Ferrari (2010, 153) labels disease for Śītalā's devotees as "a performance of the sacred" compared to the western notion of disease as a state. This is also the case for devotees of Reṇukā-Māriyamman. While in the field it became clear to me that chickenpox is a divine intervention, indeed, it is *śakti*, the goddess' act upon ones body. The informants spoke in terms of getting "cured" and "relieved" from the pox, but for this they don't see a physician, but a ritual specialist. Both the cause and relief of pox take place in the divine sphere, and through the ritual specialist (the priest) the sick approach the goddess, who is the only one who can cure the disease. This is the common perception, regardless of caste, education and religion, also from the doctor's side. When I discussed this with my interpreter Srividya, who herself had suffered from chickenpox quite recently along with her family, she told me: "Nobody goes to the doctor for pox, no one takes English medicines or painkillers. This is the general perception, and if you go to the doctor he would not give you medicines anyway. The only cure is nīm leaves and cooling substances like tender coconut." She herself got *tīrttam* brought home from a goddess temple, and was cured, after which the family performed the *vēppañcelai* ritual (these and other practices when having chickenpox will be described in the next section). In many temples I was told that the goddess has so many devotees of all castes because everybody gets pox. When I approached two young women who stayed in the Cantaveḷiyamman temple with their sick children and expressed my surprise to find that the one was a Muslim and the other a recent convert from Christianity, Srikumar gurukkal told me: "All people come here. No caste [restrictions]. In no other temple people come like that. Only here we can find all religions coming to the temple, because you have got pox irrespective of caste."

Chickenpox is said to be caused by excess heat in the body. Beck (1969) explains how disease in Tamil Nadu is seen as caused by imbalance in a person's bodily temperature. Health is maintained by keeping a proper balance of heating and cooling effects, the cooling ones being slightly dominant. Heat is said to build up from within the body, but cold attacks it from outside, hence people are concerned about cold winds.

It is no coincidence that Reṇukā-Māriyamman's main festival is celebrated in the month of *Āṭi*, traditionally the time for smallpox epidemics to hit (Allocco 2009, 290). The goddess herself is said to heat up during this time and give people *muttu*, heating up the sick and causing imbalance in his or her innate temperature (ibid). During the festival the goddess is offered *kūḷ* and nīm leaves in spades in order to cool her down, and after her festival is over

and the goddess sufficiently cooled, it rains. Like Mr. Vishnukumar said: “Once the festival is over, the next day it rains”.

6.1.2 Practices when having chickenpox

“Her *tīrttam* itself has got the power to cure. It is her *śakti*.” (Ramachandran, priest, Reṇukā paramēsvari ammaṅ temple)

The main seasons for the onset of chickenpox is the *vasanta* (spring)- and hot season (summer). According to Mr. Venkatesh, there are on average 50 people coming to the temple each morning to get *tīrtta* during the months of *cittirai* (mid April – mid May) and *vaikāci* (mid May – mid June).

The main cure of chickenpox is the *tīrttam* (San. *tīrtha*¹⁵⁸) water of the goddess, i.e. her *abhiṣeka* water containing nīm, turmeric and *vibhūti* (sacred ash). This is either sprinkled on the patient’s body, drunk or both. The *tīrttam* can be brought home from the temple if the family stays there, or if the illness is severe, people stay in the temples. If children are affected, which is more common, their parents or mothers stay with them. The number of days people stay depends on how quickly the chickenpox gets cured, which normally takes between ten and thirteen days. It is then common to stay until having been given three baths in the temple, which have to be done on days of odd numbers and only after being cured (i.e. when the pustules have been significantly smaller), as this is considered more auspicious. For instance, if you are cured on day 8, you take a ritual bath in the temple on day 9, 11 and 13 before returning home¹⁵⁹. If children are affected, it is common for the mother to worship on behalf of her children. She then takes morning baths in the temple tank followed by three *pradakṣiṇas* around the temple while wearing still a wet sari, a prayer to the goddess for curing the disease.

Apart from the *tīrttam*, the use of nīm leaves for cooling the body and purity rules help cure the disease. The sick must follow general purity rules while affected, as contact with pollution is believed to further increase the heat. He or she should stay away from e.g. menstruating women and people who have seen a corpse without taking a ritual bath yet. Further, he or she should sleep on the floor without a pillow (the bed is considered hot, as is cotton), consume cooling items such as tender coconut and (if at home) avoid playing Māriyammaṅ songs and lighting lamps in the *pūjā* room, because if one does so, the goddess

¹⁵⁸ The Tamil word for *abhiṣeka* water is derived from the Sanskrit *tīrtha*, but in Sanskrit this rather means “ford, bathing place, place of pilgrimage on the banks of sacred streams, piece of water”.

¹⁵⁹ This practice was explained to me in the Cantaveļiyammaṅ temple and the Reṇukā Paramēcuvari temple.

might be pleased and wish to remain in the home. That Māriyamman “stays” means that the sick will not be well. According to some, one should not keep pictures of Māriyamman at all inside ones home, as it is considered inauspicious to invoke her power in the domestic sphere (cf. Harman 2011, 188).

Nīm is the sacred tree of the goddess, and its leaves are ever present in her worship¹⁶⁰. Devotees are frequently seen carrying pots that are filled with nīm leaves in processions, and temples and doors are decorated both with nīm leaves and small, white flowers. While in Kanchi I was often told about the connection of Reṇukā-Māriyamman and the nīm tree, and some temples had nīm trees as their *sthalavṛkṣa*. The tree is evergreen and can be seen as a sign of fertility, a property we have seen connected to the goddess. Moreover, the soothing juice from its leaves has been used in medicine for centuries, not only in the Māriyamman tradition but on the whole Indian subcontinent (Craddock 1994, 3). The leaves are cooling, and priests and devotees alike consider them a main cure for reducing the pox. Craddock further links the knife-form of the leaves to “the knife-like pain of the disease” (ibid., 148). A core ritual for the welfare of Reṇukā-Māriyamman’s devotees is the nīm garment ritual, *vēppañcelai*, where the sick circumambulate the temple wearing garments of nīm leaves. The *sthalapurāṇa* from Padaivedu¹⁶¹, the place that according to Mr. Venkatesh’s myth was where Yama built Reṇukā’s initial temple, tells about the origin of the nīm garments. According to the local legend, Reṇukā committed *satī* (yet another sign of being utterly devoted to her husband) but was rescued from the funeral pyre¹⁶². Thereupon she wore a sari of nīm leaves to cover her wounds. This section of the *sthalapurāṇa* explains how dressing in nīm leaves became a practice for devotees, modeled on Reṇukā herself, whose body was heavily burnt.

When the slain sage [Jamadagni] was cremated after the funeral rites, Reṇukā devī committed self-immolation on the fire of her husband. At that time, it started raining heavily due to divine ordains. Soon the funeral fire went off because of the heavy downpour. Reṇukā devī her dress having been burnt out got out of the fire with half burnt body. Wearing a makeshift fabric made out of nīm leaves, she emerged from the *āśrama* [hermitage] with an unbearable pain caused by the fire. The people around looked at her fearfully because of her strange look and nīm leaves woven dress.¹⁶³ (*Arulmigu Renugambal Amman Temple. Legend of the Shrine (Thala Puranam)* 2007, 10)

Modeled on the goddess herself, the ritual can be done e.g. after being cured from chickenpox, by women, children and men alike.

¹⁶⁰ See pictures 14 and 16.

¹⁶¹ The entire Tamil Padaivedu *sthalapurāṇa* has been studied and translated from Tamil by Craddock (1994). The version I quote below is the English *sthalapurāṇa* sold at the temple.

¹⁶² The same motif is found in the *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa* (30, 36-46), where Reṇukā wishes to follow Jamadagni on the funeral pyre, but is prevented by a heavenly voice that tells her that Jamadagni will be revived again.

¹⁶³ See picture 15.

7 From chaste wife to village goddess

Much of the content in the various myths have been discussed already, but in this chapter I will discuss what I define as the central elements of the myth, namely Reṇukā's chastity and her sexual transgression, and the result of it: beheading and revival, which in the oral myths and in the *KM* transform her into a pox goddess.

7.1 Chastity

“Bright is home when wife is chaste. If not all greatness is but waste.” (*Thirukkural: With English Couplets*, verse 52)

The Reṇukā story reflects strict sexual norms imposed on women from early age in Tamil Nadu. This will become clearer after taking a look at the Tamil ideals of *cumaṅkali* (the auspicious married woman, lit. “she who is auspicious”) in accordance with Tamil female statuses or roles and the notion of *karpu* (chastity). Reṇukā's role as the perfectly chaste wife will be easier understood when seen in light of these Tamil ideals.

As briefly touched upon in chapter 4.2, in Tamil Nadu women are believed to possess tremendous powers (*śakti*) that can affect and alter events. This power can provide a woman's family with wellbeing and prosperity, but can also lead to ruin and death if used destructively. To quote Wadley (1980, 153): “A woman's curse is feared, her blessing is sought”. This power is gained from the ideal of female restraint and self-control, including submission to the woman's male relations. In Tamil Nadu, the only *wholly* benevolent female status is that of the *cumaṅkali*, the auspicious married woman who has children¹⁶⁴ and whose husband is alive. In marriage, the wife is symbolically tied to her husband by tying the *tāli* (or *maṅgalasūtra*), the yellow thread not to be removed until the husband's death, marking that she is under his control. Under the control of her husband, the wife's own inner self control and restraint are given the opportunity to increase, and this makes her more auspicious. In this way the *cumaṅkali* is “bound” both in an inward manner by her self control, and in an outward cultural manner by being tied to her husband with the *tāli*. A virgin (*kanni*) is also potentially benevolent, but since she lacks the self-control of the *cumaṅkali* she is considered less auspicious. A girl's “bindings” begin once she reaches puberty, when norms are enforced

¹⁶⁴ It is important to note that a wife is not truly, but only provisionally, a *cumaṅkali* before she has given birth to a child that survives infancy (cf. Reynolds 1980, 38). If the wife dies barren or during childbirth she is no longer considered auspicious.

on her to prepare her for married life. Rituals like wearing a sari for the first time and the knotting of the hair¹⁶⁵ are seen as signs of outward control of the girl. Her behavior is from now on modified and she is physically restricted to the house, marking the beginning of the girl's inner self-control. (ibid., 159)

Barren women (*malaṭi*) and widows (*amaṅkali; vitavai*) are on the other hand considered highly inauspicious. Their powers are seen as unpredictable and potentially malevolent, the widow's especially so (since there is still a chance the barren woman *might* improve her status, whereas a widow cannot). Barrenness and widowhood are seen as consequences of having done something wrong either in a previous life or in the present birth, which is a sign that they lack inward control. The widow is also believed to be responsible for her husband's death. Most women fear the possibility of becoming either. The widow's lack of outward cultural control is symbolized by her *tāli* being removed and that her hair is no longer knotted¹⁶⁶. In addition to widows and barren women, unmarried mothers are also inauspicious, and believed to be in their present state because they have sinned. (Reynolds 1980, 159; Wadley 1980, 36)

The most important ideal of the *cumaṅkali* is *kaṛpu*, chastity. This word derives from the Tamil root *kal*, meaning to learn, and signifies a learnt inward control (Wadley 1980, 159). The notion of *kaṛpu* includes not only marital fidelity in thought and deed, but also the female virtues of modesty, soft-spokenness, obedience, patience, unselfishness, subordination and so on (Reynolds 1980, 46; van Voorthuizen 2001, 261). The wife is supposed to be perfectly chaste and obedient to her husband. An adulterous wife is regarded with contempt whereas a husband's errors are easily overlooked, illustrated by a saying quoted by van Voorthuizen (2001, 255), comparing women to earthen pots: "once dirtied, they can never be cleansed entirely, while men are like copper pots, which are easy to rinse clean". The woman guards the honor of the family. It is exactly by controlling her *kaṛpu* and being obedient to her husband that the woman's *śakti* increases. As we saw in section 3.1, *śakti* is a female, creative energy, a power that is not only possessed by goddesses, but also by women. The concept of *śakti* is linked to the Indian idea about *tapas* (Ta. *tavam*), which means asceticism or austerities. *Tapas* in Sanskrit literally means heat, so to perform *tapas* is to be heated up

¹⁶⁵ Tamil women are supposed to always keep a knot in their hair. Even when their new washed hair dries freely in the air, a small knot is tied at the end.

¹⁶⁶ Traditionally her hair was shaved, and the widows are not supposed to wear the *puttu* (mark of *kumkum* in the forehead) anymore. They are also not allowed to go to auspicious occasions, and sometimes the floor is swept after them. However, there are variations to this pattern, and exceptions regarding what practices are followed by widows today, from wearing white or ochre saris, wearing no sari blouse to remarriage.

internally. This in turn might give the performer great powers, such as ascetic's powers¹⁶⁷, or powers of perfectly chaste women¹⁶⁸ (cf. van Voorthuizen 2001, 262). In Tamil Nadu, the idiom of temperature pervades many aspects of everyday life. This topic has been dealt with thoroughly by Beck (1969). She explains how women initially have more inner heat than men. This heat starts building up from the age of puberty with her first menstruation (which according to Beck is linked to a process of a "boiling over") and decreases again during old age. Certain bodily states are associated with increased heat (and also pollution), like when a woman is pregnant or menstruating. Likewise is sexual desire, whereas the man's subsequent release is considered cooling. Indeed, having this initial heat is why the woman needs to be "bound" by men in the first place. Heat alone can be very dangerous and must be focused and controlled into a beneficial power. An independent woman is therefore seen as potentially dangerous since her heat is uncontrolled: she is unpredictable, disrespectful of boundaries and thought to have an increased sexual appetite (Reynolds 1980, 46). This is also the case with goddesses: deities, as well as women, are subject to changing temperatures that determine their aspect as either a *wild* (*ugra*) or a *mild* (*śānta*) goddesses¹⁶⁹. The independent goddesses who have no consort are said to heat up internally because of their unreleased sexual energy, and the heat and anger resulting from it can manifest in feverish and hot diseases such as pox. The wifely goddesses on the other hand are sexually tamed and controlled by their husbands and cooler than the independent goddesses. A woman, like a goddess, is an ambivalent creature: simultaneously erotic (and potentially dangerous) and procreative (and benevolent). But in contrast to the independent woman, the "bound" woman may increase her *śakti* by being an utterly chaste and devoted wife, which provides her powers to work miracles (such as Reṇukā) and to be in charge of her family. She is restrained, but at the same time, being a perfectly chaste wife within this framework is exactly what allows her to become a powerful

¹⁶⁷ There are many similarities between the great powers of ascetics and chaste women. Many stories in Hindu mythology tell about e.g. the disastrous curse of ascetics, and ascetics curing infertility (like the epic-*Purāṇic* story of Sāgara's 60. 000 sons that he got after performing austerities in the Himalaya). There are also important differences between ascetics and chaste women: the ascetics are outside society, whereas the chaste women utterly devoted to her husband not only are part of society, but also the very basis of society. Another difference, argues van Voorthuizen (2001, 262), is that the ideal of the chaste wife is perfectly in line with patriarchal values and encourages women to resign themselves to a subordinate social position.

¹⁶⁸ For instance, the popular Tamil epic *Cilappatikāram* tells the story of the chaste wife Kaṇṇaki who burnt the city of Madurai to the ground with her chastity powers after the king of Madurai mistakenly convicted her husband to death. Kaṇṇaki is worshipped as a goddess in Tamil Nadu and seen as the prime example of a chaste woman, who was true to her husband even though he cheated on her. Like the Reṇukā tale, this story tells of a chaste woman who became a goddess after considering herself unjustly wronged.

¹⁶⁹ This either-or categorization of goddesses into wild and mild forms have been challenged and criticized for its simplification. For example Reṇukā-Māriyamman assumes both wild and mild forms, and this is not contradictory (this point will be taken up again in section 7.2.5). Still it points at a general tendency.

woman. Herein lies a paradox that needs to be addressed: who actually controls whom? Wadley (1980, 160) says:

Tamils believe that the wife would win any marital battle: only women's self-control allows them to submit to men. But by submitting, they further increase their powers. Hence the noble, bound woman will in fact control her husband, who even though he is controlled by nature, cannot match the cultural control of a bound, ordered woman. Men should control women if and when they (women) do not control themselves. But the self-controlled woman – the chaste, noble woman – will ultimately control all.

Following the arguments of Van Voorthuizen (2001, 256), the strict sexual norms that are imposed on Tamil women serve to maintain the purity of the caste. It is the woman's caste that is dominant, meaning that children inherit the mother's status and not the father's, even though the woman is considered merely a "vessel" for the father's semen¹⁷⁰. Hence, the purity of the caste, which corresponds to the purity of the woman, must be maintained and much pressure is put upon women to ensure that this is in fact the case. Pre-marital sex and extra-marital sex are banned, and as we have seen, puberty rites and marriage serves to "bind" the woman to her (future) husband, and her chastity is highly valued. These norms are all reflected in the Reṇukā tale.

7.1.1 The chaste Reṇukā and her sexual transgression

In the beginning of our stories, Reṇukā is the perfect *cumaṅkali*, bearing her husband four sons and helping him perform his daily ascetic duties. The Sanskrit term for a chaste wife is *pativrata*¹⁷¹, literally meaning "she who is devoted to her husband", a somewhat more limited word than *cumaṅkali*¹⁷². The *Mānavadharmasāstra* describes the ideal wife as being totally devoted to her husband, no matter how his character: "Though he may be bereft of virtue, given to lust, and totally devoid of good qualities, a good woman should always worship her husband like a god." (5.154, Olivelle 2005) In the stories, Reṇukā maintaining her *karpu* maintains the perfect order. Moreover, the local myths assign special powers to Reṇukā resulting from her chastity. In the oral myths, she has the power to collect water making a pot

¹⁷⁰ According to the *Mānavadharmasāstra* "[t]he husband enters the wife, becomes a fetus, and is born in this world. This, indeed, is what gives the name to and discloses the true nature of 'wife' (*jāyā*) – that he is born (*jāyate*) again in her." (9.8, Olivelle 2005)

¹⁷¹ The *KM* uses *pativrata* when denoting Reṇukā's chastity, whereas the *MB* uses *niyatavratā* ("constant in her observance of vows"). The north-Indian term denoting a chaste wife is *pativrata*, deriving from the Sanskrit term (Wadley 1980, 158).

¹⁷² From now on I use the two terms interchangeably, although *cumaṅkali* is a wider term. This is because I find the title of *cumaṅkali* only applicable to the Tamil Reṇukā where this concept is built into the story, but the discussion concerns the epic-*Purāṇic* myths as well.

out of raw clay or sand¹⁷³, and in the *KM*, she is able to scoop up water from the river and carry it home in the form of a ball with no vessel at all. Other accounts speak of her ability to dry her sari hanging in the mid-air as she walks home or to cook water and rice carrying in a pot on her head (e.g. Younger 1980, 508; Brubaker 1977, 59). All these powers come under the notion of *śakti*, gained from Reṇukā's status as *cumaṅkali*. Once she falls, merely for a brief second, she loses these powers. The stability of the everyday life in the hermitage depends on this chastity, and chaos reigns once she steps off her path as a righteous wife.

Reṇukā's tempter is usually a *gandharva* (Ta. *gantaruvaṃ*), a mythological heavenly musician associated with love and desire. This holds true for the epic-*Purāṇic* versions, as well as most oral versions¹⁷⁴. It is hardly a coincidence that the creature Reṇukā sees is a *gandharva*, known throughout India for his romantic nature. A so-called *gāndharva* marriage, one of the eight forms of marriage recognized by the *dharmasāstras*¹⁷⁵, is synonymous with love marriage. This is the only type of marriage that allows pre-marital sex; indeed the marriage is consummated by the act itself (Altekar 2009, 43). Manu describes the *gāndharva* marriage in this way: "when the girl and the groom have sex with each other voluntarily, that is the 'Gāndharva marriage' based on sexual union and originating from love." (3.33, Olivelle 2005) Van Voorthuizen (2001, 257) suggests that the *gandharva* in the Reṇukā tale might symbolize romantic love as opposed to arranged marriage. In the texts, we have seen different stories as to how Reṇukā and Jamadagni were married. The *Mbh* has Jamadagni approaching Reṇukā's father, the king, requesting her as his wife. In the *KM*, she chooses him in a *svayamvara*¹⁷⁶, and in addition we are told that "[Reṇukā] loved [Jamadagni] for a long time¹⁷⁷" (although here she does not see a *gandharva*, but Kārtavīryārjuna, Jamadagni's conventional foe in the epic-*Purāṇic* stories). Based on the above I argue that the *gandharva* in this context is to be understood as a creature of great sexual attractiveness, whose appeal is irresistible even for the *pativrata* or *cumaṅkali*, who in contrast to the sexually free *gandharva* is entirely bound by her husband.

But the *gandharva* in turn does not seduce Reṇukā, she merely sees him, either sporting with his wives in the water, or merely his reflection. In fact, most variants seem to

¹⁷³ Curiously, this held true for all 10 oral myths I was narrated in and around Kanchi. Often the stories varied slightly while telling the same thing, but this detail was a constant.

¹⁷⁴ In the oral myths that do not follow this pattern, Reṇukā either sees Indra, Garuḍa (Viṣṇu's eagle) or a saint flying in the *Garuḍavāhana*, or two *devārṣis*, and admires their beauty.

¹⁷⁵ The eight forms of marriage are: Paisācha, Rākṣasa, Āsura, Gāndharva, Brāhma, Daiva, Prājāpatya and Ārśa. See Altekar (2009, 35-49)

¹⁷⁶ The concept of self-choice of groom has some positive connotations, as it is associated with famous romances such as Damayantī who chose Nāla as her groom against the wishes of the gods.

¹⁷⁷ *sa tayā ramayām āsa cirakālam muniśvaraḥ (KM 27.3).*

play down Reṇukā's lapse, stating that she was only "slightly moved" by the sight of the *gandharva* king (or her tempter in general) (*kimcic citrarathasprhā*, *Bhp* 9.3; *kiñcin manasijasyājñāvaśaṃ ninye manas*, *KM* 27.10)¹⁷⁸ and that she restrained herself after "only a moment" (*kṣaṇamātreṇa*, *KM* 27.10). Many informants also stressed this, and said things like: "She didn't even see him!" or "She saw the shadow of a *gandharva* reflected in her pot. She thought: 'such beautiful people exist here!' She just thinks it – that is all. Not that she liked him or anything". The *KM* is even more suggestive. What seems to trouble Jamadagni is that *he* (Kārtavīryārjuna) desired *her*, and not the opposite. Jamadagni fears that Kārtavīryārjuna will come to the hermitage and abduct his wife, and orders Paraśurāma to kill her. When she is revived, Jamadagni says: "Kārtavīrya desired your mother when she was away from me, Rāma. At that very time, she became a low woman (*nīcā*)", and refuses to accept her as his wife anymore since she is defiled by being desired by another man. By stressing these attempts of the various narrators to play down Reṇukā's lapse, I wish to show that a wife totally devoted to her husband is in fact an ideal stereotype, but at the same time it is implied that Jamadagni overreacts when Reṇukā fails momentarily in her role. Brubaker (1977, 60) argues that the Reṇukā story is not a didactic story although it glorifies the lifestyle of a *pativrata*: it does not seek to present an *ideal* ideal. Indeed, it shows what terrible consequences might take place if one strays but a little. Brubaker (*ibid.*) as well as Doniger (1999, 209-10) go even further and propose that the Reṇukā story might at the same time reflect the stereotype ideal woman and embody a critique of it, it might even be satire or irony. Although the latter explanation seems not to hold true at least for my informants (I saw no indication that they took it that way), it is evident that they thought Jamadagni overreacts when he orders Reṇukā decapitated.

According to Brubaker (1977, 61) the Reṇukā tale makes use of a recurrent motif in Hindu mythology, literature and folklore: that of the pathetic ascetic. He argues, following Zimmer (1956) that many Indian tales "abound in accounts of holy men that explode", where minor incidents provokes a sudden violent outburst from the self-controlled ascetic into (like e.g. the sage Durvāsas, known for his short temper). In the Reṇukā myth Jamadagni explodes in anger over Reṇukā's chastity lapse, but cools down again immediately after Paraśurāma has fulfilled his command. The *Reṇukāmāhātmyam* (26.7-27.11) leaves little to the imagination and suggests that the incident was not even Jamadagni's fault – but anger's. The

¹⁷⁸ The *Reṇukāmāhātmyam* states that Reṇukā desires to sport with Jamadagni in the water after seeing the *gandharva* king sporting with his wife (21, 7-8).

Reṇukāmāhātmyam contains a nice dialogue between Jamadagni and anger (*krodha*) personified. Jamadagni asks the anger to leave his body, since the “awful” (*ghora*) action of killing Reṇukā was done by Anger. Anger then jumps out of Jamadagni’s body with “limbs black like a crow, [...] ugly-faced with a large under-lip, hostile eyes and a body with a dreadful form, licking his mouth resembling a hungry snake”¹⁷⁹. Standing before the sage, Anger says that he is dwelling in all beings – indeed, he is the lord of the gods – no place exists without him¹⁸⁰. In the end after exchanging arguments and condemning Anger, Jamadagni succeeds in chasing Anger away, and continues to live happily in the hermitage along with the revived Reṇukā and their sons. This dialogue and the motif of getting rid of anger shows that Jamadagni learns a lesson in the beheading story. In the *Mbh* and *KM* Jamadagni also condemns the action of killing Reṇukā once the anger has left him. We recall the philosophical *ślokas* on anger from the *KM* dedicated to Paraśurāma, reflecting the view of anger as a potential destroyer: “[...] anger is an unavoidable enemy of all creatures. Great anger alone kills knowledge, conduct and virtues. For an angry person there is no need of penance, conduct, donations or vows.” (*KM* 30-31)

Some of my informants emphasized that the Reṇukā story took place very long ago when the times were different¹⁸¹ – a time when women were not supposed to even look at another man than her husband, and therefore the pressure on Reṇukā was so strong. But now, they said, times and society have changed, and it is unavoidable for women to interact with men. One story I was told in Kanchi didn’t even include the chastity lapse. According to Mr. Veerappan, a devotee who interrupted an interview with the priest Srikumar Gruakkaḷ in the Cantaveḷiyammaṅ temple to tell this story, Reṇukā still had her chastity powers making her able to form a pot out of raw clay:

“[...] One day Indra was passing by. Indra took the form of a cock and made a sound. Hearing this, Reṇukā thought the sun had risen, and went to fetch water. She does not take any vessel for that, but fetches water with a pot made of raw clay. She went, but since it was actually not morning, Paraśurāma doubted her and chased her to kill her.”

¹⁷⁹ *kākakokilakṛṣṇāgaḥ [...] karālarūpadehaś ca lambauṣṭho vikṛtānanah tataḥ parilihan vaktraṃ jihvayā vikṛteḥṣaṇah sa ṛṣer agataḥ krodhas tasthau dagdhanagopamaḥ* (RM 26, 17-19).

¹⁸⁰ *satyaṃ satyaṃ na cāsatyam nāsti kiṃcin mayā vinā sarvohaṃ sarvabhūtaṣṭho devānām aham īśvaraḥ* (RM 26, 22).

¹⁸¹ From the perspective of the narrators of the *MB* and the oldest *Purāṇas*, the events in the Paraśurāma/Reṇukā story took place before the *Mahābhārata* war (Gail 1977, 222). Paraśurāma, however, is said to be alive still – according to several *Purāṇas* and the *MB* he is one of the eight *cirajīvins* (long lived) along with Mārkaṇḍeya, Aśvatthāman, Bali, Vyāsa, Hanumat, Vibhīṣaṇa and Kṛpa.

However, this was the exception rather than the rule, as all other stories I have ever seen or heard of Reṇukā's decapitation include a lapse of chastity, and not merely a mess-up of time like in this excerpt, where she in addition was tricked by Indra.

In the oral myths where Reṇukā has gained powers from her chastity, the image of the broken pot symbolizes her broken chastity. The pot is an auspicious symbol that represents fertility, prosperity and abundance, and since Ṛgvedic times it has also been linked to a woman's womb (Vatsal 2006, 249)¹⁸². Once the pot breaks, the order that was maintained by Reṇukā's chastity shatters. Her very femininity, her identity, as represented by the pot, is broken. Like Doniger (1999, 210) says: "A woman's fidelity to her husband *is* her identity"; and as Reṇukā is no longer the chaste wife she used to be, she continues after her beheading with a *new* identity, as the pox goddess Māriyamman.

The supreme chastity of Reṇukā is also emphasized in another myth connected to her, the story of Satiyanasūyā. According to Mr. Venkatesh, Satiyanasūyā was Reṇukā's previous birth¹⁸³. As we will see in the end, this story also explains why Reṇukā's chastity was tested in the decapitation myth, as a punishment for deceiving the great gods. Here follows Mr. Venkatesh's story of Satiyanasūyā:

The birth before Reṇukā is Satiyanasūyā. Her chastity was the main thing; she was controlling the whole world with that power. Somehow the gods wanted to test her, to break her chastity rule. The sage Nārada gave a variety of *dāl* [pulses] made of iron to the three *śaktis* [Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī and Pārvatī] and said: "Only she who can cook this *dāl* into an edible form, will I consider most powerful." They tried to cook it with their power, but it was not possible. Nārada went to *bhūloka* [the earth] and met Satiyanasūyā, the wife of the great sage Atri, and gave her the *dāl*. She took it, and thinking that her husband is the only visible god, she performed *pūjā*. With that power the iron *dāl* gets cooked to an eatable form. Nārada collected it, went to the *śaktis* and said: "You are gods and have all the powers, but the wife of a sage has done what you could not do!" They realized that she was able to do so because of her chastity powers, so if they spoiled her chastity [*karpu*], she would lose her powers. They called their husbands and told them: "No matter what you do, we want you to spoil her chastity!" Then Brahma, Viṣṇu and Śiva went to Satiyanasūyā in disguise and asked for alms. She invited them in, and put a banana leaf in front of them to serve them food. The gods replied that they did not want the food served on banana leaves, but on leaves that are smaller than mustard seeds. She then removed the banana leaves, made a plate of many small leaves, and served the food on that. But when she was about to serve them, they asked her to serve the food without any clothes. Satiyanasūyā went and removed her dress, untied her hair and let it hang on both sides [of her body]. She then told her husband that the guests had given

¹⁸² For instance, the sages Agastya and Vasiṣṭha are born from pots. The *Ṛg-veda* (7.33.10-13) says: "The gods Mitra and Varuna once saw the nymph Urvashi and got passionate. They could not resist the release of their semen; and as the semen fell off they collected it in a jar. From the top portion of the water-mixed semen Vasistha was born, while from the lower portion was born Agastya" (quoted in Vatsal 2006, 250).

¹⁸³ The same story was also narrated to me in the Reṇukā ampāl temple of the Ceṅkuntar community, but with certain differences: here, Reṇukā's previous birth was named Nāgavallī, married to sage Bhṛgu and the daughter of the cosmic serpent Ādiśeṣa. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Purāṇas*, as in Mr. Venkatesh's myth, Satiyanasūyā is married to the sage Atri.

such a command, and he gave her his *kamaṇḍalu* filled with water. When she sprinkled the water on the three gods, they became small children. She fed them with milk and put them in the cradle, where they fell asleep.

Nārada then enquired the three *śaktis* what had happened to their husbands. They replied: “by now her chastity must be gone!” and went to the forest of the great sage Atri. They were not able to find their husbands, only three children who were asleep in the hermitage. They asked Nārada who the three children were, and he replied: “They are your husbands, transformed to babies. Go and ask for your husbands [Ta. *muṅṭāṇipiccai*, lit. “begging with the end of the sari”]!” They went and apologized, and asked Satiyanasūyā to give them their husbands back. But they could not recognize the children, so Lakṣmī took Brahma, Sarasvatī took Śiva, and Pārvatī took Viṣṇu. While they held the different husbands, she sprinkled water on them, and when they resumed their original forms, the *śaktis* realized their own chastity was gone.

According to both Mr. Venkatesh and Mr. Vishnukumar, the events in this story led to the birth of Reṇukā that we have already seen several versions of, where her chastity was tested yet again because the great gods cursed her for turning them into children in this birth. But the great gods also granted Satiyanasūyā three boons, that Brahma and Sarasvatī should be her parents, that Perumāḷ (Viṣṇu) should be her son, and that Śiva should be the god whom she worships. And since the great gods tested her in the first place and ate her food, she took revenge on them by giving them *muttu* in her next birth as Reṇukā-Māriyamman.

This story of Satiyanasūyā reinforces the chastity motif of the Reṇukā tale, and at the same time it explains why the injustice was done to her in her next birth as Reṇukā (as stories on former births tend to do) – she played a trick on the great gods, who cursed her.

7.2 Beheading and head exchange

In all versions of the myth, Jamadagni orders Reṇukā’s beheading for transgressing a sexual norm. In this section I will take a closer look at what a head and beheading might symbolize. We have seen that there is a difference between the Epic-*Purāṇic* myths where Reṇukā’s head is placed upon her own body when she is revived (and does not become a goddess, but is made to forget the whole ordeal), and the oral myths where her head is placed upon the body of an untouchable and she is deified. In the Ponniamman myth we saw the opposite, Reṇukā’s body was attached to the head of an untouchable woman. The *KM* holds a middle position between the epic-*Purāṇic* and the oral versions: Reṇukā is deified, but with her own head on her own body. In other words we have seen four possibilities of Reṇukā’s revival:

- Reṇukā's own head on her own body → Reṇukā (*Mbh, Bhp*)
- Reṇukā's own head on her own body → Reṇukā-Māriyamman (KM)
- Reṇukā's own head on an outcaste's body → Reṇukā-Māriyamman
- An outcaste's head on Reṇukā's body → Ponniamman

7.2.1 Beheading

Traditionally, the head has high regard in Indian culture. According to the *Puruṣasūkta* (*Rgveda* 10.90), the Brahmin *varṇa* is made from the head¹⁸⁴ of the cosmic person, whereas the three other *varṇas* are created from the shoulders (*kṣatriyas*), thighs (*vaiśyas*) and feet (*śūdras*)¹⁸⁵. From the perspective of the hymn this is the natural division of society, based on the body metaphor. Olivelle (2011, 27) says: “The focus on the body enables the humanly created world and social order to be presented and internalized as a natural phenomenon. [...] The distinction between the *Brāhmaṇa* and the *Śūdra* is as natural as that between the head and the foot.” In other words, the *Puruṣasūkta* hymn associates the head, the hierarchical top of the body parts, with purity. Beck (1979, 22) notes that the superiority of the head is also reflected in language, where the head is vastly superior to the feet: In Tamil speech, as in English, the head is often used metaphorically to describe a superior power or importance of a thing.

In the Reṇukā myth, the dichotomy of head and body is reflected in a series of oppositions (cf. Doniger 1999, 208). The head represents the high, pure and Brahmanic woman, who according to cultural norms is perfectly chaste and possesses supernatural powers to carry water home either scooped up to form a ball, or in a pot made then and there from raw clay. In this state, Reṇukā is somehow set apart from the natural elements; she remains dry and unstained from both the water and the world. Order is prevalent. The body represents the low and impure untouchable woman. When Reṇukā follows her natural impulses of lust and desire she wets herself mindlessly in the water (*Mbh*), and loses her magical powers (in the local myths). The water ball melts or her pot breaks: she melts into the natural elements and the water is dissolved. Chaos unfolds.

When deified, Reṇukā leaves her impure body buried in the earth whereas her head is visible above and receives worship. This could be her way of showing how she interacts with

¹⁸⁴ *mukha* (mouth, face, head, upper part).

¹⁸⁵ *brāhmaṇo 'sya mukham āsīt bāhū rājanyaḥ kṛtaḥ ūru tadasya yadvaiśyaḥ padbhyāgam śūdro ajāyata* (*RV* 10.90, 13).

the impure world – her impure body remains in touch with the earth and merges into it, while her pure head rises above. Like Beck (1981, 128) says: “the goddess can be pure only by sloughing off her imperfections and leaving them (as forms of herself) to interact with the world below.”

It should be mentioned that severed heads and beheading is a general Indian theme, which is not exclusively found in the Reṇukā tale. Many gods and demons in fact have or have had severed heads: the prime example being Gaṇeśa whose head belongs to an elephant¹⁸⁶, and there are many more instances of severed heads in Hindu mythology. To give some: The Goddesses often behead demons to save the world, like Durgā does in the famous myth of the buffalo demon. The severed head of the demon Rahu causes eclipses by swallowing the sun and moon. Rahu was beheaded by Mohinī, the female *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, as he drank of the *amṛta* (immortality nectar). The nectar didn't reach further than Rahu's throat, but his head remains immortal. Aravāṇ (San. Irāvān, Arjuna's son) was beheaded and sacrificed to Kālī to ensure the victory in the Mahābhārata war, and like Reṇukā-Māriyamman he is worshipped in the form of a head¹⁸⁷. In Tiraupati amman temples Aravāṇ's severed head witnesses the 18 days of Mahābhārata festivals. Sax (1991) records a myth in which the goddess Māyā beheads herself with knives forged by her son. The head is reborn as Śiva on mount Kailash, and the trunk as Gaurā devī in the city Rishasau¹⁸⁸. A myth of the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* tells of how Viṣṇu was beheaded by a bowstring gnawed by some ants, and his head fell off and became the sun. A myth about Aṅkāḷa amman, the ferocious goddess of Mel Malayanur, tells of how one of Brahma's five heads was cut off by Śiva. Eventually the head (the *brahmapāla*, lit. the scull of Brahma) stuck to Aṅkāḷa amman's hand, and since the head ate everything, the goddess starved, became mad and went to dwell in a graveyard.

Many more examples could be provided. Anyway we can draw from this that heads are powerful containers. To add heads to gods and demons in battle provide them with more power (cf. Beck 1979, 30). The same importance is never given to e.g. feet (except perhaps for hands – the many hands of goddesses like Durgā and Kālī hold the weapons of the gods,

¹⁸⁶ This however belongs to a different and widespread mythical pattern where a human head is removed and replaced with that of an animal (Doniger 1999, 226).

¹⁸⁷ The Sanskrit *Mbh* mentions Aravāṇ's death, but the episode is elaborated in Tamil versions of the *Mbh*. Aravāṇ is worshipped in the Draupadī (Tam. Tiraupati amman) cult, and the Kūttāṇṭavar cult which is dedicated to him alone. For more on Aravāṇ's sacrifice see Hildebeitel (1988, 317-33; 1991, 283-319).

¹⁸⁸ That the head is reborn on the mountain above and the body in the city below provides an interesting parallel to how Reṇukā places her body below earth and her head above.

also signifying further strength represented by the gods' weapons. The goddess in this form also encompasses the gods' strength).

7.2.2 Psychoanalytical interpretations

According to a series of Tamil proverbs studied by Beck (1979), the head is perceived as the center of command and where knowledge enters¹⁸⁹. Its ideal state is cool and bathed in oil, a process that leaves the head pure, detached and sagacious. Desires, emotion and secret thoughts on the other hand are situated in the heart, which forms part of the body. In the myth the head is separated from the body, permanently in the two latter examples of the scheme above (as it is joined with a *new* body). What does this symbolize? Let's take a closer look at how Doniger (1980; 1995; 1999) interprets the Reṇukā tale, drawing on psychoanalytical ideas. She argues that low caste women are generally perceived as more erotic than the higher castes, and Reṇukā's body might symbolize her lustful and passionate human part, whereas her head might symbolize rationality, as according to her the head is often seen as a metaphor for the mind. Separating Reṇukā's head and body might be an attempt to purify her head again, depriving it of her lustful body. As I discussed in section 3.2, the head is still considered pure after the revival, which is why the head alone receives worship and not the *mūlamūrti* behind it. Doniger (1980, 236) says: “[U]nable to accept the possibility that a ‘chaste’ woman could have sexual impulses, the Hindus split her into a chaste mind and a literally polluted body”. But it need not be so: according to Hindu beliefs the head also has sexual connotations. The head is where men are said to store semen¹⁹⁰, and likewise women have sexual seeds stored in the head (Doniger 1999, 27). Also, the pollutions of intercourse and menstruation are believed to lodge in the hair¹⁹¹ (Beck 1981, 131). Moreover, the eyes are often used as symbols for phallus, vagina or sexual awareness (Doniger 1980, 100), which fits well with Reṇukā *seeing* the *gandharva* and loosing her chastity: “it is by gazing, not being gazed at, that Reṇukā discovers and reveals her eroticism.” (Doniger 1999, 209) Based on the

¹⁸⁹ The head itself is not actually linked directly to the process of thoughts. But knowledge is received through the ears, truth seen by the eyes, and the tongue proclaims justice, and therefore the head is associated with knowledge.

¹⁹⁰ Doniger (1980) explores the concept of semen rising into the head where it is stored. The yogi, who represses his semen, withdraws it to the point in his forehead between his eyes and transforms it into *soma*. The rich supply of semen in his head symbolized by his high piled hair (Leach 1958; Obeyesekere 1978 in Doniger 1980), and a powerful yogi is said to have an “intact store of rich, uncurdled semen in his head” (Carstairs 1958 in Doniger 1980).

¹⁹¹ All sins are also believed to lodge in the hair. This is one interpretation of why a devotee should offer his or her hair to god: to be purified. Another interpretation will be discussed below.

above arguments Doniger proposes that it might as well be that Reṇukā's separated head purifies her body (ibid., 227).

Doniger further links beheading to blinding (1995, 17) and castration (1980, 81-87). She argues that when Jamadagni orders Reṇukā beheaded he turns her into an object, instead of the viewing subject she was when she laid eyes upon the *gandharva*. Since Reṇukā *sees* the king and loses her chastity by that sight, there is a subsequent need to remove her gaze, the female gaze that in Indian mythology is both powerful and destructive. According to Jamadagni Reṇukā's behavior is unacceptable, and results in decapitation. By beheading her, she is blinded. Reṇukā is deprived of her identity (and she rises again with a new identity – Māriyamman). Both beheading and blinding can be further interpreted as castration¹⁹². According to Freud beheading is a “well-known unconscious device of the upward displacement of the genitals” (Freud in Doniger 1980, 84). As I will argue shortly I have certain reservations regarding the application of the theories of psychoanalysis, but Freud's upwards displacement fits well with the idea of semen stored in the head, and Reṇukā's decapitation as a punishment for transgressing sexual norms.

Could the Reṇukā myth also be an example of the inverted Oedipus triangle, proposed by Ramanujan (1984)? He finds in many Indian myths a “negative” Oedipus type, where instead of sons desiring mothers and daughters desiring fathers, Indian mythology has fathers desiring daughters and mothers desiring sons. Doniger (1980, 86) proposes that having a sage as a husband imposes sexual tension on the wife, and Craddock (1994, 111) argues that even though Reṇukā and Paraśurāma do not form an incestuous bond, “the sexual nature of her supposed transgression gives an erotic hue to her relationship with her son”. In this way, according to her, Paraśurāma kills his mother, *and* is seen to have some sort of eroticized relationship with her¹⁹³.

However, I would rather say that in her attempt to find a universal Oedipal pattern in the Reṇukā myth Craddock *imposes* an erotic hue onto the story. The texts leave us no such

¹⁹² Doniger (1980) explains how the head can be equated with a phallus by reading the myth of Durgā beheading the Buffalo demon as the goddess castrating him. She also discusses that in Hindu myth noses are cut off as symbolic castrations, e.g. in the *Rāmāyaṇa* Lakṣmaṇa cuts off Śūrpanakhā's nose as punishment for sexual advances, interpreted as a clitoridectomy (Kakar 1978 in Doniger 1980). As for blinding, we recall that in Sophocles' play, Oedipus blinds himself when he realizes what he has done: “in Freudian terms, a classic act of self-castration” (Craddock 1994, 67)

¹⁹³ That Jamadagni orders Paraśurāma to kill Reṇukā instead of doing it himself can also point in the direction of Jamadagni getting rid of his sexual competitor (Paraśurāma) by inflicting Paraśurāma with the sin resulting from the heinous act of killing one's mother. This motif of the father abusing the son (as a sexual competitor) is also seen in one of the famous myths of Gaṇeśa where Śiva cuts off Gaṇeśa's head when he finds him guarding Pārvatī while she is having a bath. (Cf. Patrick Olivelle, pers. comm.)

clue. Freudian psychoanalysis is a European model, and does not necessarily fit well applied to Indian perceptions as reflected in the myths in this thesis although it claims to be universal. Therefore, I think, one should be cautious applying it in order to interpret other cultures' unconscious projections. I find Doniger's analysis of the lustful body and pure head, and vice versa, suggestive, but I do not think that the material necessarily points to the Oedipal pattern proposed by Craddock, nor to interpreting beheading as castration. These interpretations are, of course, impossible to verify, but personally I do think that in applying psychoanalysis to myth there is always a danger of over-interpreting and over-sexualizing the material.

7.2.3 Reṇukā and sacrifice

Another interpretation of the Reṇukā tale links the beheading to ancient ideas about the Vedic sacrifice. Craddock (1994, 26-36) discusses the anthill's link to "the head of the sacrifice" based on Heesterman's "Case of the severed head" (1967). Briefly, the link between Reṇukā, the anthill (*purru*) and sacrifice is justified thus: the cyclic disintegration and reintegration of the universe is enacted in the Vedic ritual of the fire altar that restores the cosmic *puruṣa*. Heesterman says: "[S]tandard elements and acts of the ritual are referred to as the *head of the sacrifice*, their installation or performance signifying *the severing and/or restoration of the head*." (Heesterman 1967, 23 in Craddock 1994, 26, my emphasis) This head is described in Vedic myths as belonging to an enemy conquered in battle. According to the ritual described in the black Yajur Veda, the head of the enemy is symbolically replaced with "an anthill containing seven holes". In other words, the anthill can be viewed as a symbolic head, and through Vedic myth and ritual it is linked to sacrifice. As touched upon in previous chapters, the anthill is a locus of divinity in South India, and anthills are worshipped in particular for fertility. The snakes that dwell in them are symbolically linked to the process of birth and rebirth, shown in their changing of skin, through which they are symbolically reborn¹⁹⁴. The anthill as well as *nāga* stones are usually situated under the temple tree, which we have seen represent the *axis mundi* with its branches reaching to the sky and its roots to the netherworld. Thus "[T]he temple tree, the anthill, and the snakes that dwell in the anthill form a nexus of sacrifice, fertility and rebirth." (Craddock 1994, 36)

¹⁹⁴ The cosmic serpent Ādiśeṣa, who supports the earth with his thousand heads, is regarded the emblem of eternity (cf. MW), since he is not destroyed after each *kalpa* (the period measuring the duration of the world). As his name suggests (*śeṣa*, "remainder, that which is left"), and he is also called Ananta (infinite), he is the remainder when the universe ceases to exist. During the intervals of each creation he functions as the bed of Viṣṇu.

In Periyapalayam, where Craddock performed her fieldwork, Reṇukā is said to have manifested herself as a *liṅga* emerging from an anthill, linking her head to the sacrifice. This also fits well with Karumāriyamman, who manifested herself as a cobra in an anthill. However, apart from in the case of Karumāriyamman this theory does not fit well with my field material, apart from in one other particular case. Only two of the goddesses whose temples I frequented had an explicit connection to the anthill, although many temples contained an anthill with a snake inside that was worshipped¹⁹⁵. According to Mr. Vishnukumar, Reṇukā was born in an anthill and in her previous birth (as Satianusūyā, whose myth was presented in section 7.1.1) Ādiśeṣa was her father, but he did not add any further significance to the fact. That Karumāriyamman (whose main temple is in Thiruverkadu, near Chennai) is born in an anthill is however an important aspect of her cult, and this was emphasized by my informant Bhuvaneswari: “Karumāriyamman is the goddess who came in an anthill. She came as a black cobra¹⁹⁶. Karumāriyamman came at Thiruverkadu, as a *svayambhū* from the anthill.” I went to Thiruverkadu myself and saw the anthill next to the big and popular Māriyamman temple, which was enshrined and worshipped¹⁹⁷.

But even though Reṇukā was not directly linked to the anthill apart from in two of the Kanchipuram temples I visited, some aspects seen in sacrifice can also be seen in the Reṇukā myth without linking it to the anthill. Like the sacrifice, the goddess embodies ambivalent powers of new life and death. Craddock (2001, 167; 1994, 113) argues that Paraśurāma sacrifices his mother and reconstructs her as a goddess: Reṇukā was his mother, now Reṇukā-Māriyamman is everybody’s mother. By letting her own head be sacrificed Reṇukā shows her devotees that by self-sacrifice they too can be infused with her grace. By surrendering one’s own ego, which is represented by the head¹⁹⁸, one can obtain the grace of the goddess. To offer one’s hair, a common practice in goddess temples, can be interpreted as a symbolic head offering¹⁹⁹, and hence a self-sacrifice, to the goddess. Professor Vasudeva, who offered his hair to Reṇukā ampāl in Padaivedu, told me:

¹⁹⁵ Or, like the Nāgāttammaṅ shrine described in the beginning of the thesis, a tree with a snake underneath it. Unfortunately I do not have enough material from that particular shrine, as none of the people we met there were able to tell us anything of significance regarding the origin and history of the place. As a roadside shrine with no regular *pūjā* Mr. Subramanian and I were not able to find people to give us the information we wanted.

¹⁹⁶ *Karuḷ* in Tamil means black, an epithet given to this particular form of Māriyamman since she manifested as a black cobra in an anthill.

¹⁹⁷ See <http://www.thiruverkadukarumari.com/edeities4.htm>.

¹⁹⁸ To connect the ego to the head comes under the same discussion as the identity’s relation to the head in the next section. However, that the ego is symbolized by the head has been interpreted by other scholars. For instance (Beck 1979, 32) argues that in the most common four armed iconography of Kālī where she carries a severed head in her left hand, the head symbolizes how the devotee’s ego must be slain for obtaining salvation.

¹⁹⁹ For this and other interpretations of shaving the head in Indian culture, see Olivelle (1998).

“We should offer the highest thing to the god whom we love. If that’s the case, the highest portion of the body is the head. Because you will not be able to offer the head completely, as a mark of it we offer the hair. This is known as *uttamāṅga* [lit. “the highest part of the body”, i.e. the head], because we offer the highest thing to god. We are not able to give the whole head so we give a token of it. We can not give an eye, etc.”

We can draw some lines from the “sacrificed” Reṇukā to the tantric goddess Chinnamastā, (lit. “she whose head is severed”), whose iconography illustrates how the devotees are nourished by the goddess and the goddess in turn nourished by the sacrifices of her devotees. Commonly, Chinnamastā is depicted standing on top of a love-making couple with her own self-decapitated head in her hand, and streams of blood flowing from her bleeding neck into the mouths of her head and two attendants. Chinnamastā is at the same time the sacrifice, the sacrificer, and the recipient of the sacrifice, and in this way she shows the interdependence of sex, death and new life. Similarly Reṇukā is also sacrificed and revived as a goddess who controls life, disease and death, but by Paraśurāma’s hands.

7.2.4 Head exchange and revival

The theme of beheading cannot merely be interpreted as a *separation* of the head and body (like Doniger’s interpretation that the beheading purifies either the head or body), it is also about *merging*, an exchange of heads. In the oral myths, what creates the goddess is exactly the merging with a woman of a lower caste.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, my informants seemed not to question that it was Reṇukā’s head that continued living, and not her body, with the exception of Ponniyamman’s story. Some, like the devotee Balasubramanian, justified this by stating that “in the body of a person, the head is the most important thing”. An interesting parallel to the head-exchange in the Reṇukā story is found in the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, an 11th century collection of Indian legends and folk tales retold by Somadeva. Here, a washerman is married to a girl and once the wife’s brother visits them:

“[T]hey pass by a temple of Durgā and the young husband enters and is overwhelmed by the powerful presence of the Goddess. He takes a sword lying in front of the idol and decapitates himself in order to offer a blood sacrifice to the goddess. When the brother-in-law finds the dead body he is so perturbed that he follows the example. Seeing both men lying dead the young wife desperately addresses the Goddess and then attempts to hang herself with a creeper. All of a sudden the voice of the Goddess is heard ordering her to put back the two severed heads on the bodies. In her confusion, the young woman places the heads on the wrong bodies. Then the three of them continue their journey.” (Brückner 1999, 120)

In the frame story a king and a *vetāla* (ghost-like being dwelling in cremation grounds) debates who of the two men should be considered the woman's husband. The king argues that it is the one with the head of the husband, since "the head is the most important part of the body, the identity of a person depending on it" (ibid.). Another version of the same story however²⁰⁰, has the king in the frame story argue that the one with the body of the husband is the correct husband, since "the wedding is performed by the bridegroom taking the bride's hand with this own right hand which is part of the body" (ibid., 121). This shows that there are different interpretations as who is considered the person whose life continues after a head exchange, like in the case of *Ponniyamman*, where the body of *Reṇukā* is the life-continuer²⁰¹, something that was not questioned by the informants in Uthukadu.

The dualism between mind (as the center of identity) and body is a western categorization and is not necessarily the way other cultures would divide these entities. Doniger (1999, 258) says: "Many cultures – including Hinduism – do not debate the mind-body question at all²⁰²; they assume that memory, for instance, is a part of both." As the myths presented in the thesis show, the identity of a person along with his or her memories could be situated both in the head and body.

In the *Puruṣasūkta* we saw how the Brahmins are seen as the head of society. But for the Brahmins to maintain their purity as the head of society, the lower castes are needed to take care of the tasks that require contact with impurities. Beck (1981, 128) argues that by using the body image, the *Reṇukā* tale reinforces the idea that the one cannot exist without the other. The *Reṇukā* myth explicitly talks about social exchange²⁰³, the goddess is a mix of high and low castes. According to Craddock (1994, 43) the mixing of castes, and especially Brahmins and untouchables, is an ever-present theme in Tamil Folklore, and in India in general. But Beck's point of interdependence can be seen on several levels: The high and low castes, purity and impurity, the two aspects of the goddess. Brubaker (1977, 62) touches on the same when he argues that "We learn from *Reṇukā* [that] what is untouchable must not only be touched but known intimately as a vital part of oneself."

²⁰⁰ A Jaina version in which the washerman is exchanged for a Brahmin who offers his head to Śiva after marriage.

²⁰¹ The same is of course the case with *Gaṇeśa*, whose body continues life after receiving the head of an elephant.

²⁰² The *Upaniṣads* distinguish the eternal soul from the temporary body. In classical Hindu philosophy the mind is considered different from the soul (*ātman*) and *puruṣa*, and it belongs to the body. It is an instrument of the soul, by which the soul controls the senses, and by which the soul perceives its own mental states. (White 2000, 477)

²⁰³ An interesting parallel to the myth of *Sax*'s beheaded goddess mentioned in the previous section, in which we find a biological exchange: here, the goddess beheads herself and becomes Śiva and *Pārvaṭī*, *ardhanārīśvara*.

7.2.5 The ambivalent village goddess

The myth serves to explain how the village goddess Reṇukā-Māriyamman embodies two opposite goddess types, briefly described in section 7.1. The categorization of goddesses into *śānta* and *ugra* is connected to two types of women, the non-erotic wife and erotic consort – controlled and uncontrolled female sexuality²⁰⁴. Māriyamman embodies both, and she is benevolent and wrathful at the same time. Her creation myth explains her ambivalent and ambiguous nature. She is at the same time Sītā-like and wrathful. Sītā, wife of Rāma and the heroine of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is the prime example of an ideal wife in pan-Indian mythology. Kinsley (1988, 77) says: “In inculcating the nature of the ideal woman in India, Sītā plays an important role, perhaps the dominant role of all Hindu mythological figures. The *Rāmāyaṇa*, either in its original Sanskrit version or in one of several vernacular renditions, is well known by almost every Hindu.” The Sītā story also contains the motif of injustice done to her by her husband – Rāma, as Jamadagni, questions the chastity of his Sītā, without reason, after Rāvaṇa abducted her²⁰⁵. She then enters the fire to prove her chastity towards Rāma (as we recall from section 6.1.2 the same motif of Reṇukā entering the fire is found also in the Padaivedu *sthalapurāṇa* and *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa*).

Kinsley (1988) sees beheading in the Reṇukā story as part of a bigger mythological theme: injustice to women, which transforms mortal women into wrathful village goddesses (cf. also van Voorthuizen 2001, 258; Doniger 1980, 273). In the Reṇukā myth, a housewife from the domestic (*akam*) sphere is transformed through suffering into a goddess of the public (*puram*) sphere, a pattern seen in several Tamil myths (Craddock 2001, 154). I have already mentioned Kaṇṇaki (footnote 168, p. 69), the chaste wife who burnt down Madurai with her torn off breast when her husband was unjustly sentenced to death. Another example of a mistreated woman who becomes a goddess is the myth about the Brahmin woman who was tricked into marrying an outcaste man. This myth is also connected with Māriyamman (although I myself was never told this story):

²⁰⁴ The two types of consorts are also expressed e.g. in the two wives of the gods Murukan (Tamil Nadu) and Khaṇḍoba (Maharashtra): both have two wives by their side, one of high caste (arranged marriage), and one of low caste (love marriage).

²⁰⁵ Sītā is in the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki described as constantly thinking of her husband Rāma. Her whole life is built around attending him. She follows him into exile in the forest, where she is abducted by the demon Rāvaṇa. After rescuing her, Rāma questions Sītā's loyalty and says it would be ignoble for him to take her back after she had spent time in custody of another man. Sītā then enters a funeral pyre, praying to Agni that if she were innocent, she should be protected. Sītā is not harmed by the flames and Rāma accepts her back. That is, until the citizens start gossiping about the incident and Rāma exiles her from his kingdom. After several years Rāma orders a public ordeal to prove her innocence (and that *he* is free of shame). After the ordeal, Sītā sinks back into earth from which she was born.

Once upon a time there lived a Ṛishi who had a fair daughter. A Chaṇḍāla, *i.e.* an Outcaste, desired to marry her. He went to Kāśī (Benares) in the disguise of a Brāhman, where, under the tuition of a learned Brāhman, he became well versed in the *śāstras*... and learnt the Brāhman modes of life. On his return he passed himself off as a Brāhman, and after some time made offers to the Ṛishi lady, and somehow succeeded in prevailing upon her to marry him. [...] They lived a married life for some time, and had children. One day it so happened that one of the children noticed the father stitch an old shoe previous to going out for a bath. This seemed curious, and the child drew the mother's attention to it. The mother, by virtue of her *tapas*..., came to know the base trick that had been played upon her, and cursed himself and herself. The curse on herself was that she should be born a Mari, to be worshipped only by low-caste men. The curse on him was that he should be born a buffalo, fit to be sacrificed to her, and that her children should be born as sheep and chickens. (Craddock 1994, 42)

These types of myths, Kinsley says, help explain the ambivalent nature of these goddesses, and their independence of a consort. After suffering at the hands of males, Reṇukā-Māriyamman revolts and becomes independent. The injustice done to her makes her devoid of male control²⁰⁶, and on her own she is both powerful and potentially angry: because of the suffering she experienced, she is prone to sudden outbursts of wrath and violence. But the goddess is not only fierce, and she is not feared by her devotees as the description of an *ugra* goddess might imply. Perhaps we could rather talk of a kind of awe – a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*²⁰⁷? On the one hand, it seems the devotees are well aware that she is fierce and therefore they are cautious not to offend her²⁰⁸. On the other hand, the devotees show great love and affection for her (cf. also Craddock 2001, 146), like one devotee of Karumāriyamman whose home I visited, Bhuvaneswari, told me over and over: “[Māriyamman] has come mainly to destroy evil things and atrocities. She is focused on that good things should happen.” Bhuvaneswari is in her seventies, frail and has lost a big toe to diabetes. Due to this handicap she rarely leaves her house, except for participating in functions in the temple. She and her husband keep a *pūjā* room in their house filled with pictures of Māriyamman where Bhuvaneswari invokes the goddess in a jewelry and bangle-adorned oil lamp every Friday. But whenever she leaves her house and enters the sanctum of

²⁰⁶ Most village goddesses are said to be married to Śiva. This was also the case in the Karumāriyamman temple I visited where they celebrate an annual marriage festival during which Māriyamman marries Śiva. When I asked my informants in the other temples whether Reṇukā-Māriyamman was married, however, most of them simply said, like Mr. Arumugasamy gurukkāl: “As per the history, she is married”, or like Mr. Vishnukumar: “She is married to Jamadagni”. In any case, the marriage is in general played down and the goddess considered independent of male control.

²⁰⁷ Rudolf Otto's phrase describes the “numinous” meeting with the divine as “a fearful and fascinating mystery” that at the same time invokes fear and attraction in the experiencer.

²⁰⁸ For instance, I myself felt the wrath of the *ugra* goddess Cantaveḷiyamman on my own body when I caught a high fever after an interview there, and was asked by my interpreters whether I had done something to upset the goddess, like e.g. not following the temple's purity rules, since “she is very fierce”. Their first concern was that I became ill because I had done something to attract the wrath of the goddess. This left me with the impression that I was expected to act carefully around her.

Māriyamman, she is “so happy, so happy”, she said repeatedly. This notion of the goddess as a figure who on the one hand invokes caution and on the other love in her devotees shows that the goddess Reṇukā-Māriyamman is not easily reduced to a single aspect. She is the cause and the cure of disease. She gives and takes lives. She is merciful and fractious. She encompasses and hence she expresses the very ambivalence of life, as this quote from Erndl (1993, 158) illustrates:

“Devotees worship the Goddess out of love and devotion, not simply as a means of flattering her into satisfying their material desires. The Goddess grants her devotees’ wishes as a way of showing her grace and gives *darśan* openly. She is accessible, immanent, and worldly. What Babb²⁰⁹ perceives as malevolence could simply be called realism. Devī is closely connected with the realities and ambiguities of life. She is *prākṛti* (matter), *śakti* (divine power), *māyā* (creative illusion), *samsāra* (world cycle) – which encompass purity and impurity, auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, creation and destruction, life and death.”

However, with the former paragraphs and the image of a suffering woman who revolts and is transformed into a goddess in mind, to see the goddess as a feminist is to reduce her drastically. As Brubaker (1978, 122 cited in Craddock 1994, 10) says:

“The goddess is not a champion of women’s rights, nor a symbol of their suffering and revenge. She is not the deified embodiment of female protest and self-assertion. She is, rather, – as is any deity – the embodiment of a religious vision and the symbol and medium of an experience of sacred power.”

Brubaker’s last point is crucial. The devotees approach the goddess to get a response. There is an interaction between devotee, goddess and *śakti*, the power that flows from the goddess to her devotees and back again to her through ritual interaction. The principle of *do ut des*²¹⁰ is evident here: the devotees approach the goddess doing X, for the goddess to do Y in return. The cult of the Reṇukā-Māriyamman is in the end built around devotees’ and goddess’ give and take in reciprocity in order to obtain a result – be it to be cured of chickenpox or getting a job.

²⁰⁹ Lawrence Babb (Ganeri 2005, 425) was the first scholar to introduce the dichotomy of malevolent and benevolent goddesses.

²¹⁰ “I give, so that you may give”, a quote from Roman religion that expresses the reciprocity between devotee and deity. This echoes Marcel Mauss’ ideas about “the gift”. Briefly, Mauss argues that there is a bond between the giver and the gift, therefore the act of giving demands reciprocal from the recipient. His argument is that gift exchange builds the relationship between humans, in this case the argument is extended to encompass the gods. See Mauss (1970, 1975).

8 Conclusion

In the thesis I have presented three different types of Reṇukā myths, viz. the classical Sanskrit variants belonging to the epic-*Purāṇic* traditions, a written local variant from the *Kāñcī-māhātmyam*, and two local oral variants from the Kanchipuram area. I will now return to the questions posed in the introduction – *How do the Sanskrit myths of Reṇukā manifest locally? How do the local myths relate to the Sanskrit myths?* To answer this, I will sum up some changes and constants we have seen throughout the various myths. The schema on the next page presents a simplified picture of the most important changes between the stories, where blue signifies traits common to all the myths (dark blue the identical traits and light blue with slight variations), green the exclusively Sanskritic traits and orange the exclusively local Tamil traits.

The local and the epic-*Purāṇic* myths all share the same plot, or structure, namely Reṇukā's chastity lapse leading to the matricide and her subsequent revival. This is why we can speak of the myths in this thesis as the *one and same myth*, albeit with a plot that leaves room for changes, elaboration and localization. Most importantly, the motifs of Reṇukā's chastity, matricide and revival are ever present in the myth, and Reṇukā always figures as the mother of Paraśurāma.

Even though you can look at these narratives as the same myth, there are still huge differences between them. The local myths are about the creation of a goddess who is ambivalent and powerful – a sharp contrast to the epic-*Purāṇic* versions where Paraśurāma wishes that his mother forgets the matricide. As a consequence Reṇukā's *śakti* is kept in check throughout the epic-*Purāṇic* myths and not allowed any opportunity to unfold: Reṇukā remains under the control of her husband and the Paraśurāma story continues uninterrupted. In further connection to this, nor do the epic-*Purāṇic* accounts mention Reṇukā's chastity powers gained from her status as *cumāṅkali* or *pativrata*. Throughout the epic-*Purāṇic* stories, Reṇukā has no special powers; she is an ordinary sage's wife. Van Voorthuizen (2001, 266-7) argues that this controlled *śakti* expresses the male voice that is dominant in the Brahmanical tradition and reinforces patriarchal values, whereas the female voice is more visible in folk Hinduism²¹¹ represented by oral and more local myths where Reṇukā's fate is different.

²¹¹ Folk Hinduism is used here in van Voorthuizen's (2001, 266) sense, as "a collective term for the religious traditions which fall outside the scope of the Sanskrit tradition".

Schema 1: Changes and constants in the Reṇukā myths

	Epic- <i>Purāṇic</i>		Written local <i>KM</i>	Oral local	
	<i>Mbh</i>	<i>Bhp</i>		Venkatesh's myth	Dhobis' myth
Husband	Jamadagni	Jamadagni	Jamadagni	Jamadagni	Śiva
Children	Paraśurāma + 4 others	Paraśurāma + several others	Paraśurāma	Paraśurāma + 3 others	Paraśurāma
Chastity powers	÷	÷	Make ball of water	Make pot of raw clay	Make pot of raw clay
Sees while fetching water	King of <i>gandharvas</i> sporting with his wives	King of <i>gandharvas</i> sporting with <i>apsaras</i>	Reflection of Kārtavīrjārjuna	Reflection of a <i>gandharva</i>	Shadow of a saint travelling in the sky in the Garuḍavāhana
Reṇukā's reaction	Is desirous	Is desirous and forgets time of the sacrifice	Desires him and he desires her, is delayed for the sacrifice	Thinks he is beautiful	Thinks he is beautiful
Anger of Jamadagni	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fate of other sons	Deprived of consciousness	Killed along with Reṇukā	÷	Turned into a dog, gypsy and weaver	÷
Reṇukā's flight	÷	÷	÷	To dhobis, fishermen and colony	To dhobis and colony
Matricide	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Boons of Paraśurāma	Revival of his mother unaware of the killing, himself unstained by sin and natural state of his brothers	Revival of his mother and brothers	÷ (Paraśurāma begs Jamadagni for pity and Jamadagni suggests to revive Reṇukā)	Revival of his mother, he will be at his mother's side and not be cursed as a son who wronged his father	Revival of his mother
Manner of revival	Own head and body	Own head and body	Own head and body	Own head and outcaste's body	Outcaste's head and own body
Deification	÷ (Made to forget the matricide)	÷ (Made to forget the matricide)	Becomes Māriyamman after widowed	Becomes Māriyamman after rejected by Jamadagni	Becomes/remains Ponniyamman after rejected by Śiva

Boon of pox	÷	÷	Gets from Śiva after he deified her on her own request	Gets the <i>navadhānya</i> from Jamadagni to use as pox pearls, tests it on the gods	÷
Localizing elements	÷	÷	Goes to Kanchipuram and establishes a <i>liṅga</i> , is deified there	Born in Uthukadu, Yama builds temple for her in Padaivedu where she assumes her temple form	Goes to Erikarai (near Uthukadu) and lies down to prevent the river from flowing over

The *KM* holds a middle position between the epic-*Purāṇic* and oral versions both in terms of genre and content. Content-wise this middle position is obvious in the schema, where the *KM* shares some features with the epic-*Purāṇic* (green) and some with the oral myths (orange). Reṇukā becomes a legitimized low caste goddess after she is widowed, but not with the head exchange that characterizes all oral versions. Still, many folk elements are included in the *KM*, a local Sanskrit Brahmanical text, reflected in Reṇukā’s deification, her chastity powers and her association with pox.

Where the Sanskrit (now including the *KM*) and oral myths differ significantly, is the head exchange with a low caste woman. In all the oral versions I collected Reṇukā is revived with the body of an outcaste (but in the Ponniammaṇ myth, the *head* of an outcaste). As half Brahmin–half outcaste, she is no longer accepted as Jamadagni’s (or Śiva’s) wife. Reṇukā, now Māriyammaṇ since her body has “changed”, gets the boon of *muttu* in order to infect people with pox, so that they must serve and sustain her. All this is not part of the classical Sanskrit sources.

The *KM* and, even more so, the oral myths all contain strong elements of localization. The localization is present on several levels, and in the oral myths not only by anchoring the story in physical space, but also to social groups. It is important that the woman Reṇukā is beheaded along with is identifiable by caste. Giving Reṇukā the head or body of a “colony lady” or a dhobi is also a way of localizing the mythic action, as this further serves to legitimize the dhobis’ role in rituals concerning the goddess and disease. The important role

of the dhobis in the Reṇukā tale is also reflected in general beliefs like “if you get food from a dhobi’s house while infected with chickenpox, you will recover more quickly”²¹². I have described the dhobis’ role in the annual festival in Uthukadu, where they house the goddess as they did in the myth. A future task for research on this would be to investigate in fieldwork the entire festival, in order to explore the ritual dimensions of the Reṇukā tale in detail.

The link to social groups is also strong in the motif I have called “Reṇukā’s flight”, present only in the oral myths. Commonly, as in Mr. Venkatesh’s myth, Reṇukā takes refuge at the dhobis, the fishermen and in the colony, or in one variant I heard a *pūjāri* in a Śiva temple hid her. Also, in Mr. Venkatesh’s myth, Jamadagni turns his other sons that refuse to kill Reṇukā into representatives of two other caste groups living in the area, the saḥ weaving community and the naraikkuṛavar gypsies (and a dog).

But the anchoring to local places is also pervasive in the local myths. The *KM* legitimizes a shrine established by Reṇukā near Kanchipuram. Thereby the text glorifies the power of the *liṅga* as well as the power of the goddess Reṇukā (Māri), and the city of Kanchipuram as a fruitful place to fulfill one’s prayers. Further, that Reṇukā establishes a *śivaliṅga* makes her resemble Kāmākṣī, the principal and well-known goddess of Kanchi, who did the same. This equates Kāmākṣī and Reṇukā although most people I interviewed had not at all heard of the story of Reṇukā establishing a *liṅga*. Since my informants were not from the big Brahmanical temple complexes in Kanchi, it is not completely unexpected that the *KM* or *Kāñcīppurāṇa* are not very well known by the people I interviewed. But as mentioned in section 4.2, the *liṅgas* from the *KM* are not mentioned in the list of Kanchipuram’s 108 *Śivaliṅgas* either. This is curious. Is this because the *liṅgas* are in fact outside Kanchi, as I argue? Perhaps people do not know of them because they had been deserted for so long and are still under renovation? More research on the *KM* and *Kāñcīppurāṇa* as well as archeological research on *liṅgas* inside the city of Kanchipuram would be required to answer these questions.

Both Mr. Venkatesh and the dhobis localize their myth by anchoring them to well known places around Kanchipuram. Mr. Venkatesh mentions Reṇukā’s birthplace, the village of Uthukadu, and the Ponniyamman story explains how the goddess was driven away from her temple near the village and laid down as a protective wall at the lake in Erikarai. Most informants, however, linked their stories to Padaivedu, where Tamil Nadu’s most famous Reṇukā temple is situated – a renowned pilgrimage site known for its special powers.

²¹² Bhuvanewari from the Karumāriyamman temple told me this.

Another element of localization, which links Reṇukā directly to the Tamil soil and temple grounds is that Reṇukā has manifested spontaneously as a *svayambhū* bodiless head in several places in Kancipuram. This is not mentioned in the myths, but many priestly informants stressed the fact.

The motif of Reṇukā's *satī* is not present in the scheme since this motif is not included in the versions I have gone most deeply into. The *satī* motif is found in the *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa* as well as the *sthalapurāṇa* from Padaivedu, where it explains the origin of the nīm garment ritual performed at Reṇukā-Māriyamman's temples. Reṇukā's *satī* is yet another topic that requires deeper insight in future studies.

Apart from investigating different versions of the Reṇukā myth, I have interpreted the motifs I find most important, namely chastity, beheading and revival. Apart from the more obvious elements of localization such as the anchoring to local places, these motifs are in the local myths exactly what sets the story apart as a Tamil myth, distinct from the myths of the trans-regional Brahmanic-Sanskritic tradition. This is shown in the Tamil chastity ideal leading to Reṇukā's resurrection as a powerful village goddess associated with pox and disease.

The chastity norms imposed on Tamil women are reflected in and expressed through Reṇukā's special chastity powers. In the local Reṇukā stories, she has special powers resulting from her chastity throughout, contrasting the epic-*Purāṇic* versions where she is an ordinary woman. The local Reṇukā is a *cumaṅkali* who through her chastity and devotion towards the husband is able to increase her *śakti* and use her powers benevolently. Her inner heat, that initially can be dangerous, is controlled by the ties of marriage and focused into a beneficial power. Once she becomes a mistreated woman on the other hand, or a widow no longer bound by her male kin, she gains powers she can use destructively. In the Tamil myths, revived with a "changed" form, or as in the *KM* widowed, Reṇukā turns into an ambivalent goddess. However, I have argued that although the story reflects these strict norms imposed on women in Tamil Nadu, it does not serve a didactical purpose. Rather, it plays down Reṇukā's chastity lapse, as indicated by statements of the informants, and implied by the texts themselves, which I argue straightforwardly narrates the mythical actions without necessarily *advocating* them.

While the Reṇukā tale has frequently been analyzed using psychoanalytical interpretations, I argue that one has to be more cautious, since the Freudian theories from 19th century Europe are not necessarily easily applicable to an ancient Indian myth. I do, however,

find some symbolical perspectives suggestive, as Doniger's analysis on the purification of the cut apart head and body. This being said, I do think though that Doniger dwells too much on the *separation* of Reṇukā's head and body in her analysis. The *merging* of the low caste woman is what makes up Māriyamman. Following Beck (1981, 128), I argue that by using the image of a *body*, revived part outcaste and impure and part Brahmin and pure, the Reṇukā myth demonstrates how one part is dependent on the other. This is visible on different levels. Socially, the high castes are dependent on the lower to do the tasks that sets the high castes apart from the low in terms of purity and impurity. When it comes to the goddess herself, she embodies two contrasting aspects, the *ugra* and the *śānta*. These two aspects do not exclude each other; rather, they express and embrace the very ambivalence of life.

By discussing the notions of head, body, mind and identity, I have shown that it is not necessarily so that mind and memories are situated in the head. Like in the Ponniamman myth, the *body* can also go on with a person's memories and identity when the *head* is left behind. The notion of identity and its relation to the body in Indian culture is a yet another topic that would be interesting to investigate further in future studies.

Like other Tamil stories of mistreated women, the local Reṇukā stories are creation myths of an ambivalent and powerful goddess. Wronged, decapitated and (in the oral myths) revived as half outcaste, Reṇukā-Māriyamman rises as a wrathful yet affectionate goddess, simultaneously the cause and the cure of disease, a powerful and accessible *śakti*.

Oh gem of Māri, reduce the pearls that you have weaved,
Oh mother with a voice of the bird, playfully reduce these pearls [...]
Oh Pearl of Māri Oh great mother,
Who protects just with sidelong merciful sight,
Please give us your lotus like feet to worship.
(extract from *Māriyamman tālāṭṭu*²¹³)

²¹³ <http://stotrarathna.blogspot.com/2009/07/mariamman-thalattu-tamil.html>

Glossary

Most words are given in Sanskrit, and words in Tamil are indicated with Ta. in parentheses. The most common terms that are used both in Sanskrit and Tamil are given first in Sanskrit, then in Tamil in parentheses.

<i>abhiṣeka</i> (Ta. <i>apiṭēkam</i>)	ritual bathing of a deity
Ādiśeṣa (Ta. <i>Aticēṣaṅ</i>)	the cosmic serpent on which Viṣṇu reclines during the intervals of the world's creations
<i>alaṃkāra</i> (Ta. <i>alaṅkāram</i>)	adornment of the goddess with garlands, clothes and jewels
(Ta.) <i>ammai</i>	generic term for pox viruses, e.g. smallpox and chickenpox
(Ta.) <i>ammaṅ</i>	goddess, more common term than <i>ampāl</i>
(Ta.) <i>ampāl</i>	goddess, more Brahmanical term than <i>ammaṅ</i>
Aṅkāḷa <i>ammaṅ</i>	graveyard goddess of Mel Malaiyanur
(also Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvāri)	
<i>ārati</i> (Ta. <i>āratti</i>)	ritual of circulating a burning lamp in front of the deity
(Ta.) <i>Āṭi</i>	the fourth Tamil month, mid-July to mid-August
<i>avatāra</i> (Ta. <i>avatāram</i>)	descent of a deity to the earth
<i>bali</i> (Ta. <i>pali</i>)	animal sacrifice
<i>bhakti</i> (Ta. <i>patti</i>)	devotion, love
Brahma	Hindu deity considered part of the <i>trimūrti</i> along with Viṣṇu and Śiva
<i>darśana</i> (Ta. <i>taricaṅam</i>)	the auspicious viewing of the deity
<i>devī</i> (Ta. <i>tēvi</i>)	goddess
Durgā (Ta. <i>Turkkai</i>)	goddess created by the gods to slay the demon Mahīśāsura
Gaṇeśa (Ta. <i>Piḷḷaiyār</i> , <i>Viṅṅāyakaṅ</i>)	Śiva's son, god with elephant head
Garuḍa (Ta. <i>Karutaṅ</i>)	Viṣṇu's vehicle, an eagle
<i>grāmadevatā</i>	village goddess
(Ta. <i>kirāmatēvatai</i>)	
<i>gandharva</i> (Ta. <i>kantaruvam</i>)	celestial mythical being associated with romance
Kāmākṣī (Kāmāteci <i>ammaṅ</i>)	form of the goddess Pārvatī in Kanchipuram
Kaṅṅaki	heroine of the Tamil epic <i>cilappatikāram</i>

(Ta.) <i>karpu</i>	chastity
<i>kṣatriya</i>	the second class, or <i>varṇa</i> , of warriors
<i>kumkum</i>	vermillion powder
(Ta.) <i>kūḷ</i>	millet porridge, common food for the goddess Māriyamman
(Ta.) <i>kurukkaḷ</i> (<i>gurukkaḷ</i>)	officiating Brahmin priest in Goddess temples
<i>triśūla</i> (Ta. <i>cūlam</i>)	trident, attribute of the goddess
<i>liṅga</i> (Ta. <i>liṅkam</i>)	aniconic mark that represents Śiva in phallic form
<i>Mahābhārata</i>	Indian epic about the great war of the Bhāratas
<i>mahādevī</i>	the one Great Goddess
<i>māhātmyam</i>	sub genre of <i>purāṇas</i> telling the origin of particular shrines
<i>Mānavadharmasāstra</i>	the laws of Manu, law book pertaining to religious and legal duty
<i>mūlamūrti</i> (Ta. <i>mūlapēram</i>)	immovable image of the deity installed in temples
<i>maṇḍapa</i> (Ta. <i>maṇṭapam</i>)	outdoor pillared pavilion in the temple
(Ta.) <i>muttu</i>	lit. pearls; pox pustules
<i>nāga</i> (Ta. <i>nāka</i>)	snake
<i>naivedya</i> (Ta. <i>naivēttiyam</i>)	food offering presented to the deity
<i>navagrahas</i>	the nine planets of Hindu astronomy
(Ta. <i>navakkirakam</i>)	
<i>navarātri</i> (Ta. <i>navarāttiri</i>)	lit. nine nights; annual festival of the goddess during which she is worshipped in different forms
<i>nīm</i>	<i>Azadirachta Indica</i> , sacred tree of the goddess Māriyamman
<i>pativratā</i> (Ta. <i>cumaṅkali</i>)	chaste wife utterly devoted to her husband
<i>Pārvatī</i>	wife of Śiva
(Ta.) <i>poṅkal</i>	dish of boiled lentils and rice, a common offering to the goddess
(Ta.) <i>piṭāri</i>	boarder goddess
<i>pradakṣiṇa</i>	circumambulation
(Ta. <i>pirataṭciṇam</i>)	
<i>prasāda</i> (Ta. <i>piracātam</i>)	food offered to the deity and distributed to devotees for consumption
<i>pratiṣṭhā</i> (Ta. <i>piratiṭṭai</i>)	consecration
<i>pūjā</i> (Ta. <i>pūcai</i>)	veneration, ritual of worship
<i>pūjāri</i> (Ta. <i>pūcāri</i>)	officiating non-Brahmin priest in goddess temples

<i>purāṇa</i>	genre of texts consisting e.g. of narratives from Hindu mythology, cosmology, genealogies etc.
(Ta.) <i>purru</i>	anthill or termite hill
<i>Rāmāyaṇa</i>	Indian epic about the journey of Rāma
<i>śakti</i> (Ta. <i>catti, cakti</i>)	feminine power, strength, potency
<i>śānta</i> (<i>cāntam</i>)	peaceful, benevolent, characteristic of the goddess
<i>satī</i>	a wife's self immolation on the funeral pyre of her husband
Sītā	wife of Rāma, principle female character of the <i>Rāmāyaṇa</i>
Śītalā	north Indian goddess of smallpox
Śiva (Ta. Civaṅ)	major Hindu deity, considered part of the <i>trimūrti</i> along with Brahma and Viṣṇu
<i>śloka</i>	the most common Sanskrit verse form developed from the Vedic <i>anuṣṭubh</i> meter, consisting of double verse lines of 16 syllables
<i>sthalapurāṇa</i>	texts that tell the origin of particular Tamil shrines
(Ta. <i>tala purāṇam</i>)	
<i>sthalavrkṣa</i>	temple tree indigenous to each temple
Subrahmaṇya, also Skanda and Kārtikeya (Ta. Murukaṅ)	Son of Śiva and Pārvatī
<i>sūdra</i>	the fourth and lowest class, or <i>varṇa</i> , of servants
<i>sumaṅgalī</i> (Ta. <i>cumaṅkali</i>)	auspicious married woman
<i>svayambhū</i> (Ta. <i>cuyampu</i>)	self manifest
<i>tapas</i>	lit. heat; asceticism, austerities
(Ta.) <i>tīrttam</i>	holy water from the <i>abhiṣeka</i> of the goddess, distributed to devotees as <i>prasāda</i> and used as a remedy for pox
<i>trimūrti</i>	Hindu triad consisting of Brahma (the creator), Viṣṇu (the preserver) and Śiva (the destroyer)
<i>ugra</i> (Ta. <i>ukkiram</i>)	fierce, aspect of the goddess
<i>utsavamūrti</i>	procession image of the deity kept in temples
(Ta. <i>urcavapēram</i>)	
(Ta.) <i>uṭukkai</i>	hourglass-shaped drum
<i>vāhana</i> (Ta. <i>vākaṇam</i>)	vehicle or animal (of the gods)
<i>varṇa</i>	lit. color; generic term for the four principal classes: Brahmins, <i>kṣatriyas</i> , <i>vaiśyas</i> and <i>sūdras</i>

Viṣṇu (Ta. Perumāḷ)	major Hindu deity, considered part of the <i>trimūrti</i> along with Brahma and Śiva
Yama	god of death

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Appendix A: Pictures and maps



1. Reṇukā sees a *Gandharva* in the sky and her pot breaks.



2. Paraśurāma decapitates his mother at Jamadagni's command.



3. Paraśurāma attaches Reṇukā's head to the body of an outcaste woman.



4. Reṇukā is revived with a different body.

Pictures on this page from <http://www.renugambal.com/>



5. Iconography of Karumāriyamman



6. Iconography of Reṇukā ampāl,
Padaivedu



7. Devotee praying at Nāgāttamman shrine.



8. Paḍavēṭṭammaṅ *mūlamūrti*. On the right, an image of Paraśurāma.



9. Cantaveḷiyammaṅ *mūlamūrti*, adorned for Navarātri.



10. Devotees gathered around Cantaveḷiyammaṅ's procession image during the Navarātri festival.



11. Paḍavēṭṭamman temple



12. Cantaveḷiyamman temple



13. Mandapa for devotees with chickenpox, Cantaveḷiyamman temple



14. Māriyamman adorned with nīm leaves.



15. Reṇukā dressed in nīm leaves, mural from Reṇukā ampāl temple, Padaivedu.



16. Procession of devotees carrying pots decorated with nīm leaves, Paḍavēṭṭamman temple.



17. Ponniyamman shrine, Uthukadu

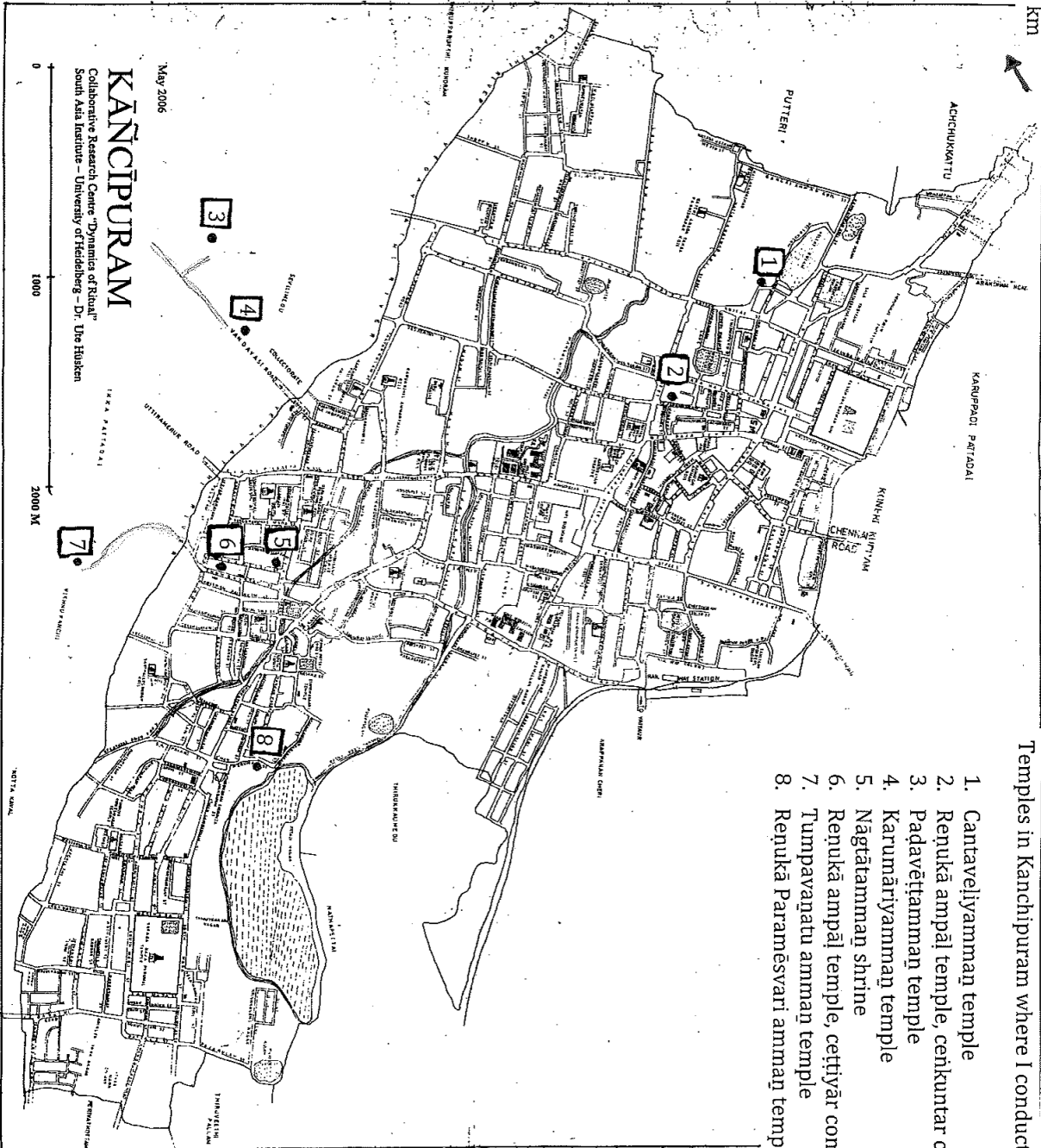


18. The *linga* Renukesvara, Pallur



19. Restored *gopura* and shrine of the *linga* Parasuramesvara, Pallur

Pallur
ca. 20 km
Padalvedu
ca. 70 km



- Temples in Kanchipuram where I conducted interviews:
1. Cantaveļiyammaṅ temple
 2. Reṅukā ampaļ temple, ceṅkuntar community
 3. Paḍaveitammaṅ temple
 4. Karumaṅriyammaṅ temple
 5. Naḡātammaṅ shrine
 6. Reṅukā ampaļ temple, ceṭṭiyar community
 7. Tumpaṅvaṅaṭu ammaṅ temple
 8. Reṅukā Paramēsvari ammaṅ temple

Uṅṅukadu
ca. 30 km

Map 1



Map 2

Appendix B: Sanskrit texts

Mahābhārata 3.116, 1-19

sa devādhyayane yukto jamadagnir mahātapāḥ
tapas tepe tato devān niyamādvaśam ānayat [1]
sa prasenajitaṃ rājann adhigamya narādhipam
reṇukāṃ varayām āsa sa ca tasmai dadau nṛpaḥ [2]
reṇukāṃ tv atha saṃprāpya bharyāṃ bhārgavanandanāḥ
āśramasthas tayā sārddham tapas tepe ‘nukūlayā [3]
tasyāḥ kumārāś catvāro jajñire rāmapañcamāḥ
sarveśam ajadhanyas tu rāma āsīj jadhanyajah [4]
phalāhāreṣu sarveṣu gateṣv atha suteṣu vai
reṇukā snātum agamat kadācin niyatāvratā [5]
sā tu citrarathaṃ nāma mārṭikāvatakaṃ nṛpam
dadarśa reṇukā rājann āgacchatī yadṛcchayā [6]
krīḍantam salile dṛṣṭvā sabhāryaṃ padmālinam
rddhimantam tatas tasya sprhayām āsa reṇukā [7]
vyabhicārāt tu sā tasmāt klinnāmbhasi vicetanā
praviveśāśramaṃ trastā tām vai bhartānvabudhyata [8]
sa tām dṛṣṭvā cyutām dhairyād brāhmyā lakṣmyā vivarjitām
dhikśabdena mahātejā garhayām āsa vīryavān [9]
tato jyeṣṭho jāmadagnyo rumanvān nāma nāmataḥ
ājagāma suṣeṇāś ca vasurviśvāvasus tathā [10]
tān ānupūrvyād bhagavān vadhe mātur acodayat
na ca te jatāsamhohāḥ kiṃcid ūcur vicetasah [11]
tataḥ śasāpa tān kopāt te saptāś cetanām jahuḥ
mṛgapakṣisadharmāṇaḥ kṣipram āsañ jaḍopamāḥ [12]
tato rāmo ‘bhyagāt paścād āśramaṃ paravīrā
tam uvāca mahāmanyur jamadagnir mahātapāḥ [13]
jahīmām mātaram pāpām mā ca putra vyathām kṛthāḥ
tata ādāya paraśuṃ rāmo mātuh śiro ‘harat [14]
tatas tasya mahārāja jamadagner mahātmanaḥ
kopo agacchat sahasā prasannaś cābravīd idam [15]

mamedam vacanāt tāta kṛtam te karma duṣkaram
vr̥ṇīṣva kāmān dharmajña yāvato vañchase hṛdā [16]
sa vavre mātur utthānam asmṛtiṃ ca vadhasya vai
pāpena tena cāsparśam bhrātṛṇām prakṛtiṃ tathā [17]
apratidvandvatām yuddhe dīrgham āyus ca bharata
dadau ca sarvān kāmāṃs tāñ jamadagnir mahātapāḥ [18]

Bhāgavatapurāṇa 9, 2-8

kadācid reṇukā yātā gaṅgāyām padmālinam
gandharvarājam kṛḍantam apsarobhir apaśyata [2]
vilokyantī kṛḍantam udakārtham nadīm gatā
homavelām na sasmāra kiṃcic citrarathasprhā [3]
kālātyayam tam vilokya muneḥ śāpaviśaṅkitā
āgatya kalaśam tasthau purodhāya kṛtāñjaliḥ [4]
vyabhicāram munir jñātvā patnyāḥ prakupito ‘bravīt
ghnatainām putrakāḥ pāpām ity uktās te na cakrire [5]
rāmaḥ saṃcoditaḥ pitrā bhratṛn mātṛā sahāvidhīt
prabhāvajño muneḥ samyak samādhes tapasāś ca saḥ [6]
vareṇa cchandayām āsa prītaḥ satyavatīsutah
vavre hatanām rāmo ‘pi jīvitam cāsmṛtiṃ vadhe [7]
uttasthus te kuśalino kidrāpāya ivāñjasā
pitur vidvāṃs tapovīryam rāmaś cakre suhr̥dvadham [8]

Kāñcīmāhātmyam 27, 1-67

reṇukeśvaramahimānuvarṇanam

kāśika uvāca
atha vakṣyāmi viprendrā nadyās tīre ‘sya dakṣiṇe
reṇukeśvaram asty anyadreṇukāpūjitaṃ purā [1]
reṇukāsty eva mātā sā jamadagnipriyā satī
abhedyavarmaṇo rājñas tanayā vanitottamā [2]
jamadagnir munivaras tām uvāha svayamvare
sa tayā ramayām āsa cirakālam munīśvaraḥ [3]
kadācic chāradīm sāksāj jyotsnām iva tamonudam

haihayarājā kārtavīryo nṛpottamaḥ [4]
 jalāharaṇasaṃprāptāṃ taṭākāṃ sumahattaram
 navayauvanasampannāṃ atilāvanyaśālinīm [5]
 kāmayan kāmabāṇārtas tatpuras svayam āsthitaḥ
 yuvātirūpasampannaḥ pārthivo 'sau viśeṣataḥ [6]
 saināṃ svaprapadālokaniratā nāvalokayat
 svalāvanyaṃ darśayitum vyomni tālapramāṇake [7]
 tajjalopari tasthau hi navamanmatharūpavān
 tathā tasminn api dine nīram ākṛṣya pāninā [8]
 piṇḍikaraṇaveśāyāṃ tannīre pratibimbītam
 nirīkṣya sāsya vai cchāyāṃ munibhāryā pativratā [9]
 kiñcin manasijasyājñāvaśaṃ ninye manas svakam
 punaś ca kṣaṇamātreṇa saṃstabhyātmām ātmanā [10]
 punas toyam samānetum udyuktā munivallabhā
 pūrvavat piṇḍitannāsīt tajjalaṃ pāninā bhuvī [11]
 tadātibhītā sā sādhvī manasy evam acintayat
 kiñ karomi kva nāyāmi kā gatiḥ me kva durmateḥ [12]
 apiṇḍīkṛtapūjārhanīrahastām vṛthāgatām
 drṣtvā māṃ pāṃsulam matvā muniḥ kopān kariṣyati [13]
 hā sambakaruṇāmūrte pāhi māṃ śaraṇāgatām
 ity evaṅ cintayām āsa cintayantī ca sādhasat [14]
 ghaṭe gṛhītvā tattoyam abalā pāṃsulā satī
 mandamandagatiḥ bhītā yayau sā munisannidhim [15]
 munis tāṃ sajalān kumbhaṃ nyasya pārśve sthitām dhiyā
 kṛtāñjalipuṭāṃ drṣtvā tāvat kālavilambanāt [16]
 samādhim āsthito 'tyarthaṃ manasā dhyānatatparaḥ
 haihayasya tu daurātmyaṃ jñātavān sa taponidhiḥ [17]
 tadrūpālokanād īṣac chañcalīkṛtamānasām
 krudhaḥ provāca tāṃ bhāryāṃ rāmam ālokya putrakam [18]
 vatsa rāma mahābāho mātā te haihayārthitā
 saturājātibalavān yuvā dorbalavān prabhuḥ [19]
 mātus te hṛdayaṃ kiñcic calitaṃ tasya darśanāt
 avāśyam enām ādāsyaty asmānnagaṇayan dhruvam [20]

asyā mamājñayā cindhi śiro me mā viśaṅkaya
vilambitaṃ na kartavyo rājñā dṛṣṭā vivekinā [21]

pitṛnideśenaparaśurāmakṛtasvamātrvadhā

iti rāmo guror vākyād ādāya janānīm nijām
bahis svasyāśramābhyāśe ciccheda janānīśiraḥ [22]
nirviśaṅkam aho kaṣṭaṃ strītvam tatrāpi yauvanam
tatrāpi rūpaśālitvam tatrāpi brāhmaṇāśrayaḥ [23]
tato rāmaś śucābhyetya pitaraṃ praṇaman muhuḥ
paścāttāpena saṃyuktaḥ prāhāsau mātṛbhaktimān [24]
svāmin guro jagaty asmin mātṛghno 'yam itīha me
apavādo yathā na syāt tathā mayi dayāṃ kuru [25]
iti tasya vacaś śrutvā rāmam ūce bhṛgur muniḥ
rāma rājasutāputras tvam adya vidito mayā [26]
mayi bhaktiś ca te vatsa tathāpi śṛṇu putraka
asvargyaṃ lokavidviṣṭaṃ svamātrvadhakarma yat [27]
tasmāt te māstv apakhyātir mātṛhatyā samudbhavā
sandhāya tacchiras tūrṇaṃ samutthāpaya madgirā [28]
tatas tām saṃpraṇamyāśu sāñjalir vinayānvitaḥ
mātar yatheṣṭaṃ gaccheti tām visṛjyaihi me 'ntikam [29]
ity ājñāpya muniḥ putraṃ karuṇākrāntamānasah
krodhas tu sarvajantūnām arātir na duratyayaḥ [30]
vidyāśīlaguṇān ekaḥ krodho hanti mahābalaḥ
kruddhasya na tapo dharmo na dānāni vratāni ca [31]
sa japo homadevārcānāśas tasya kutas sukham
cintayan manasety evaṃ kopam caṇḍālakarmakṛt [32]
tatas sa pitṛvākyena rāmo 'pi janānīśiraḥ
tatkabandhena sandhāya jīvayitvā svamātaram [33]
praṇamya sāñjalir mātar yathecchaṃ gaccha bhūtale
ity uktā reṇukānena punaḥ kleśaprapīḍitā [34]
ullaṅghya svapater ājñāṃ tatsamīpam upāgatā
tām dṛṣṭvātra bhṛgur bhūyo rāmam provāca putrakam [35]
mayā rāma yadā tyaktā mātā te haihayārthitā

kārtavīryakṛtajamadagnīsiroharanaghaṭṭah

tadānīm eva nīcābhūt tyajainām āśramād bahiḥ [36]
ity uktvātha bhṛguḥ putraṃ vegena tapase yayau
kārtavīryas tu taṃ jñātvā tyaktakopaṃ munīśvaram [37]
tadantare śiraś chitvā jagāma pṛthivīpatiḥ
reṇukā bhṛśaduḥkhārtā bhartṛvyasanakarśitā [38]
dr̥ṣṭveṣa bhaktiṃ putrasya varalābhaṃ ca śaṅkarāt
svaputrānumatātīvabhaktiśraddhāsamanvitā [39]
svayaṃ ca liṅgaṃ samsthāpya kāñcyām atraiva hr̥ṣṭadhīḥ
pūjayām āsa puṣpādyaiḥ purāriṃ tanayo yathā [40]
pravālanadyās salilāḥ prabhuṃ samsnāpya śaṅkaram
asyāḥ kadācid īśānaḥ prasādam akarot prabhuḥ [41]
asau dr̥ṣtvā tathaiveśam ārtighnaṃ kīrtivardhanam
ārād ambikayā sākam astauṣṭt stutyam akṣayam [42]
reṇukovāca
pitā tvam sarvalokānām māteyaṃ naganandini
mātāpitṛbhyām kenātra nihnuto mānasamkṣayaḥ [43]
ahaṃ hi bahuthā loke paribhūtā 'smi he pitaḥ
tvām prapannāsmi he deva prasūtāhaṃ tvayā vibho [44]
idaṃ karma karomy adya tava pūjābhidhaṃ mahat
tvām eva matpatis sarvavedāntārthavicakṣaṇaḥ [45]
prābrūyāt satataṃ śambho bhuktimuktiphala pradam
ārtighnaṃ kīrtidaṃ nṛṇām bhuvanānām abhiśriyaṃ [46]
īśānaṃ tvām mahādevaṃ sarvātmānam ca śāśvatam
na vācāriḥ priyaḥ patyuh patih kāmāya vai bhavet [47]
ātmano bhanati stotraṃ priyaṃ sarvapriye sadā
putro 'py evaṃ sutā 'py evaṃ dhanadhānyaṃ paśur vasu [48]
prāṇās ca sarvāṅy akṣāṇi kāmāyeśasya mānase
akṣaram tvām sadā brūyād amṛtañ cākṣaram haram [49]
ārasātaḥ ārabhya cāmarāntaṃ dhṛteḥ padaṃ
dhṛtiś ca sā prakṛṣṭājñā sūryācandramasor dhṛteḥ [50]
iti mahyaṃ sadā bhartā brūyād īśa tavārtihan
mahimānamato veda ko deva jagadīśvara [51]

tvām sarvamaṅgalākāntaṃ ye stuvanti sumāṅgalāḥ
 bhavanti tvām prasannās te divyamāṅgalabhoginaḥ [52]
 matputraś ca tvayā rāmaḥ paritrāto 'tra vai purā
 māṃ ca trāhi mahādeva rakṣa tvam jagataḥ pitaḥ [53]
 sarvāmba rakṣa sarvāmba sarvāmba tvam girīndraje
 namo vām astu satataṃ prasīdatam umāśivau [54]
 iti stutas tadā śambhur munipriyavadhūgirā
 nirīkṣya girijānātho girijāṃ sadarasmitaḥ [55]
 vatse tvam reṇuke brūhi yad iṣṭam te hṛdi sthitam
 tatsarvam eṣā girijā tavasya dāty asaṃśayam [56]
 iti vākyam samākarṇya reṇukāpṛcchad īśvaram
 sarvajñā 'haṃ śucārtāsmi prāptakaṣṭadaśānīsam [57]
 paribhūtā ca khinnā ca dīnā dīnadayāpara
 tad īśa te kṛpāsindho kṛpayā pāhi māṃ prabho [58]
 bhūyāsam devatā nṛṇāṃ pratyakṣaphalasiddhidā
 yathā kalau prasiddhā syāṃ tathā māṃ kuru śaṅkara [59]
 mayā pratiṣṭhite liṅge sadā sānnidhyam astu te
 sām̐basya saganasyeśa sasutasyāstu sannidhiḥ [60]
 sarveṣāṃ atra bhūtānāṃ bhuktimuktiprado bhava
 tatas tripurahā tasyai dattvābhīṣṭān imān mudā [61]
 devatāṃ ca cakāraināṃ vacasā girirādbhuvāḥ
 kalijānāṃ ca martyānāṃ pratyakṣaphaladāṃ prabhuḥ [62]
 varṇāśramācāradharmarahitānāṃ viśeṣataḥ
 mārītyākhyāvatiṃ kṛtvā provāca punar īśvaraḥ [63]
 bāṇāhave mayā sṛṣṭam purā sphoṭakasamjñikam
 jvaramīśram mahārogaṃ grhītvānena bhūtale [64]
 prasiddhā bhava hemārīty uktvā 'ntarhiṃgato 'mbayā
 sā hi tatra tathaivāgāt kāñcīpuryāṃ hi devatā [65]
 khaḍgaketadharā sarpamekhalā bhūṣaṇojjvalā
 bodharājādigaṇapair āvṛtātyadbhutākṛtiḥ [66]
 tad etad reṇukeśasya darśanam bhuktimuktidam
 rājñāṃ atra viśeṣeṇa raṇe vijayasiddhayaḥ [67]

శ్రీ కాంశీ మాహాత్మ్యే

నమః స్మృతి సంభాష్య నమత స్మగణోఽంబయా
అష్టోత్తరైశ్చ న స్పంభ ర వరా తా శ్చలాలభ్యూమ్. 97

అఖ్యాన శుత దళలం నమమా ద్విద్రిత
మంహానినా స్మ మనిబ్ధవమహానిశేవ్యమ్
య శ్చానయే ద్విజనరా స్మతతి శ్చుశోతి
ముక్తానుసంఘమహా యోతే స్మ ముక్తిమ్. 98

ఓమి త్యామితాళరాణి క్రిహ్నాన్తే శవర సుహితాయాం
క్రికాశ్చ మహాశక్తిః ప్రారంభాశ్చేద పరకరాశ్చేద
మహిమాశుతేనం వాస సత్సంశోఽభ్యాః.

శ్రీ కష్ట
అథ సప్తవింశోద్ధ్యాయః
రేణువేంద్ర మహిమానువరనమ్

కా శ క తి కా ష :

అథ వత్సాఘం విశ్రాంతి నద్యా స్తీరేఽన్య దక్షిణే
రేణుకేంద్ర మ స్త్రున్య దేణుకాళూజరం భురా. 1
రేణుకాన్యైవ మాతా సా జమదగ్నిప్రియా నతీ
అశేవ్యవర ప్రోశో రాజ్ఞే వ్యవయా వసితో త్తమా. 2
జమదగ్ని ర్భునివర స్తా మునాభా స్వయంవరే
న తయా రమయామాన చిరకాలం మునిశేనః. 3
కదాచి చ్యాకడిం సాక్షో జ్యోత్స్నా మన తిమోనువక్
తాం ద్భుష్టావై హయో రాజా తా ర్షుశో స్మహో త్తమః. 4

సప్తవింశోద్ధ్యాయః

జలాహరణం ప్రాప్తం త్కాకం నమమా శ్రరమ్
నవయాజనమస్తూర్వా మతిలావణ్యశాలినమ్. 5

కామయన్ కామభారా ర్ష స్తూర స్వయం మాశీతః
యువతిరూషమన్వషి పాశ్చివోఽసా విశేషతః. 6

వైనం స్వప్నవాలోకినతా నావలోకయత్
స్వలావణ్యం దర్శయిషం శ్యోమ్న తాళ వనూణకే. 7

తజ్జలోఽతి తపా హి నవమన్గళయావవా
రథా తస్మిన్మపి దినే నీర మాశ్చవ్య పాశేనా. 8

ఓక్తేరణశేఖాయాం శ్శ్శికే వ్రతిమ్భురమ్
నిరీత్య సోన్య చై ఛాయాం మునిభార్యా వతివత్రా. 9

కేశ్చ స్మనిజాస్మజ్జావళం నిన్యే మన స్పృకమ్
భువశ్చ త్కణమా త్తేణ సంస్థానాన్మూలైవ మాతల్లూ. 10

భువ స్తోయం సమాశేషం ముమ్మకా మునివల్లభా
భూర్వం త్పిన్ద్రేత వ్యాకీ త్తజలం పాశేనా భవతి. 11

తదాతిథీతా సా సాకీన్య మనన్యేన మచి వ్రయత్
కిబ్బులోమి క్వ వా యామి కా గతి ర్నే క్వ మర్కతే. 12

అతిశ్శీత భూతార్క సీరహస్తాం వ్రతాగతామ్
ద్భుష్టావై హం పాంసంహా మ్రిత్యా మునిః శోవ జ్జురివ్యతి. 13

హా సామ్న కరుణామూర్తే పాహి మాం శరణగతామ్
ధర్మేన శ్చిన్వయామాన చి వ్రయన్తీ చ సాధ్యసాత్. 14

ఘటే గ్రహిత్యా త్యోయ ముఖలా పాంసలా వతీ
మనమర్ద్రోతి క్షితా యయా సా మునినిబ్ధిమ్. 15

ముని స్తాం నజల జ్జుమ్నం స్వస్య పార్శ్వే క్షితాం నియా
కృత్యాత్మలూం ద్భుష్టావై తానత్యాంఠింఠిమ్భురాత్. 16

- 17 సమూహ మూర్ఖులతో కల్పితం మనసా భాగ్యవరత్వం; మైహాయస్య మే వారాత్యైం జ్ఞానేనా స్వ తపోనిధిః.
- 18 తద్వూహలోకేనా వీష ద్భక్తికృత మూనహమ్ క్రుద్ధః ప్రోవాన తాం భార్యాయం రామ మాలోక్య పుత్రకమ్.
- 19 వర్ష రామ మహాభాగవతో మాతా తే మైహాయాశితా నమ రాజాతిఃపదానాం యువా దోర్భులనాన్ ప్రభః.
- 20 మామ ప్తే హృదయం కిన్న ద్భుతిం త్వ దర్శనాత్ అనశ్య మేనా మానాస్య త్యహ్నా న్నగణయ స్సృవమ్.
- 21 అస్య మ మాజ్ఞయా చ్చిద్ధి శిలో మే మా విశబ్దయ విశంభిం న క్ష ర్హ్యో రాజ్ఞా ద్భిహ్నా విశేషియా.

విశ్వనిదేవేన పరభూమక్యత స్వమాత్మవదః

- 22 ఇది రామో గురో ద్యాత్యా దాదాయ జననం నిజామ్ బహి స్వస్యాశ్ర మాభ్యాశే చిచ్ఛేద జననీధిః.
- 23 నిర్విశేషా మహో కష్టం ప్రీత్యం తప్తాని యోవనమ్ తప్తాని యోవనాతిథ్యం తప్తాని బ్రాహ్మణాశ్రయః.
- 24 తపో రామ శ్శిష్యాత్వే పితరం ప్రణమ స్తుభాః పశ్చాత్తాపేన సంయు క్తః పాపసా మాత్మే శక్తిమాన్.
- 25 స్వయి స్వరో జగత్స్వ న్ని నాత్మేభ్యున్నయ మితీనా మే అపనాదో యథా న నస్య తేభా మయి వయూం కరు.
- 26 ఇతి తస్యే వన శ్శ్రుత్యా ద్వామ మాచే భృగ్విం యః రామ రాజసంతాపృతే స్వ మస్య విదితో మయా.
- 27 మయి భక్తి శ్చ తే వర్ష త్కాని శ్శ్రీణా పుత్రక అస్యన్యం లోకవిద్వంసం స్వమాత్మవదకర్మ యత్.

- 28 తస్మా త్తే మా స్వస్థూతి రాశ్రీనాత్మాసముద్భవా సన్ధాయ తద్భిర మ్ననం సముత్థాయ మజ్జితా.
 - 29 తే త్సాం సంపద మ్యామ సాశ్రీతి శ్శునయాన్వితః మాత ర్య కేష్టం గచ్ఛేత్త తాం విశ్వజ్యోహి మే వై భకమ్
 - 30 ఇత్యాభాస్య మునిః పుత్రం కరుణాత్మా స్వమాశనః శ్రోదస్తే పుష్కలమనా మరాతి ర్ష మురర్భయః.
 - 31 విద్యాశీలనా తేః శ్రోధో వా ని మహాబలః క్రుదస్య న తపో భలో న దానాని న శాని చ.
 - 32 న జపో హామదేవ్యానాశే స్వస్య కుత స్సుఖమ్ చిచ్ఛయ స్సనశేత్కేషం శోపం చద్దాబోర్మోశ్చిత్.
 - 33 తత స్వ విత్పానాత్మీన రామోఽపి జననీధిః తత్ప్రబుష్టేన సన్ధాయ జనయిత్వా స్వమాతరమ్.
 - 34 ప్రణమ్య సాశ్రీతి రాశ్రీత ర్యకేచ్ఛం గచ్ఛ భూతతే భక్త్యుక్తా తేణ కానేన పునః క్షేతే ప్రకీడితా.
 - 35 ఉల్లస్య స్వనశే రాజ్ఞాం తత్ప్రమాద మనాగతా రాం ద్భిష్టాత్మ భృగ్విం యా యా రామం ప్రోవాన పుత్రకమ్.
 - 36 మయా రామ యవా త్యక్తా మాతా తే మైహాయాశితా
- తా ర్షిర్యక్తృణ జనుదగ్ని శిరోహారణమట్టిః**
- 36 తదానీ మేవ నీవాభూ త్యజైనా మాశమా ద్భవహా.
 - 37 ఇన్ద్యుక్త్యాభ భృగః పుత్రం కేశన త్వన నుయా తా ర్షిర్యన్ద్ర తం జ్ఞాత్వా త్యక్తేశోపం మునిశ్యమ్.
 - 38 తద స్తతే శిర శ్చిత్వా జామ పృథ్విపతిః తేణాకా భృగవఃఖాతా భ ర్భువ్యనకర్మితా.

- 224 దృష్ట్యేకభక్తిం పుతస్య వరలాభం చ శబ్దాచారాత్
స్వపుత్రానుమతాతీవ భక్తిశ్రద్ధానమన్వితా. 39
- 39 స్వయం చ లిప్తం సంపాప్య కాశ్చాస్య మిత్రైః సహస్వశీః
పూజయామాన పుస్తాన్విత్యైః పురానిం తనయా యథా. 40
- 40 ప్రవాళనద్యా శ్శులితః ప్రభం సంపాప్య శ్శబ్దార్థమ్
అభ్యాః కదాచి దీశానః ప్రసాద మఃలో త్స్యభుః. 41
- 41 అసా దృష్ట్యా తిశ్రైశ్చేక మా తిశ్చం కీ తివర్ణ సమ్
అథా దమ్బుకయా సాశ మస్తాన్వై ద్మృత్యే ముఖయమ్. 42
- 42 కలు లో కా చ :
- 43 పితా త్వం సర్వలోకాణాం మాతేయం సగనద్ధి
మాతాపితృభ్యాం కేనా త్రి నివృత్తో మానసంఘయా. 43
- 43 అనం హి బహుభా లోకే చరిభూతాన్వీక్రి హే పితః
త్వాం ప్రహృషిక్రి హే దేవ ప్రసూతానం త్వయా విభో. 44
- 44 ఇదం కర్మ కరో మ్యన్య తవ పూజాభిధం మహాత్
త్వా మేవ మత్సత్తి సర్వవేదాన్వార వివక్షణః. 45
- 45 ప్రబూయా త్కృతతం శమ్యా భు క్షిము క్షిభు ప్రదమ్
అక్షిభుం క్షిపం న్యూణాం భవనానా మభిశ్రయమ్. 46
- 46 ఈశానం త్వా మృతకదేవం సర్వాత్మానం చ శాశ్వతమ్
న వాచాఃః త్రి యః చమ్యః పతిః కామాయ తై భవేత్. 47
- 47 ఆత్మనో భవతి ప్తీ త్తం ప్రియం చమృతియే సదా
పుత్రోఽప్యేయం సుతాఽప్యేయం భవభాన్యం వసం ర్మయ. 48
- 48 పూజాశ్చ సర్వా ల్యుతాశి కామా యేశస్య మానసే
అక్షరం త్వాం సదా బూయా దమృత శ్శ్రుతరం హరిమ్. 49
- 49 ఆరసాఠల మారభ్య చామృతాన్యం భృతేః సవమ్
భృతిశ్చ సా ప్ర కృష్టాజ్ఞా సూర్యాచప్రమహా ర్భృతేః. 50

- 50 ఇతి మహ్యం సదా భద్రా భూమా వీశ తనా ర్మహా
మహిమాన మతో శేవ లో దేవ ఐకీకీర్ణ. 51
- 51 త్వాం సర్వమృతాకా న్దం యే సువర్షి సుమహాః
భవన్తి త్వాం ప్రహృషిక్రి దివ్యమంకళభోగిణః. 52
- 52 మర్మత్ర శ్చ క్షయయా రామః పితృభ్యోఽత తై పురా
మాంద త్రాహి మనకదేవ రక్ష త్వం బాఠః పితః. 53
- 53 సర్వామృ రక్ష సర్వామృ పరామృ త్వం గిర్యశ్చే
నవనా నా మస్త సతీతం ప్రసీవతే ముమూశిచా. 54
- 54 ఇతి స్తుత స్తుతా శమ్భు ర్మృతి ప్రి యవహూగిరా
నిఠ్యన్య గిజానాలో గిజాం సవరస్మిర్భిః. 55
- 55 వశ్చే త్వం శేఘ్రే ల్యాహి యదివం శే హృది పితమ్
తత్సర్వ మేమా గిజా తవన్య దాశ్చ్యసంకయమ్. 56
- 56 ఇతి వాశ్యం సమాశర్వ కేఘ్రాశ్చ ద్భృ వీశ్వరమ్
సర్వజ్ఞానం తుచార్హస్మి సా స్తకస్తదశానశమ్. 57
- 57 పుటూతా చ ఖన్నా చ దినా వీవదయాఠ
తపిత శే కృపాన్వో కృపయా సాహి మాం ప్రభో. 58
- 58 భూయానం దేవతా న్యూణాం ప్రత్యేక్షభలసిద్ధిదా
యథా శతా ప్రసిద్ధా స్యాం తథా మాం ఘన శబ్దార్. 59
- 59 మహూ ప్రతిష్ఠితే లితే సదా సాన్నిధ్య మస్త శే
సామృప్య మగణ శ్యేశి సుత శ్యామ్ నమిసిః. 60
- 60 సశ్యేషా మత్ర భూతాణాం భు క్షిము క్షిపణో భవ
తత్ ప్రీతురహ తస్యై దత్వాశీష్టా నిమా హృదిచా. 61
- 61 దేవతాం చ చకారై నాం వచసా గిరరామృతః
కలిబానాం చ మర్హ్యానాం ప్రత్యేక్షభుదాం ప్రభుః. 62

శ్రీ కాంచీ మాహా శీర్షిక

- 63 భక్తాశ్రమచార్యుని గ్రంథాంతానాం విశేషతః
మూలతాత్పర్యవతిం శ్రీత్యా ప్రవాచ భువ రిశ్యతః..
- 64 బాణామాకే మయా స్మృతం పురా స్మృతసంజ్ఞితమ్
జ్వరమిశ్రం మహాలోకం గృహీతా త్యానేన భూతతే.
- 65 ప్రసిద్ధా భవ నేమాతే త్యక్త్యా నైవరింగలో మ్మయా
సాహితేర తవైవాగా తాన్ శ్శ్రుత్యాం హి దేవతా.
- 66 భువన్మూలధరా చర్మ శుఖలా భూమలోజ్వల
బోధరాజానిగణవై రాన్వత్యాత్మద్భుత్యాశ్శ్రీతిః.
- 67 త దేర దేణుకేశస్య దర్శనం భు క్షిమ క్షిదమ్
రాజ్ఞా మిత్ర విశేషేణ రణే విజయసిదయః.
- 68 వర స్తం రేణుకాస్యాయ మిమం సా నై వ క్షిదయేత్.

ఓం శ్యామిహాభరాణే శ్రీశ్యామే శర్వాభవంహితాదాం
కౌశ్యమాహా శ్శ్రీ శేణుకేశ్వర మహిమావజ
వరం నామ చంద్రవంశే యోగయః.

అథ అష్టావింశో ఽధ్యాయః

గోవిందపాఠకస్తానస్థిత శ్రీదక్షిణామూర్తి కథా ప్రారంభః

- 1 భూయోఽపి వశ్యే దేవస్య కాశ్చాన్యం సానాని భూతిశః
తేషా భుణ్యతేమం ప్రోక్షం రేణుకేశమిమామకమ్.
- 2 గోవిందపాఠకస్తానే లిప్తం గోవిందపూజితమ్
యతాస్తే దక్షిణామూర్తి రక్షానతిమరారుణః.

అష్టావింశో ఽధ్యాయః

- 227 యత్యాగమోక్షవిధాన్యం గోవిందం దక్షిణానః
అచతయ ద్విషం శ్యాన్యా న్యతే ధిత్యా మహేశ్వరః.
- 3 గోవింద పాఠకస్తానం తిస్తాత్ప్రాశ్చాన్యం చక్రిధిమత్
గోవిందాత్మతీర్థ్య దర్శనం భు క్షిమ క్షిదమ్.
- 4 తిస్తాత్ దక్షిణామూర్తి ర్గ్రంథం జ్ఞానవర్ణనమ్
సానా న్యయాని వత్స్యామి భూయః కాశ్చాన్య మనేశశః.
- 5 పాశుపా సీమా వరశురాయతీర్థ్య దక్షిణే
పురా పురాణాయువయః పురాత్మ క్షితినర్దనః.
- 6 యోగాచార్యా ఇతి భాగ్యతా యోగజ్ఞానేనమ్మతాః
శ్శ్రీతే శ్శ్రీ శ్శ్రీతేన శ్శ్రీ తథా శ్శ్రీతేశీఖః వయః.
- 7 శ్శ్రీత్యాశ్శ్రీతీ మహాయోగీ తథా శ్శ్రీతీర్థమోహితః
సంతాలో దుస్తథే శ్రీసీమా న్యరహాభో దుద్భివయః.
- 8 శ్శ్రీమయా నర్జనన శ్శ్రీన విశేషో ఽథ సకేశశః
విశాభోఽతిమహాశాసనాశనో నామకీర్తనః.
- 9 సుహలోత సుముఖ శ్శ్రీన దురుల్లలో చుర్జన స్తథా
దురతిక్రమణః కేశ్చ న్పూతన వనన్దనా.
- 10 వనమ్మయాలో నీరాశీ నిర్ద్రమో నివమాత్మతః
సధామా విరణా శ్శ్రీన కథ్థివా క్షిమిల స్ఫురః.
- 11 వైలః పరాశ్రణో గణో శ్శ్రీనమిశ్శ్రీనైర్ శార్జనః
సరతి శ్శ్రీ సుభూషేష శ్శ్రీ మేమాతీ శ్శ్రీసూనాచానః.
- 12 అంగిరా బాహు శ్శ్రీన కేమశ్శ్రీనైశ్శ్రీనైశ్శ్రీనైశ్శ్రీనైశ్శ్రీ
బుబుధ ద్విరామిత్ర త్రిభామా చ తిర్ధనః.
- 13 లయోద్బవ శ్శ్రీ లయాత్మితో విశ్వవ్యా లమ్బికేశవో
వసిష్ఠః కాశ్శ్రీలో రాతి ద్విరేతాశ్శ్రీ తిరశేషః.
- 14