From Chaste Wife to Village Goddess

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

Ina Marie Lunde Ilkama

Master’s Thesis in Sanskrit (SAN4590)
60 credits

Asian and African Studies Program
Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages
The Faculty of Humanities
University of Oslo

Spring 2012
© Ina Marie Lunde Ilkama

2012

From Chaste Wife to Village Goddess: A study of Reṇukā-Māriyammaṇ and her myths in and around Kanchipuram

Ina Marie Lunde Ilkama

http://www.duo.uio.no/

Print: Reprosentralen, University of Oslo

Picture on front page: Head of Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari, Cantaveliyammaṇ 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-Purānic tradition, the others from the Kanchipuram area in northern Tamil Nadu, namely two oral Tamil versions and one Sanskrit version from the Kāncīmāhātmyam. In contrast to the epic-Purānic 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 Māriyammaṇ 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-Purānic 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.
Acknowledgements

First of all I wish to thank all the informants, both priests and devotees, who openheartedly shared their time and thoughts with me. Also, thanks to my research assistants Mr. Subramanian and Srividya for being my right hands while in Kanchipuram, and for their interpreting work.

A special thanks to my supervisor Prof. Ute Hüsken for all her comments, suggestions, encouragement and enthusiasm throughout the whole process, which have been invaluable to me, and yet again for good memories and countless coffees in India. I am also grateful to all participants of the South Asia Colloquium, and especially Prof. Claus Peter Zoller, for comments and suggestions to my many chapter drafts.

Thanks to Prof. T.V. Vasudeva at the Kuppuswami Sastri Research Institute for help with the translation of the Kāṇcīmāhātmyam myth and for sharing his knowledge, and to M.D. Muthukumaraswamy, director of the National Folklore Support Centre, for guidance and reading suggestions in the very beginning of this work, and for opening his home to me while in Chennai.

I also wish to thank my family and friends for their encouragement and faith in me.

And finally, a heartfelt thanks to Arne for his tremendous support, for backing me up when I was down, for making me more coffee than what is sound, and, of course, for proof-reading and help with layout and Word. I could not have done this without you.

ॐ शंक्ति

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 Civaṉ, 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-Māriyammaṉ, Reṇukā devī and Reṇukā ampāḷ 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-Māriyammaṇḍ 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 Māriyammaṇḍ ................................................................. 22
      3.1.2 Connections with other goddesses ......................................................... 24
   3.2 Who is Reṇukā-Māriyammaṇḍ? ................................................................... 25
   3.3 Ritual ............................................................................................................... 28
4 The Sanskrit Myths ................................................................................................. 31
   4.1 Epic and Purāṇic accounts ............................................................................. 31
   4.2 Reṇukā in the Kāṇcīmāhātmyam .................................................................. 35
5 Oral Myths ............................................................................................................... 45
   5.1 The Paṭavēṭṭamamaṇṭ Temple .................................................................... 45
   5.2 The Dhobis’ Version ..................................................................................... 52
6 Reṇukā’s revival as a pox goddess ..................................................................... 59
   6.1 Reṇukā-Māriyammaṇḍ’s boon of *muttu* .................................................... 61
   6.1.2 Practices when having chickenpox .......................................................... 64


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 it\(^1\), smeared with kumkum (vermillion) and turmeric powder at its grand roots. Around the tree, there are several erected nāga\(^2\) 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 Tumpavāṇatu 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 ampāḷ temple\(^3\))

In Northern Tamil Nadu where I conducted my fieldwork, Reṇukā ampāḷ\(^4\) is worshipped as a village goddess (grāmadevatā) famed for solving a wide range of mundane problems, be it

---

\(^1\) These treads (sūtra, Ta. cāttiram) 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. nākakka) 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 Nāgattāmannāḷ (”Snake goddess”). See picture 7 in appendix A.

\(^3\) The temple’s full name is arulmiṇku aṇgaṇi reṇukāmpāḷ 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 (puṟṟu).

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 Māriyamma 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 head\(^5\), 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-Purānic tradition. In the thesis I look at Reṇukā-Māriyammaṇ’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-Purānic 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-Māriyammaṇ and the decapitation myth in scholarly sources

Scholarly studies of Reṇukā-Māriyammaṇ 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 Māriyammaṇ, who is very popular and widely worshipped in South India. According to Younger (1980, 494), “Māriyammaṇ 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 Kuppuswami 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-Māriyammaṇ and/or the beheading myth⁷.

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

Harman (2011) treats Māriyammaṇ’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.


Meyer’s thorough study of Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari (or Aṅkāḷa ammaṇ) (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-Māriyammaṇ – 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 Māriyammaṇ

---

⁷ More than these could be mentioned (e.g. Biardeau (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-Māriyammaṇ also shares the myth of Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari of Mel Malaiyanur (her main temple, Tiruvannamalai district). According to my priestly informant at the Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ temple Reṇukā and Aṅkāḷa ammaṇ 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 Kāṇcippurāṇam) that I translate from the Sanskrit Kāṇcīmāhātmyam, 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-Purānic tradition, the others local versions from the Kanchipuram area in northern Tamil Nadu, namely two oral Tamil myths and one Sanskrit myth from the Kāṇcīmāhātmyam. 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-Māriyammaṇ. After a brief introduction about village goddesses, I explore the connection between Reṇukā, Māriyammaṇ 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 Kāṇcīmāhātmyam 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 textual study of the Reṇukā stories in the Bhāgavatapurāṇa, Mahābhārata and Kāṇcīmāhātmyam 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/Mariyamma 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 levels 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) I see myth as a “story that is sacred 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 […] that continues to have meaning in the present because it is remembered” (O’Flaherty 1988, 27).

In her study of the goddess Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvarī, 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 (pativrata, Ta. cumañkali), 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 signs\(^{15}\) (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 Kāṇcīmāhātmyam (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 possible\(^{16}\), 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 me\(^{17}\), 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 altogether\(^{18}\) 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 Reṣukā 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 Māriyammaṅ 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 people\(^{19}\) and the town itself covers about 24 sq.km (Seshadri 2003, 7). Kanchi is considered one of India’s seven holy cities\(^{20}\), and is famous for its many temples, both Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava, several of them big and important pilgrimage sites\(^{21}\). 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.


\(^{20}\) The saptamokṣapurūṣī (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 Garudapurāṇa: “ayodhyā mathurā māyā kāśī kāṇḍī avanitkā pūrī dvāravatī jīneyā saptaitā mokṣadāyikāh” (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), Kaṭalānātha temple (Śiva), Kacapeśvara temple (Śiva), Varadarāja perumāḷ temple (Viṣṇu), Vaikuṇṭha perumāḷ temple (Viṣṇu), Kumārakoṭṭam temple (Murukaṇ).
Goddess, represented here by the famous Kāmākṣī amman 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 Tumpavāgatu Amma 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 group.

The findings of the thesis are mainly built upon interviews and observations from ten different temples or shrines in and around Kanchipuram, 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 Cantaveliyamman 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 nīm 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-shrines in addition to the goddess in the sanctum. The ones with courtyards each had a temple tree (śthalavrksa), and some of them had big pōṛgus 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 Murukaṇ (with or without his two wives), the navagrahas (9 planets) and a guardian deity like Kāttavārāyaṇa or Maturavīraṇa 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 Cantaveliyamman temple had a nīm tree as their sthalavrksa, since this tree is considered Māriyamman’s tree.
Apart from the temples in Kanchi I visited the big Reṇukā ampāḷ temple in Padaivedu, 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/Māriyammaṉ, and more importantly as the very place the Reṇukā story actually happened. Moreover, the Padaivedu Reṇukā 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), baliṇīṭha (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 myth.

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 Paṭāvaṭṭammaṉ temple, houses in fact a form of this Reṇukā in Padaivedu. The name Paṭāvaṭṭammaṉ 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 approach\(^3\), 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 Paṭavēṭṭammanān

---

\(^3\) “Delvis struktureret tilnærming.”
temple, is very well versed in mythology, and gave me hours of valuable material. Mr. Srikumar Gurukkal from the Cantaveliyammaṇ 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. Vishnu Kumar, 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 worship. But no rule without an exception: Bhuvaneswari from the Karumāriyammaṇ 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 Srividya. 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 Māriyammaṇ 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 Hüskens’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, “nālaikku, nālaikku”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 myself\(^{34}\), 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 control\(^ {35}\), 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 there\(^ {36}\). 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.  

\(^{36}\) 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, Karumāriyammaṇ 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 Māriyammaṇ. 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 Māriyammaṇ 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 āmmay (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. Her sexual energy is heightened, and she is potentially violent, destructive and angry. Her priests are often, though not always, non-Brahmins of lower castes. 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 Māriyammaṇ temples in Thiruverkadu and Samayapuram have Brahmin priests, and so does the Reṇukā ampāḷ 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 sakti 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 devimahātmyam39: “With your gentle forms that roam about in the triple world, and with the exceedingly terrible ones, protect us, and also the earth40s. 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 ādiparasakti 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-Śāṁyā as a part (āṃśa) of Pārvatī, who again was regarded an āṃśa of ādiparasakti. As Mr. Vishnukumar from the Reṇukā ampāl temple put it: “There is ādiparasakti, and from that there are āṃśas: 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 sakti is the active energy of any deity. When it comes to the great male gods, sakti is personified in the wife of the god, who acts on his behalf. This is because according to Hindu thought the male principle (puruşa) is the conscious, whereas the female principle (prakṛtī) is the creative. The conscious is dependent on the creative to act. Therefore goddesses are said to possess more sakti than the gods, and women more than men. In other words sakti 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’ sakti 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, Śāṁyā is one of the goddesses who have

39 Also called Durgā saptāṣṭi, a Sanskrit text from the 5th century CE that belongs to the Mārkanda Purāṇa and glorifies the Great Goddess.
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 Renukā 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 ġurukkal 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 Cantavēliyamman 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 poṅkal (mixture of boiled rice and lentils) on the temple grounds, a popular

---

42 Officiating Brahmin priests of goddess temples are called ġurukkal (kurukkal), whereas non-Brahmin priests of goddess temples are called pūjārī.

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-Māriyammaṉ’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 Māriyammaṉ has risen, she was referred to as a village border goddess (Tam. kirāmayeḷaiēvatai 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. Tumpavaṇṇatu 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 Kāḷi, representing the eight directions (the quarter directions are also counted), and in the middle of the eight is Kāmākṣī, the principal Goddess of Kanchi.

3.1.1 Reṇukā and Māriyammaṉ

Māriyammaṉ 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 smallpox, although she is also connected to rain and fertility. Māriyammaṉ in a particular place will be regarded as different to Māriyammaṉ 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 Māriyammaṉ temples, and she is commonly referred to as “Māriyammaṉ 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 weakness 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, Cantaveliyammaṉ 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 Māriyammaṉ’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).
Māriyamma/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 Māriyamma seemed almost impossible to separate. Her devotees saw Reṇukā as the same as Māriyamma, 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 Māriyamma. Indeed, this is why she has the name Māriyamma, which according to Tamil folk etymology means “the changed mother” – 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 Māriyamma 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 ampā, Rēṇukā tēvi (Reṇukādevi) or Rēṇukā paramēcuvari amma (Reṇukāparamēsvari), but in other temples she had other names, such as Tumpavaṇatu amma (the goddess of the forest of Tumpai-flowers), Cantaveliyamma (derivation uncertain) or Paṭavēṭṭamma (the goddess of Padaivedu). Moreover, Reṇukā devī shares the similar or identical iconography as Māriyamma; 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 triṣūla (trident, Ta.

47 With this I mean that in general all Reṇukās I encountered, were considered to also be Māriyamma, but not necessarily the opposite. There are many Māriyamma that are not connected to the Reṇukā story, and although it was common in the area I visited, not all Māriyamma 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 māṟu means “to change”, but this verb has the alveolar r. Māriyamma is however spelt with the dental r and is not derived from the verb. Mārī in Tamil means rain, but none of my informants linked her name to rain. In Sanskrit mārī carries the meaning “smallpox, pestilence and death” (MW).

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

51 Leuca Indica, a small white flower.

52 Since there are several famous forms of Māriyamma, her iconographies vary. Reṇukā commonly shared the iconography of Karumāriyamma of Thiruvverkadu, who also takes on the Reṇukā story. See pictures 5 and 6, and pictures 8 and 9 for comparisons with the mūlāmūrti of Paṭavēṭṭamma and Cantaveliyamma.
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 devotees\(^{53}\). 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 flowers\(^{54}\).

### 3.1.2 Connections with other goddesses

Some people also regarded Reṇukā and Māriyammaṉ as different, even if they shared the same story. Some considered them two different avatāras among the seven sisters (Ta. capta kaṇyikal, probably related to the Sanskrit saptamātrkās, 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 place\(^{55}\).

Tumpavaṇatru 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 Māriyammaṉ.

The goddess Ellaiyammaṉ 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 Maharashtra\(^{56}\).

The Reṇukā story is also occasionally connected to Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari or Aṅkāḷa amman, the ferocious goddess of Mel Malayanur who dwells in the graveyards. She is widely worshipped in Tamil Nadu\(^{57}\), but of somewhat less fame than Māriyammaṉ. 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 Māriyammaṉ 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 Māriyammaṉ temples and in religious supermarkets.

\(^{55}\) One list I was told includes Karumāriyammaṉ, Reṇukā, Aṅkāḷa amman, Umamaheśvari, Nāgakaṇṭikāl, Vārāhi and Pārvati.

\(^{56}\) 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).

\(^{57}\) Aṅkalaparamēcuvari has been studied thoroughly by Eveline Meyer (1986). She also discusses the Reṇukā myth.
Bhuvaneswari, a devotee of Karumāriyammaṇṭ, told me that Reṇukā and 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 Māriyammaṇṭ) and sets her apart from other goddesses.

3.2 Who is Reṇukā-Māriyammaṇṭ?

“She is a very powerful (cattivantai) goddess. Whatever prayer you do here, you get the fruit of it.” (Subramaniyam, Tumpavāṭu ammaṇṭ 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 Māriyammaṇṭ, 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 kūḷ, 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 ammaṇṭ 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, bali58 consisting of goat or hen is given to a secondary deity, Ellayammaṇṭ, outside the temple complex. Previously this was done in front of Tumpavaṇṭu ammaṇṭ herself, but this is not practiced anymore.

Cantaveliyammaṇṭ is a ferocious form of Reṇukā-Māriyammaṇṭ 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 necessarilly 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 Ponniyamma, 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-Māriyamma is very found of pampai 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 temple.60

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 pūṟṟu. This is a trait Reṇukā shares with Karumāriyamma, the black Māriyamma 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 it, both made of stone. Commonly the head alone received worship. According to myth, the head part of Reṇukā is

60 Devotional songs accompanied with pampai and utukkai (types of drums)
61 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.
62 This is where the snakes live, and pūṟṟus (anhtills) 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).
63 Occasionally it was two heads, such as in the Tumpavaṇatu amman temple and the Nāgātammaṇ roadside shrine (Muttumāriyamma 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 Paḍavēṭṭammaṇ temple, said: “The head is Reṇukā devī, and then there is the total form given to her [the mūlamūrti]. That is Māriyammaṇ. 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 Māriyammaṇ. In the Cantaveṇiyammaṇ temple, however, the gurukkal gave the opposite information, that the head portion was the form (Cantaveṇiyammaṇ) and the full statue Rēṇukaparamēcuvari, but still the pūjā was performed to the head alone. One informant, Bhuvaneswari (a devotee from the Karumāriyammaṇ 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 ampāḷ 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 Tumpavaṇatu ammaṇ 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. Māriyammaṉ 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 Gaṅgayammaṉ in order to make it rain, and here Reṇukā 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 *pujā* and occasional animal sacrifices at some of Reṇukā-Māriyammaṉ’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 Reṇukā 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 Paḍavēṭṭammanṉ 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 temple. The ritual lasted for hours and was accompanied by intense drumming and songs praising Māriyamma. The piercing is considered a vow (vrata, Ta. viratam) to the goddess: 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 vow.

Another common ritual is to shave your hair and donate it to the goddess. The Cantaveḷiyammaṉ temple had a special tonsuring shed for the devotees to do this. In the bigger Māriyammaṇ temples, like the Karumāriyammaṉ 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 cūḍākarana, the head-shaving life cycle ritual (saṃskāra) in the temple, something I witnessed in Padaivedu (along with the karnavedha, 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. Māriyammaṉ’s cult is also characterized by possession, something I witnessed both at the Cantaveliyammaṉ 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 Paṭavēṭṭamman temple where the deities was 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 Māriyammaṉ 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, Cantaveliyammaṇ 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 classification. First, the classical Sanskrit variants, namely the epic-Purānic versions; second, a local temple variant from the Kāṇcimāḥātyam; 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-Purānic versions of the Reṇukā tale, before proceeding to a local version found in the Kāṇcimāḥātyam (KM). The oral tales will be discussed in chapter 5.

4.1 Epic and Purānic accounts

Material on Reṇukā is found in several Sanskrit sources, best known are the versions of her beheading in the Mahābhārata (Mb) and the Bhāgavatapurāṇa (Bh), the epic version probably a bit older than the Purānic. The beheading story is also found in the Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa and the Reṇukāmāḥātyam 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 Bh, 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 īthāsa (“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 Purānic period” (ca. 500 BCE-500 CE). This was when the cults of Vaishnavism, 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 Purānic 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 stories. 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 Purānic 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-Purānic myth about the avatāra (incarnation) of Viṣṇu, 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 thesis. 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 Śākuntalā.
69 According to the standardized purānic list of ten avatāras, Paraśurāma is number six. In the Mahābhārata he is not yet considered an avatāra, nor has the epithet parāṣu (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 Kartavīryājuna 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).
Purānic 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 Purānic 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 wife,[71] went to bathe, and while going she unexpectedly saw the king of Mārttikāvataka named Citraratha[72] sporting in the water along with his wife, prosperous and garlanded with lotuses. By seeing this, Reṇukā was desirous of him.[73]. [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 Rumaṇḍat came, as well as [the other sons] Susena, 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 king,[74] 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] Paraṣurāma wished for the revival of his mother unaware of the killing and [himself] unstained by the sin[75], 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] niyātāvrata.

[72] Citraratha is the king of the gandharvas, celestial musicians who are married to the Apsaras (“nymphs”).

[73] tasya sphrayām āsa reṇukā.

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

[75] sa vavre mātir uṭhānam asmrṭiṃ ca vadāya vai pāpena tena cāsparśaṃ. 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 Voorhuijen (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: asmrṭi being a feminine noun carrying the meaning “non-remembrance, forgetting” fits grammatically with mātir, “of [his] mother”. Other Sanskrit texts (Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa, Bhagavatapurāṇa, Reṇukāmāhātyam) mention this wish too. Goldman (1977, 22) translates that Rāma wishes for “her forgetfulness of her murder; (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 over\textsuperscript{76}. Let us now turn to the Purānic 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, Renukā who had gone to the river to [fetch] water, was somewhat desirous\textsuperscript{77} 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 Satyavat [Jamadagni] pleaded 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\textsuperscript{78}), becomes slightly desirous and looses 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-Purānic ending echoes Kṛṣṇa’s teachings in the Bhagavadgītā, nothing really happened – no one was really killed\textsuperscript{79}.

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 matricide\textsuperscript{80}, and her life continues in the everyday sphere of the hermitage. But, in all oral versions I encountered

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{77} kīmīc citrarathasprṛḥā.

\textsuperscript{78} The significance of seeing a gandharva will be explained further in section 7.1.1.

\textsuperscript{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?” (Bhagavadgītā, 2.19-22)

\textsuperscript{80} This is also the case in the Viṣṇudharmottaraapurāṇa and Reṇukāṁhātyam.
of the story\textsuperscript{81}, as well as in the \textit{Kāncīmāhātyam} 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 \textit{Kāncīmāhātyam}

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 \textit{Kāncīmāhātyam} (KM), there is one chapter dedicated to the Reṇukā story (26), as well as one for Paraśurāma\textsuperscript{82} (27). This is a local rendering that serves to explain the presence of two liṅgas, one established by Reṇukā and one by Paraśurāma, in a small village named Pallur\textsuperscript{83} on the border of Kanchipuram and Vellore district\textsuperscript{84}. The Reṇukā story here stands on its own, and in contrast to the accounts of Reṇukā in the \textit{Mbh} and \textit{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 \textit{māhātyams} in general as well as the \textit{KM} is called for.

The \textit{māhātyams} are a sub-category of local \textit{Purānic} 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 \textit{māhātyam} texts often claim to belong to one of the major \textit{Purāṇas}, thus increasing their authority. In fact, however, they are often not parts of the standard editions of these \textit{Purāṇas}, and their relevance remains largely local. This is also the case with this \textit{KM}; it claims to belong to the \textit{Skandapurāṇa}\textsuperscript{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 \textit{māhātyas} […] 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 \textit{māhātyams}.

\textsuperscript{81} Van Voorthuizen (2001, 266) reports similar findings.
\textsuperscript{82} The story of Paraśurāma in the \textit{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.
\textsuperscript{83} My fieldwork indicates that the liṅgas are situated in this village. However, as will be discussed below, this does not confirm with Shulman’s (1985) findings.
\textsuperscript{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.
\textsuperscript{85} Cf. the colophons after each chapter: \textit{om ity ādamahāpurāṇe śrīśkande saṅkarasamhitāyām kāncīmāhātye reṇukēśvarasamahāmāvvarṇanam nāma saptaviṃśo ḍhyāyaḥ 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 Reṅukā as a goddess.

The Kāṅcīmāhātmyam (“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 Kāṅcīmāhātmyam 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 Civaṇāṇamunivar (alternatively called Civaṇāṇayokikal, d. 1785) and his student Kacciyappamunivar to compose the Kāṅcippurāṇa 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). What is found in chapters 45 and 46 in the Kāṅcippurāṇa is content wise more or less identical to the myth of Reṅukā 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 Reṅukā 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 Reṅukā. This KM has been studied by Marie-Claude Porcher (1985).
88 The Kāṅcippurāṇam however, has been studied and translated into French by Dessigane et al (1964), and the Reṅukā 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

Kāśika said:

[1] I shall now declare, O best of Brahmins, another [liṅga called] Reṇukeśvara 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 Abhedayavarmaṇ. [3] Jamadagni, the best among sages, married her in a svayamvara, and she loved the sage lord for a long time.

[4-6] Once, the Haihaya king Kārtavīrya, 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 ball, 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 Paraśūrāma establishing a liṅga called Parasurāmeśvaram.

90 Self-choice of groom.

91 Reṇukā’s tempter in the KM is Kārtavīryarjuna, the Haihaya king, who in the purānas is the one who kills Jamadagni after stealing his magical cow, provoking Paraśūrāma to kill the entire kṣatriya race 21 times.

92 pīṇḍikaraṇevaśāyām. This compound has two alternative translations: the effort [veṣa, incorr. for veṣa: work, activity] of making [the water] into a ball [pīṇḍikaraṇa], or, the effort [veṣa] of collecting [water], where pīṇḍikaraṇa is taken as merely “collecting”. Monier Williams solely give pīṇḍikaraṇa the meaning “making into a lump or ball” cf. the common meaning of pīṇḍa/pīṇḍi (“ball, lump”), but pīṇḍi- √kṛ 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 [Kārtavṛtya]. [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

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. Reṃukā, 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 Parasurāma⁹⁵ she herself raised a linga 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 linga] 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. Reṃukā 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 (dhrīti) 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 Reṃukā! 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, Reṃukā 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 śivalinga 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 Mānavadharmaśāstra “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 linga I established, along with the goddess, your body of attendants [bhūtāganas], 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 kaliyuga96, especially for those who are devoid of the moral codes [dharma] and austerities of class and stage of life [varṇaśrama]97. After giving her the name Mārī98, the lord spoke again: [64-66] “Previously, in the war with Bāna99, I created the severe illness known as boil, combined with fever. You shall be known as overpowering with this [disease] on earth, O Mārī!100a After saying so, he disappeared along with the goddess. Verily, like this she indeed went thither to Kāṇchi puram as a goddess, bearing sword and shield, luminous ornaments and a snake-girdle, and her extraordinarily beautiful form is surrounded by Gaṇeṣa and Pōttu Rāja101. [67] Therefore, the sight of the linga Reṇu kesāvara, 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 Bṛhp) 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 śivalīnga there. This event of Reṇukā installing and worshipping a linga is obviously modeled on the well-known story of Kāmākṣī, the reigning goddess of Kanchipuram who is a form of Pārvatī, and Ekāmranātha, who is a form of Śiva. According to this legend, Kāmākṣī establishes and worships a śivalīnga of sand under a mango tree102, which she later saves from the overflowing Vegavatī 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 linga. Mr. Subramanian, priest of the Tumpavaṇaṭu Ammaṇ temple, rejected the question with certainty: “Only Kāmākṣī has done pratiṣṭhā [consecration, setting up] of śivalīnga. She only made a śivalīnga and prayed to him.” Others

96 According to scriptures, kāliyuga 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 Bāna 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 Purānic 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 linga 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 Paraśurāmeśvaram (Ta. Paracirameccaram) were under renovation (ongoing since 2006), the Reṇukeśvaram shrine still in bad shape\(^{104}\). 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 Nandi\(^{105}\) 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 Paraśurāmeśvara 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 Kāṇcippurāṇa, and they gave us a reprint of the story in the Tamil Kāṇcippurāṇa written in modern Tamil\(^{107}\). 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.

\(^{105}\) Nandi, the bull, is Śiva’s vehicle and present at his temples.

\(^{106}\) Also “[…] ein ‘Volks’-Heiligtum innerhalb eines brahmanischen Tempelcomplexes”. (Shulman 1984, 123)

\(^{107}\) The Kāṇcippurāṇa is written in an older and poetic style of Tamil.
“situated at the southern shore of the river”\textsuperscript{108}. Based on these findings, I argue that the liṅgas are in fact not within a Brahmī Saiva temple complex as suggested by Shulman, but further away in the small village of Pallur.

After establishing the liṅga in Kanchipuram, Reṇukā serenely prayed to it, and Śiva and Pārvatī appeared before her. In the following paragraphs in particular is the Śaiva sectarian feel of the story striking. The epic and Purānic accounts of the story mostly belong to the Vaiṣṇava tradition\textsuperscript{109}, 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 Śiva\textsuperscript{110}. 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 (ammag, devatā) or malevolent spirits (pēy). On her own request, Śiva makes

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{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 Reṇukābhāmyam 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).

\textsuperscript{110} Paraśurāma is also a devotee of Śiva in some of the Purāṇas: the Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa, Brahavaivartapurāṇa and Brahmadānapurāṇa, 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 Karumāriyammaṉ 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”\footnote{varṇāśramācāradharmahitānāṁ viśeṣataḥ.}, namely the lowest class of śūdras, 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-Māriyammaṉ is traditionally and commonly (but not always) served by non-Brahmin priests of lower castes, but Reṇukā-Māriyammaṉ 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 Māriyammaṉ once she is revived, however with her head placed upon the body of an outcaste.
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 Pāṭavēṭṭammanṭ 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 Pāṭavēṭṭammanṭ 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 Paṭavēṭṭammanṭ Temple

Sitting on the back of Mr. Subramanian’s scooter he drives towards the Paṭavēṭṭammanṭ 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 triśula, and there are a few more additional shrines around her. Paṭavēṭṭammanṭ 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, Paṭavēṭṭammanṭ will be clad in ice and cotton and disguised as a paṇiliṅka (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 Paṭavēṭṭammanṭ with joined palms to the sound of the bell and my eyes meet hers before I wave the ārati fire onto my eyes, drink a sip of the ārttam (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\textsuperscript{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.

Paṭavēṭṭamman is the goddess Reṇukā, who is a form of Māriyammaṉ. She bears this name because her main temple is in Padaivedu\textsuperscript{113}, 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 cēnkantar 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\textsuperscript{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 Māriyammaṉ\textsuperscript{115}.

**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

\textsuperscript{112} Vijayadaśamī (lit. victory on the 10th [day]), when the goddess’ triumph over the buffalo demon is enacted in many goddess temples.

\textsuperscript{113} Padaivedu is in Tiruvannamalai district, ca. 60 km from Tiruvannamalai.

\textsuperscript{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 Paṭavēṭṭamman temple decorated with lights for navarātri. The picture shows the entire temple from outside.

\textsuperscript{115} According to Venkatesh this story presents two incarnations: Reṇukā (before the beheading) and Māriyammaṉ (when revived). The birth of Satiyanasūyā is retold below. The other two incarnations were Ankāla amman and Calcutta Kāli.
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 wood. 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-child. 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 Auviyār. Now out of the seven, one was the goddess at Uthukadu. 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 fathers 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. The sage praised him as a good son and blessed him with three boons, and the sage agreed. This was in the sky, whose formation. This was the beginning of the community 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 taikātu*).

118 Samayapuram is home to a famous Māriyammān temple. Auviyār 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 Narikkuvārs 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 Narikkuvārs see [http://www.wiki.indianfolklore.org/index.php?title=Introduction_to_Narikuruvar_Digital_Archive](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](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 Renuka devi’s body and vice versa. It was mārī [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!”

Renuka devi 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 Urmāri [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 panagam124. 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 śīlām [trident] and milk cow. The muttu got reduced, and she went to brahma-loka 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 kūj.” 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. Renukā devi 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 Purānic 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 Renuka tale. The most important difference in this myth as opposed to all Sanskrit versions is Renuka’s head exchange with a low caste woman. Further, Mr. Venkatesh tells how Renuka-Māriyammaṇ 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 koṇja karumāri” – she whose form changed became Karurūmāri.
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 Ellayammān temple. 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 puruṇa, 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-Purānic versions and in the KM, 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 “colony 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-Purānic 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 sin, but so is disobeying one’s father. Jamadagni lays the greatest burden of all upon his son when asking

---

126 For instance, the Tumpavaṇatu ammaṇ temple houses a shrine to Uthukadu Ellayamman.
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 *Mānavadharmaśāstra* 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 gurukkaḻ of the Cantaveliyanmaṉ 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 *kūl* before they were both beheaded. In the Tumpavaṉatu ammaṉ temple, I was told that she ran to the dhobis first and hid there, and then to the ūrkkāvalaṉs (*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 *kūl* was given to Reṇukā-Māriyanmaṉ in all her temples, being one of her main
According to Mr. Subramanian, priest in the Reṇukā ampāḷ temple of the ceṭṭiyār community, Reṇukā hid behind a liṅga in a Śiva temple where the pūjārī played pampai and utukai. Since this temple belonged to the fishermen, she enjoys music of the drums as well as cilampam\textsuperscript{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 Paṭavēṭṭammanṭ temple\textsuperscript{131}, 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-Purānic 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-Māriyammanṭ’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 Māriyammanṭ. Jamadagni cannot accept Reṇukā as his wife bearing the body of an outcaste\textsuperscript{132}, 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

---

\textsuperscript{130}Cilampam is a percussion instrument, a handheld brass ring with bells inside. I saw pampai, utukai and cilampam being used during rituals e.g. in the Paṭavēṭṭammanṭ temple and the Reṇukā ampāḷ temple of the Ceṅkuntar community.

\textsuperscript{131}See picture 8.

\textsuperscript{132}Note that Paraśurāma remains by her side even though Jamadagni rejects her. The Apastamba dharmaśūtra says: “[…] even if [the mother] has fallen from caste, [the son] must always serve her” (1.28,9) and Vasiṣṭha dharmaśūtra “a mother is never an outcaste to her son” (13.47) (Olivelle 2000).
to describe the goddess giving pox diseases\textsuperscript{133}, where the pustules are seen as Māriyammañ’s pearls, and a common name for Māriyammañ is Muttumāriyammañ. Reṇukā then goes to \textit{devaloka} and tests the \textit{muttu} on the great Brahmanical gods who give her boons and weapons in order for her to remove their unbearable pain. The boons Māriyammañ 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, Māriyammañ establishes the pox diseases as her own domain completely, where not even a great god can interrupt. Māriyammañ alone is in charge of giving and removing \textit{muttu} and in control of death\textsuperscript{134}, 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 \textit{pūjā} for Reṇukā-Māriyammañ 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 \textit{sthalapurāṇa} will be addressed in the next chapter.

5.2 The Dhobis’ Version

\textit{After about an hour-long rickshaw ride eastwards from Kanchi, we reach the Ellayammañ temple in Uthukadu, the small village pointed out to me by Mr. Venkatesh as the birthplace of Reṇukā\textsuperscript{135}. 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 Ellayammañ 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 Ellayammañ’s sister Ponniyammañ, who has a small shrine 2 km away in a}

\textsuperscript{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”.

\textsuperscript{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 Māriyammañ’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.

\textsuperscript{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 Ponniyammaṅ’s shrine after a visit to the colony and the dhobis’ quarters, where Ponniyammaṅ 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 Māriyammaṅ 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 Māriyammaṅ’s sanctum. This Māriyammaṅ 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 Ponniyammaṅ 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 Ponniyammaṅ 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 triśula 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 Ponniyammaṅ 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 stripes\textsuperscript{136}. 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 garland\textsuperscript{137}. Beside her are her seven children, also represented as seven aniconic stones, and some nāga stones. Ponniyammaṅ 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

\textsuperscript{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).

\textsuperscript{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 encountered\(^{138}\), Reṇukā gets her own head placed on an outcaste’s body. Then she is revived and deified as MāriyammaṆ. 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 CantaveliyammaṆ: “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 PonniyammaṆ, a goddess of rivers\(^ {139}\), 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 PonniyammaṆ. She went to fetch water to perform abhiṣeka [ablution] to lord Śiva. At that time a saint [cvāmiyār] was traveling in the sky in the garudavāhana\(^ {140}\) [Karutāṇ]. 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 Īcuvarāṇ [i.e. Śiva] himself comes to kill her. PonniyammaṆ 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 PonniyammaṆ.

---

\(^{138}\) 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. Vishnu Kumar she became Mātānki, 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 PonniyammaṆ (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 Ponniyammañ 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 Ponniyammañ is identical to Reṇukā’s journey while being chased for beheading in the myth.

During the festival, Ponniyammañ is taken in procession for eight days, installed and brought in a pot\(^{141}\). The first Wednesday after amavasya (new moon day), the kāppu thread\(^{142}\) is tied around the pot and she is first brought to the Piṭāri temple (which is to be addressed shortly) and then to the Ellayammañ temple (Ponniyammañ’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 kūḻ 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 viṭṭu)\(^{143}\) since she was beheaded there. Since Ponniyammañ 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 Ponniyammañ. The festival ends with Ponniyammañ and Paraśurāma being taken to the Ellayammañ temple where bali of goat, hen and three to four buffalos\(^{144}\) are offered to Ponniyammañ 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, Ponniyammañ 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 niṃ 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 Ponniyammaṉ’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. Ponniyammaṉ 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 Ponniyammaṉ receive an outcaste head instead of a body identifies the goddess further with them; she is their goddess. I also argue that bearing an outcastes head makes Ponniyammaṉ even more impure. In contrast to Māriyammaṉ in Mr. Venkatesh’s story who stands up for herself and revenges the injustice done to her by giving the great gods pox, Ponniyammaṉ 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 Ponniyammaṉ story rather resembles a forlorn goddess than a mighty Māriyammaṉ with powers to subdue the great gods.

After Ponniyammaṉ 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 Ponniyammaṉ 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. Ponniyammaṉ 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 Ponniyammaṉ 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 Ponniyammaṇ’s temple and drove her away. Ponniyammaṇ 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 “*onṭi vantēri piṭāri ār 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 Cantaveliyanmanṭ 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 gurukkal 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 ārati 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. Cantaveliyanmanṭ 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.

Cantaveliyanmanṭ, whose temple is situated on the city border northwest in Kanchipuram, is famous for curing pox. 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 Cantaveliyanmanṭ 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 Gurukkal, 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-Māriyammaṅ, 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). 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 Śītalā 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 Māriyammaṅ. First, her devotees never call Māriyammaṅ “the smallpox goddess”. I heard no one call her this, as I explained in chapter 3: Tamils call her ammāṅ or ampāḷ. 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 enough. 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-Māriyammaṅ became associated with pox. This means that the narrators found this epithet particularly important. Still, I wish to stress that to her devotees Reṇukā-Māriyammaṅ is also much more than a “pox goddess”, and I find it important to be aware of and reflect upon the
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-Māriyammañ cures are in particular eye-diseases (such as blindness\textsuperscript{153}), 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 chickenpox\textsuperscript{154}.

6.1.1 Reṇukā-Māriyammañ’s boon of muttu

In Mr. Venkatesh’s myth, Māriyammañ 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. Māriyammañ requests that Yama builds her a temple and offers her kūḻ. 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 Māriyammañ’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 chickenpox\textsuperscript{155} – no one can do anything anyway, except the goddess herself. Even when a person dies, Mr. Venkatesh said, he or she stays with Māriyammañ in Marivācal\textsuperscript{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 ammaṉ 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:

\textsuperscript{153} Previously blindness was a side effect from smallpox (Beck 1981, 131).
\textsuperscript{154} A common practice in the bigger Māriyammañ 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.
\textsuperscript{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 nilm leaves and follows certain purity rules.
\textsuperscript{156} Marivācal is Māriyammañ’s realm. “Vācal” means “entrance” or “gate.”
The head of the outcaste lady was placed on the body of Reṇūkā 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 [niça].” Reṇūkā 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 Reṇūkā-Māriyammaṇ 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 Gurukkal 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 Reṇūkā became the pox goddess:

In earlier days, the ammaṇ temp[les] were located in the outskirts of the city. 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. Ampāḷ 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 Muttumāriyammaṇ.

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. arul) and rage (Ta. ukkiram) of the goddess. Worshippers of the goddess link the Tamil word for pox, ammai, to the term ammaṇ. Srikumar Gurukkal explains: “Its name itself is ‘ammai’, indirectly it means ‘goddess’ (ammaṇ). She gives it and cures it.” There is a distinction between cīnīna 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.

62
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-Māriyammaṇ. 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 vēppaṅcelai 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 Cantaveliyamman 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-Māriyammaṇ’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

“The tīrttam itself has got the power to cure. It is her sakti.” (Ramachandran, priest, Reṇukā paramēsvari ammaṇ temple)

The main season 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) 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 home. 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 pradakṣinas 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 Māriyammaṉ 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 Cantaveliyanmaṉ temple and the Reṇukā Paramēcuvari temple.
might be pleased and wish to remain in the home. That Māriyamma “stays” means that the sick will not be well. According to some, one should not keep pictures of Māriyamma 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 worship. 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-Māriyamma and the nīm tree, and some temples had nīm trees as their sthalavṛksa. 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 Māriyamma 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-Māriyamma’s devotees is the nīm garment ritual, vēppaṅcelai, where the sick circumambulate the temple wearing garments of nīm leaves. The sthalapurāṇa from Padaivedu, 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 pyre. 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 [Jamadagnī] was cremated after the funeral rites, Reṇukā dēvī 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 dēvī 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. (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.
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 (kanyā) 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 hair\textsuperscript{165} 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 knotted\textsuperscript{166}. 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 karpū, chastity. This word derives from the Tamil root kal, meaning to learn, and signifies a learnt inward control (Wadley 1980, 159). The notion of karpū 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 karpū and being obedient to her husband that the woman’s šakti increases. As we saw in section 3.1, šakti is a female, creative energy, a power that is not only possessed by goddesses, but also by women. The concept of šakti 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

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{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.
This in turn might give the performer great powers, such as ascetic’s powers, or powers of perfectly chaste women (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) goddesses. 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-Purānic 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-Māriyammaṉ 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 semen. 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 pativratā, literally meaning “she who is devoted to her husband”, a somewhat more limited word than cumaṅkali. The Mānavadharmaśāstra 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 karpū 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 Mānavadharmaśāstra “[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 pativratā 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 pativratā, 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-Purānic myths as well.
out of raw clay or sand\textsuperscript{173}, and in the \textit{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 \textit{ṣakti}, gained from Reṇukā’s status as \textit{cumaṇkali}. Once she falls, merely for a brief second, she looses 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 \textit{gandharva} (Ta. \textit{gantaruvam}), a mythological heavenly musician associated with love and desire. This holds true for the epic-\textit{Purānic} versions, as well as most oral versions\textsuperscript{174}. It is hardly a coincidence that the creature Reṇukā sees is a \textit{gandharva}, known throughout India for his romantic nature. A so-called \textit{gāndharva} marriage, one of the eight forms of marriage recognized by the \textit{dharmaśāstras}\textsuperscript{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 \textit{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 Voorhuizen (2001, 257) suggests that the \textit{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 \textit{Mbh} has Jamadagni approaching Reṇukā’s father, the king, requesting her as his wife. In the \textit{KM}, she chooses him in a \textit{svayamvara}\textsuperscript{176}, and in addition we are told that “[Reṇukā] loved [Jamadagni] for a long time\textsuperscript{177}” (although here she does not see a \textit{gandharva}, but Kārtavīryārjuna, Jamadagni’s conventional foe in the epic-\textit{Purānic} stories). Based on the above I argue that the \textit{gandharva} in this context is to be understood as a creature of great sexual attractiveness, whose appeal is irresistible even for the \textit{pativrata} or \textit{cumaṇkali}, who in contrast to the sexually free \textit{gandharva} is entirely bound by her husband.

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

\textsuperscript{173} Curiously, this held true for \textit{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.

\textsuperscript{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 \textit{Garudavāhāna}, or two \textit{devārṣis}, and admires their beauty.

\textsuperscript{175} The eight forms of marriage are: Paiśācha, Rākṣasa, Asura, Gāndharva, Brāhma, Daiva, Prājāpatya and Ārśa. See Altekar (2009, 35-49)

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

\textsuperscript{177} \textit{sa tayā ramayāṁ āsa ciraṅkālāṁ 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) (kīṁciṁ cītraśapṭhaṁ, Bhp 9.3; kīṁciṁ manasiṣyāṁjñāvaśaṁ ninye manas, KM 27.10) and that she restrained herself after “only a moment” (kṣanamātreṇa, 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 (Kārtavīrājuna) desired her, and not the opposite. Jamadagni fears that Kārtavīrājuna will come to the hermitage and abduct his wife, and orders Paraśurāma to kill her. When she is revived, Jamadagni says: “Kārtavīra 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 Reṇukāmāḥātyām (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 Reṇukāmāḥātyām 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 GruakkaI in the Cantavelīyamman 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 kākakilakṛṣṇāgah [...] karālarūpadehaś ca lamhaustho vikṛtānamah tataḥ parilihan vaktraṁ jihvayā vikṛtekṣanah sa ṛṣer āgataḥ krodhas tashthau dagdhanagopamaḥ (RM 26, 17-19).
¹⁸⁰ satyam satyam na cāsatyam nāsti kimciṁ mayā vinā sarvoham sarvabhiḥastho devānām aham iśvaryaḥ (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)\(^\text{182}\). 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 birth\(^\text{183}\). 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 saktis [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 edible form. Nārada collected it, went to the saktis 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 [karpū], 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 Agastyā and Vasiṣṭha are born from pots. The Ṛgveda (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 ampīl temple of the Cenikunar community, but with certain differences: here, Reṇukā’s previous birth was named Nāgavalli, married to sage Bhṛgu and the daughter of the cosmic serpent Ādīśeṣa. In the Rāmāyana and the Purāṇas, as in Mr. Venkatesh’s myth, Satiyanasūyā is married to the sage Atri.
such a command, and he gave her his kamandalu 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. munṭānipiccā, lit. “begging with the end of the sari”]!” They went and apologized, and asked Satiyanāṣīyā 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 Satiyanāṣīyā three boons, that Brahma and Sarasvatī should be her parents, that Perumāl (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-Māriyammaṇ.

This story of Satiyanāṣīyā 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-Purānic 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 Ponniyammoṇ 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-Purānic 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:
7.2.1 Beheading

Traditionally, the head has high regard in Indian culture. According to the Puruṣasūkta (Ṛgveda 10.90), the Brahmin varṇa is made from the head\(^{184}\) 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 form 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 looses 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 ‘syā mukham āsit bāhū rājanyāḥ kṛtaḥ īru tadasya yadvaiśyāḥ padbhyaṃ gaṃ 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 elephant\textsuperscript{186}, 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 Mohini, 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. Aravān (San. Irāvān, Arjuna’s son) was beheaded and sacrificed to Kālī to ensure the victory in the Mahābhārata war, and like Reṇukā-Māriyamma he is worshipped in the form of a head\textsuperscript{187}. In Tiraupati ammaṉ temples Aravān’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 Rishasau\textsuperscript{188}. 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 ammaṉ, the ferocious goddess of Mel Malayanur, tells of how one of Brahma’s five heads was cut off by Śiva. Eventually the head (the brahmakapāla, lit. the scull of Brahma) stuck to Aṅkāḷa ammaṉ’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, 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).
186 The Sanskrit Mbh mentions Aravān’s death, but the episode is elaborated in Tamil versions of the Mbh. Aravān is worshipped in the Draupadi (Tam. Tiraupati ammaṉ) cult, and the Kūttanṭavar cult which is dedicated to him alone. For more on Aravān’s sacrifice see Hiltebeitel (1988, 317-33; 1991, 283-319).
187 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 enters. 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 semen, 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 hair (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 looses 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 castration. 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 her.

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 Rāmāyana Lakṣmana 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 (puṟṟu) 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 word). 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 with Karumāriyammaṇ, who manifested herself as a cobra in an anthill. However, apart from in the case of Karumāriyammaṇ 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 worshipped. 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) Ādišeṣa was her father, but he did not add any further significance to the fact. That Karumāriyammaṇ (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: “Karumāriyammaṇ is the goddess who came in an anthill. She came as a black cobra. Karumāriyammaṇ came at Thiruverkadu, as a svayambhū from the anthill.” I went to Thiruverkadu myself and saw the anthill next to the big and popular Māriyammaṇ temple, which was enshrined and worshipped.

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-Māriyammaṇ 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 head, 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 offering, and hence a self-sacrifice, to the goddess. Professor Vasudeva, who offered his hair to Reṇukā āmpāḷ in Padaivedu, told me:

---

195 Or, like the Nāgāttammaṇ 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 pīṭā 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 Māriyammaṇ since she manifested as a black cobra in an anthill.


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 Kāli 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 Ponniyamma’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 however\textsuperscript{200}, 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 Ponniyammaṇ, where the body of Reṇukā is the life-continuer\textsuperscript{201}, 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 all\textsuperscript{202}; 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 exchange\textsuperscript{203}, 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.”

\textsuperscript{200} A Jaina version in which the washerman is exchanged for a Brahmin who offers his head to Śiva after marriage.
\textsuperscript{201} The same is of course the case with Gaṇeśa, whose body continues life after receiving the head of an elephant.
\textsuperscript{202} The Upaniṣads distinguish the eternal soul from the temporary body. In classical Hindu philosophy the mind is considered different from the soul (atman) 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)
\textsuperscript{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 Pārvatī, ardhanārīśvara.
7.2.5 The ambivalent village goddess

The myth serves to explain how the village goddess Reṇukā-Māriyammaṇṭi 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 sexuality. Māriyammaṇṭi 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 Śītā-like and wrathful. Śītā, 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, Śītā 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 Śītā story also contains the motif of injustice done to her by her husband – Rāma, as Jamadagni, questions the chastity of his Śītā, without reason, after Rāvana abducted her. 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 Brahmadānapurāṇa).

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 Māriyammaṇṭi (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 Khaṇḍobā (Maharashtra): both have two wives by their side, one of high caste (arranged marriage), and one of low caste (love marriage).

205 Śītā is in the Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki 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 Rāvana. After rescuing her, Rāma questions Śītā’s loyalty and says it would be ignoble for him to take her back after she had spent time in custody of another man. Śītā then enters a funeral pyre, praying to Agni that if she were innocent, she should be protected. Śītā 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, Śītā sinks back into earth from which she was born.
Once upon a time there lived a Rishi who had a fair daughter. A Chaṇḍāla, i.e. an Outcaste, desired to marry her. He went to Kāśi (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 Rishi 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, Reṅkuṅ-Śāriyammaṇ 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 fascinans207? 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 Karumāriyammaṇ whose home I visited, Bhuwaneswari, told me over and over: “[Śāriyammaṇ] has come mainly to destroy evil things and atrocities. She is focused on that good things should happen.” Bhuwaneswari 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 Māriyammaṇ where Bhuwaneswari 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 Karumāriyammaṇ temple I visited where they celebrate an annual marriage festival during which Māriyammaṇ marries Śiva. When I asked my informants in the other temples whether Reṅkuṅ-Śāriyammaṇ was married, however, most of them simply said, like Mr. Arumugasamy guurukkāl: “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 Cantaveliyammaṇ 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.
Māriyammañ, 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 Reṅukā-Māriyammañ 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 Babb perceives as malevolence could simply be called realism. Devī is closely connected with the realities and ambiguities of life. She is prākṛti (matter), šakti (divine power), māyā (creative illusion), saṁsāra (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-assentation. 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 šakti, the power that flows from the goddess to her devotees and back again to her through ritual interaction. The principle of do ut des is evident here: the devotees approach the goddess doing X, for the goddess to do Y in return. The cult of the Reṅukā-Māriyammañ 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-Purānic traditions, a written local variant from the Kāñeśī-
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 Sanskrit traits and orange the exclusively local Tamil traits.

The local and the epic-Purānic 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-Purānic versions where Paraśurāma wishes that his mother forgets the matricide. As a consequence Reṇukā’s śakti is kept in check throughout the epic-Purānic 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-Purānic accounts mention Reṇukā’s chastity powers gained from her status as cumāṅkali or pativratā. Throughout the epic-Purānic 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 Hinduism\(^\text{211}\) 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”.

87
### Schema 1: Changes and constants in the Reṅukā myths

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Husband</th>
<th>Jamadagni</th>
<th>Jamadagni</th>
<th>Jamadagni</th>
<th>Jamadagni</th>
<th>Śiva</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>Parāśurāma + 4 others</td>
<td>Parāśurāma + several others</td>
<td>Parāśurāma</td>
<td>Parāśurāma + 3 others</td>
<td>Parāśurāma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chastity powers</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Make ball of water</td>
<td>Make pot of raw clay</td>
<td>Make pot of raw clay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sees while fetching water</td>
<td>King of gandharvas sporting with his wives</td>
<td>King of gandharvas sporting with apsaras</td>
<td>Reflection of Kārtavīrjārjuna</td>
<td>Reflection of a gandharva</td>
<td>Shadow of a saint travelling in the sky in the Garuḍavāhana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reṅukā’s reaction</td>
<td>Is desirous</td>
<td>Is desirous and forgets time of the sacrifice</td>
<td>Desires him and he desires her, is delayed for the sacrifice</td>
<td>Thinks he is beautiful</td>
<td>Thinks he is beautiful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger of Jamadagni</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fate of other sons</td>
<td>Deprived of consciousness</td>
<td>Killed along with Reṅukā</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Turned into a dog, gypsy and weaver</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reṅukā’s flight</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>To dhobis, fishermen and colony</td>
<td>To dhobis and colony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matricide</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boons of Parāśurāma</td>
<td>Revival of his mother unaware of the killing, himself unstained by sin and natural state of his brothers</td>
<td>Revival of his mother and brothers</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Revival of his mother, he will be at his mother’s side and not be cursed as a son who wronged his father</td>
<td>Revival of his mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manner of revival</td>
<td>Own head and body</td>
<td>Own head and body</td>
<td>Own head and body</td>
<td>Own head and outcaste’s body</td>
<td>Outcaste’s head and own body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deification</td>
<td>✓ (Made to forget the matricide)</td>
<td>✓ (Made to forget the matricide)</td>
<td>Becomes Māriyamman after widowed</td>
<td>Becomes Māriyamman after rejected by Jamadagni</td>
<td>Becomes/remains Ponniyamman after rejected by Śiva</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Boon of pox

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>+</th>
<th>+</th>
<th>Gets from Śiva after he deified her on her own request</th>
<th>Gets the navadhānya from Jamadagni to use as pox pearls, tests it on the gods</th>
<th>+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Localizing elements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>+</th>
<th>+</th>
<th>Goes to Kanchipuram and establishes a liṅga, is deified there</th>
<th>Born in Uthukadu, Yama builds temple for her in Padaivedu where she assumes her temple form</th>
<th>Goes to Erikarai (near Uthukadu) and lies down to prevent the river from flowing over</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The KM holds a middle position between the epic-Purānic 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-Purānic (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 Ponniyammanā 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 Māriyammanā 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 Reṣṇukā 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 Reṣṇukā tale in detail.

The link to social groups is also strong in the motif I have called “Reṣṇukā’s flight”, present only in the oral myths. Commonly, as in Mr. Venkatesh’s myth, Reṣṇukā 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 Reṣṇukā into representatives of two other caste groups living in the area, the sah weaving community and the naraikkūṟavar gypsies (and a dog).

But the anchoring to local places is also pervasive in the local myths. The KM legitimizes a shrine established by Reṣṇukā near Kanchipuram. Thereby the text glorifies the power of the liṅga as well as the power of the goddess Reṣṇukā (Māri), and the city of Kanchipuram as a fruitful place to fulfill one’s prayers. Further, that Reṣṇukā establishes a śivaliṅga makes her resemble Kāmākṣī, the principal and well-known goddess of Kanchi, who did the same. This equates Kāmākṣī and Reṣṇukā although most people I interviewed had not at all heard of the story of Reṣṇukā 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 Kāṇcippurāṇa 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 Kāṇcippurāṇa 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 Reṣṇukā’s birthplace, the village of Uthukadu, and the Ponniyammaṉ 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 Reṣṇukā temple is situated – a renowned pilgrimage site known for its special powers.

212 Bhuvaneswari from the Karumāriyammanṉ 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’ special chastity powers. In the local Reṇukā stories, she has special powers resulting from her chastity throughout, contrasting the epic-Purānic 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 Ponniyamman 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 tālāṭṭu²¹³)

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.

*abhiṣeka* (Ta. *apiṭekam*) ritual bathing of a deity

Ādiśeṣa (Ta. *Atičaṇṭa*) the cosmic serpent on which Viṣṇu reclines during the intervals of the world’s creations

*alamkāra* (Ta. *alaṅkāram*) adornment of the goddess with garlands, clothes and jewels

(Ta.) *ammai* generic term for pox viruses, e.g. smallpox and chickenpox

(Ta.) *ammaṉ* goddess, more common term than *ampol*

(Ta.) *ampol* goddess, more Brahmanical term than *ammaṉ*

Aṅkāḷa ammaṉ graveyard goddess of Mel Malaiyanur

(also Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari)

*aṟati* (Ta. *āratti*) ritual of circulating a burning lamp in front of the deity

(Ta.) Āṭi the fourth Tamil month, mid-July to mid-august

*avatāra* (Ta. *avatāram*) descent of a deity to the earth

*bali* (Ta. *pali*) animal sacrifice

*bhakti* (Ta. *patti*) devotion, love

Brahma Hindu deity considered part of the *trimūrti* along with Viṣṇu and Śiva

*darśana* (Ta. *taricaṇṭam*) the auspicious viewing of the deity

*devī* (Ta. *tēvi*) goddess

Durgā (Ta. Turkkai) goddess created by the gods to slay the demon Mahīṣāsura

Gaṇeṣa (Ta. Piḷḷaiyār, Śiva’s son, god with elephant head

Viṇāyakaṉ)

Garuḍa (Ta. Karutaṉ) Viṣṇu’s vehicle, an eagle

grāmadevatā village goddess

(Ta. *kirāmatēvatai*)

gandharva (Ta. *kantaruvam*) celestial mythical being associated with romance

Kāmākṣi (Kāmāṭci ammaṉ) form of the goddess Pārvatī in Kanchipuram

Kaṇṇaki heroine of the Tamil epic *cilappatikāram*
kṣatriya  the second class, or varṇa, of warriors
kumkum  vermilion powder
(Ta.) kūḷ  millet porridge, common food for the goddess Māriyammaṇ
(Ta.) kurukkal (gurukkal)  officiating Brahmin priest in Goddess temples
triśūla (Ta. cūlam)  trident, attribute of the goddess
linga (Ta. liṅkam)  aniconic mark that represents Śiva in phallic form
Mahābhārata  Indian epic about the great war of the Bhāratas
mahādevī  the one Great Goddess
māhātmyam  sub genre of purāṇas telling the origin of particular shrines
Mānavadharmāśāstra  the laws of Manu, law book pertaining to religious and legal duty
mūlamūrti (Ta. mūlapēram)  immovable image of the deity installed in temples
manaḍlapa (Ta. manṭapam)  outdoor pillared pavilion in the temple
(Ta.) muttu  lit. pearls; pox pustules
nāga (Ta. nāka)  snake
naivedya (Ta. naivēṭiyam)  food offering presented to the deity
navagrahas  the nine planets of Hindu astronomy
(Ta. navakkirakam)
navarātri (Ta. navarāṭtiri)  lit. nine nights; annual festival of the goddess during which she is worshipped in different forms
nīm  Azadirachta Indica, sacred tree of the goddess Māriyammaṇ
pativratā (Ta. cuamāṅkali)  chaste wife utterly devoted to her husband
Pārvatī  wife of Śiva
(Ta.) poṇkal  dish of boiled lentils and rice, a common offering to the goddess
(Ta.) piṭāri  boarder goddess
pradakṣiṇa  circumambulation
(Ta. pirataṭcinam)
prasāda (Ta. piracātam)  food offered to the deity and distributed to devotees for consumption
pratiṣṭhā (Ta. piratiṭṭai)  consecration
pājā (Ta. pūcai)  veneration, ritual of worship
pājāri (Ta. pūcāri)  officiating non-Brahmin priest in goddess temples
purāṇa
   genre of texts consisting e.g. of narratives from Hindu mytholgy, cosmology, genealogies etc.
(Ta.) purru
   anthill or termite hill
Rāmāyaṇa
   Indian epic about the journey of Rāma
śakti (Ta. catti, cakti)
   feminine power, strength, potency
śānta (cāntam)
   peaceful, benevolent, characteristic of the goddess
sati
   a wife’s self immolation on the funeral pyre of her husband
Sītā
   wife of Rāma, principle female character of the Rāmāyaṇa
Śītalā
   north Indian goddess of smallpox
Śīva (Ta. Civaṇ)
   major Hindu deity, considered part of the trimūrti along with Brahma and Viṣṇu
śloka
   the most common Sanskrit verse form developed from the Vedic anuṣṭubh meter, consisting of double verse lines of 16 syllables
sthalapurāṇa
   texts that tell the origin of particular Tamil shrines
(Ta. tala purāṇam)
sthalavykṣa
   temple tree indigenous to each temple
Subrahmaṇya, also Skanda
   Son of Śīva and Pārvatī
and Kārtikeya (Ta. Murukaṇ)
śūdra
   the fourth and lowest class, or varṇa, of servants
sumaṅgalī (Ta. cumaṅkalī)
   auspicious married woman
svayambhū (Ta. cuṟampu)
   self manifest
tapas
   lit. heat; asceticism, austerities
(Ta.) tīrttam
   holy water from the abhiṣeka of the goddess, distributed to devotees as prasāda and used as a remedy for pox
trimūrti
   Hindu triad consisting of Brahma (the creator), Viṣṇu (the preserver) and Śīva (the destroyer)
ugra (Ta. ukkiram)
   fierce, aspect of the goddess
utsavamūrti
   procession image of the deity kept in temples
(Ta. urcavapēram)
(Ta.) utukkai
   hourglass-shaped drum
vāhana (Ta. vākaṇam)
   vehicle or animal (of the gods)
varṇa
   lit. color; generic term for the four principal classes: Brahmīns, kṣatriyas, vaiśyas and śūdras
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Viṣṇu (Ta. Perumāl)</td>
<td>major Hindu deity, considered part of the <em>trimūrti</em> along with Brahma and Śiva</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yama</td>
<td>god of death</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bibliography

Allocco, Amy L. 2009. *Snakes, Goddesses, and Anthills: Modern Challenges and Women's Ritual Responses in Contemporary South India*. PhD Emory University, Atlanta.


Egnor, Margaret Trawick. 1984. "The Changed Mother or what the Smallpox Goddess did when there was no more Smallpox." *Contributions to Asian Studies* no. XVIII.


Kāṅcīmāhātmyam. 1967. Vijayavada/Madras/Hyderabad: Venkatrama and CO.


The *Sahyadri-Khanda of the Skanda Purana: a Mythological, Historical, and Geographical account of Western India*. 1877. Bombay.


Śrīmadbhagavataprārāmbhah. 1905?


Reference works


*Tamil lexicon: Published under the authority of the University of Madras*. 1982. Madras: University of Madras
Electronic sources

Arulmigu Devi Karumari Amman Temple, Thiruverkadu

Arulmigu Renugambal Amman Temple, PadaiVeedu:

Census of India, Basic Data Sheet, Kanchipuram District:

Government of Tamil Nadu, Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments:

Mariamman Thalattu

National Folklore Support Centre:

Wikipedia, Tamil Nadu map:
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 Karumāriyaṉmaṉ
6. Iconography of Reṉukā ampāl, Padaivedu

7. Devotee praying at Nāgāṭtammaṉ shrine.


10. Devotees gathered around Cantaveliyamman’s procession image during the Navarātri festival.
11. Pađavēṭṭamman temple

12. Cantaveḷiyamman temple

13. Mandapa for devotees with chickenpox, Cantaveḷiyamman temple

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

17. Ponniyammag shrine, Uthukadu

18. The *liṅga* Reṇukeśvara, Pallur

19. Restored *gopura* and shrine of the *liṅga* Paraśurāmeśvara, Pallur
Temple in Kanchipuram where I conducted interviews:
Appendix B: Sanskrit texts

Mahābhārata 3.116, 1-19

sa devādhayayane yukto jamadagnir mahātapāḥ
tapas tepe tato devān niyamādvaśaṁ ānayat [1]
sa prasenajitaṁ rājann adhigamyā narādhipam
reṇukāṁ varayāṁ āsa sa ca tasmai dadau nṛpaḥ [2]
reṇukāṁ tv atha samprāpya bhāryāṁ bhārgavanandanaḥ
āśramasthas tayā sārdhaṁ tapas tepe ‘nukūlayā [3]
tasyāḥ kumārāś catvāro jajñire rāmapaṇcamāḥ
sarveśāṁ ajadhanyas tu rāma āsīj jadhanyajaḥ [4]
phalāhāreṣu sarvesu gateśv atha suteśu vai
reṇukā snātum agamat kadācin niyatāvratā [5]
sā tu citrarathaṁ nāma mārtikāvatakaṁ nṛpaṃ
dadarśa reṇukā rājann āgacchatī yadṛcchayaḥ [6]
krīḍantam salile dṛṣṭvā sabhāryaṁ padmālinam
ṛddhimantam tatas tasya spṛhayāṁ āsa reṇukā [7]
vyabhicārāṁ tu sā tasmāt klīnāmbhasi vicetanā
pravivesāśramaṁ trastā tāṁ vai bhartānvabuddhyata [8]
sa tāṁ dṛṣṭvā cyutāṁ dhairyād brāhmaṇyā lakṣmyā vivarjītāṁ
dhikśabdena mahātejā garhayāṁ āsa vīravān [9]
tato jyeṣṭo jāmadagnyo rumanvāṁ nāma nāmataḥ
ājagāma suṣeṇaṁ ca vasurviśvāvasus tathā [10]
tān ānupūrvyād bhagavāṁ vadhē mātūr acodayat
na ca te jatāsamamohāḥ kimcid uṣur vicetasaḥ [11]
tataḥ śāśāpa tān kopāt te saptāś cetanāṁ jahuḥ
mṛgapaksisadharmāṇaṁ kṣipram āsāṁ jaḍopamāḥ [12]
tato rāmo ‘bhyaṅgāt paścād āśramaṁ paravīrā
tām uvāca mahāmanyur jamadagnir mahātapāḥ [13]
jahīmāṁ mātaram pāpāṁ mā ca putra vyathāṁ kṛthāḥ
tata ādāya paraśuṁ rāmo mātuḥ śiro ‘harat [14]
tatas tasya mahārāja jamadagner mahātmanaḥ
kopo āgacchat sahasā prasannaṁ cābravīd idam [15]
mamedaṃ vacanāt tāta kṛtaṃ te karma duṣkaraṃ
vṛnīṣva kāmān dharmaṃya yāvato vaṅchase hrdā [16]
sa vavre mātur utthānam asmṛtiṃ ca vadhaṣya vai
pāpena tena cāsparṣaṃ bhṛṭrāṇāṃ prakṛtiṃ tathā [17]
apratidvandvatāṃ yuddhe dirgham āyuṣ ca bharata
dadau ca sarvān kāmāns tāṇj jamadagnir mahātmapāḥ [18]

Bhāgavatapurāṇa 9, 2-8
kadācid reṇukā yātā gaṅgāyāṃ padmālinam
gandharvārajaṃ kṛṣṇantam apsarobhir āpaśyata [2]
vilokayanā kṛṣṇantam udakārtham naḍīm gatā
homavelaṃ na sasmāra kiṃcic citrathaspṛḥā [3]
kālātyayaṃ taṃ vilokya muneḥ śāpaviśaṅkitā
gātya kalaśaṃ tathau purodhāya kṛtāṇjaḷaḥ [4]
vyabhicāraṃ munir jñātāvaḥ patnyāḥ prakupito ‘bravīt
ghnataināṃ putrakāḥ pāpam ity uktās te na cakrīre [5]
rāmaḥ samcūrītāḥ pritā bhṛatīn mātrā sahāvidhīt
prabhāvajño muneḥ samyak samādhes tapasaḥ ca saḥ [6]
varena cchandayāṃ āsa pṛtāḥ satyavatīsutaḥ
evavre hatanāṃ rāmo ‘pi jīvitaṃ cāsmṛtiṃ vadhe [7]
uttathus te kuśalino kidṛpayā īvāṇjasā
pitur vidvāṃs tapovīryaṃ rāmaḥ caκre suhṛdvadham [8]

Kāṅcimāhātyam 27, 1-67
reṇukeśvaramahimānuvarṣanam
kāśika uvāca
atha vakṣyāmi viprendrā nadyās tīre ’ṣya daksine
reṇukeśvaram asty anyadreṇukāpūjitaṃ purā [1]
reṇukāṣṭy eva mātā sā jamadagnipriyā satī
abhedyavarmano rājīnas tanayā vanitottamā [2]
jamadagnir munivaras tāṃ uvāha svayamvare
sa tayā ramayāṃ āsa cirakālaṃ munīśvaraḥ [3]
kadācic chāradīṃ sāksāj jyotsnāṃ iva tamonudam
hahayarājā kārtavīryo nṛpottamaḥ [4]
jalāharanaśamprāptāṁ taṭākaṁ sumahattaram
navayauvanasampannāṁ atilāvanyaśālinīṁ [5]
kāmayaṁ kāmabāṇārtaṁ tatpuras svayaṁ āsthitaḥ
yuvātirūpasampannaḥ pārthivō ’sau viśeṣataḥ [6]
saināṁ svaprapadālokaniratāṁ nāvalokayat
svalāvanyaṁ darśayitum vyomni tālapramāṇake [7]
tajjalopari tasthau hi navamanmatharūpavān
tathā tasminn api dine nīram ākṛṣya pāninā [8]
pīṇḍikaraṇaṁvēśāyāṁ tannīre pratibimbitam
nirīkṣya sāsyā vai cchāyāṁ munibhāryā pativrata [9]
kiṅcin manasi jasyāyājñāvaśaṁ ninye manas svakam
punaḥ ca kṣaṇamātreṇa samstabhāyātmāṁ ātmanā [10]
punāṁ toyaṁ samānetum udvuktā munivalabhā
pūrvavat pīṇḍitannāsīt tajjarāṁ pāninā bhuvi [11]
tadātiḥītāṁ sā sādhvī manasy evam acintayat
kiṅ karomī kva nāyāmi kā gatir me kva durmate [12]
apīṇḍikṛtapūjīrānirahastāṁ vrthāgatām
dṛṣṭvā mām pāṁsulam matvā muniḥ koṇaḥ kariṣyati [13]
hā sāmbakarunāmūrte pāhi māṁ śaraṇāgatāṁ
ity evaṁ cintayaṁ āsa cintayantī ca sādhvasāt [14]
ghate grhītvā tattvoyam abalā pāṁsulā satī
mandamandaṅgarīt bhūtā yawau sā munisannidhim [15]
munis tāṁ sajalaṁ kumbhaṁ nyasya pārśve shtiṁ dhiyā
kṛtāṅjalipuṭāṁ dṛṣṭvā tāvat kālavilambanāt [16]
samādhiṁ āsthito ’tyartham manasaḥ dhyānataprāṇah
haihayasya tu daurātmyaṁ jñātavān sa taponidhiḥ [17]
tadrūpālokanād īṣac chaṅcalīkṛtamānasām
kruddhaḥ provāca tāṁ bhāryāṁ rāmam ālokaṁ putrakam [18]
vatsa rāma mahābāho mātā te haihayārthitā
saturājātibalavāṁ yuvā dorbalavāṁ prabhul [19]
mātus te hṛdayaṁ kiṅcic calitaṁ tasya darśanāṁ
avaśyam enāṁ ādāsyaty asmānnaṇaṇayan dhruvam [20]
asyā mamājñayā cindhi śiro me mā viśaṅkaya
viḷambitaṁ na kartavyo rājñā dṛṣṭā vivekinaḥ [21]

pitṛnideśena paraśurāmaṁकṛtsvamātṛvedha
iti rámo guror vākyād ādāya jananīṁ niṣām
bahiś svasyāśramābhyaśe ciccheda jananīśīraḥ [22]
nirviśaṅkam aho kaśṭaṁ strītvam tatrāpi yauvanam
tatrāpi rūpaśālitvaṁ tatrāpi brāhmaṇāśrayaḥ [23]
tato rāmaś śucābhyaṃta pītaraṁ praṇamaṁ muhuḥ
paścāttēna samyuktah prāhāsaṃ māṭṛbhaktimaṁ [24]
svāmin guror jagaty asmin māṭṛghno āyam itiḥa me
apavādo yathā na syāt tathā mayi dayāṁ kuru [25]
itā tasya vacā śrutvā rāmam ūce bhṛgur muniḥ
rāma rājasutāputras tvam adya viditō mayā [26]
mayi bhaktīś ca te vatsa tathāpi śṛṇu putraka
asvargyaṁ lokavidviṣṭaṁ svamātṛvedhakarma yat [27]
tasmāt te māṣtv apakhyāṭir māṭṛhatyaḥ samudbhavā
sandhāya tacchiras tūṁ samutthāpayā madgirā [28]
tatas tāṁ sampraṇaṃyaśu sāṅjalir vinayāṅvitaḥ
māṭar yatheṣṭaṁ gaccheti tāṁ visṛjyaṭihi me āntikam [29]
ity ājñāpya muniḥ putraṃ karunākrāntamānasah
krodhas tu sarvajantunāṁ arāṭir na duratayaḥ [30]
vidyāśilagunān ēkaḥ krodho hanti mahābalaḥ
kruddhasya na tapo dharmaḥ na dānāni vratāni ca [31]
sa japo homadevāṛcānāśas tasya kutas sukham
cintayan manasetya evaṁ kopaṁ caṇḍālakarmakṛ [32]
tatas sa pitṛvākyena rāmo īpi jananīśīraḥ
tatkabandhena sandhāya jīvayitvā svamātaram [33]
praṇaṃya sāṅjalir māṭar yathecchaṁ gaccha bhūtale
ity uktā reṇukāṇena punah kleśaprapāditā [34]
ullaṅghya svapater ājñāṁ tatsaṁinapam upāgatā
tām dṛṣṭvātra bhṛgur bhūyo rāmaṁ provāca putrakam [35]
mayā rāma yadā tyaktā mātā te haihayārthītā
kārtaviryakṛtajamadagniśirohanarāṇaḥ
tadānim eva nīcābhūt tyajainām āśramād bahiḥ [36]
ity uktvātha bhṛguḥ putraṁ vegena tapase yayau
kārtavīryas tu taṁ jñātvā tyaktakopaṁ munīśvaram [37]
tadantare śiraś chitvā jagāma prthivīpatiḥ
reṇukā bhṛṣadūkāhārtā bhartrīvyasanakārṣitā [38]
dṛṣṭveṣa bhaktiṁ putrasya varalābhāṃ ca śaṅkarāt
svaputrānumatātīvabhatkiśraddhāsamanvitā [39]
svayaṁ ca liṅgāṁ samsthāpya kānḍyāṁ atraiva hṛṣṭadhīḥ
pūjayāṁ āsa puṣpāyaiḥ purārīṁ tanayō yathā [40]
pravālanadyās salilaḥ prabhuṁ saṁsnāpya śaṅkarām
asyāḥ kadācid iśānaḥ prasādam akarot prabhuḥ [41]
asa dṛṣṭvā tathaiveśaṁ ārtighnaṁ kīrtivardhanam
ārād ambikāyā sākām astauśītt stutyaṁ akṣayaṁ [42]
reṇukovāca
pītā tvāṁ sarvalokānāṁ māteyaṁ naganandinī
mātāpitṛbhyaṁ menātra niḥnuto māṇasaṁkṣayaḥ [43]
ahaṁ hi bahuthā loke parihūtā śmi he pitaḥ
tvāṁ prapannāsmi he deva prasūtāhaṁ tvāyā vibho [44]
idāṁ karma kārmyādyā tava pūjābhidham mahat
tvāṁ eva māṭpatiś sarvavedāntārthavikāṣaṇāḥ [45]
prābhūyāt satatāṁ śambho bhuktimuktiphalaḥpradām
ārtighnaṁ kīrtiṇāṁ nṛṇāṁ bhuvanānāṁ abhiśriyaṁ [46]
iśānaṁ tvāṁ mahādevaṁ sarvātmānām ca sāsvatam
na vācāriḥ priyaḥ patyuḥ patiḥ kāmāya vai bhavet [47]
ātmano bhanati stotraṁ priyaṁ sarvapriye sadā
putro ’py evaṁ sutā ’py evaṁ dhanadhānayaṁ paśur vasu [48]
prāṇāś ca sarvāṇy akṣaṇi kāmāyesasya mānase
akṣaraṁ tvāṁ sadā brūyād amṛtaṁ cākṣaraṁ haram [49]
ārasaṭalām ārabhyā cāṁbaraṇaṁ dhṛteḥ padam
dhṛteḥ ca sā prakṛṣṭājāṅā sūryācandramasor dhṛteḥ [50]
itī mahāyaṁ sadā bhartā brūyād iśa tavārīhan
mahimānamato veda ko deva jagadīśvara [51]
tvāṃ sarvamaṅgalākāntaṃ ye stuvanti sumaṅgalāḥ  
ḥavanti tvām prasannās te divyamaṅgalabhoginaḥ [52] 
matputraś ca tvayā rāmaḥ paritrāto 'tra vai purā 
māṃ ca trāhi mahādeva rakṣa tvam jagataḥ pitaḥ [53] 
sarvāṃba rakṣa sarvāṃba sarvāṃba tvam girṇdraje 
namo vām astu satataṃ prasīdatam umāśīvau [54] 
iti stutas tadā śambhur munipriyavadhūgirā 
nirīkṣya girijānātho girijāṃ sadarasmitaḥ [55] 
vat tvam reṇuke brūhi yad iṣṭaṃ te ārdhi sthitam 
tatsarvam eṣā girijā tavyaśa dāty asaṃśayam [56] 
iti vākyāṃ samākārya reṇukāprcchad īśvaram 
sarvajñāḥ 'haṃ śucārtāsmi prāptakaṇṭadāśāniśam [57] 
parībhūtā ca khinnā ca dīnā dīnādayāpara 
tad īśa te kṛpāśindho kṛpayā pāhi māṃ prabho [58] 
ḥūyāśaṃ devatā nṛṇāṃ prayākṣaphalasiddhidā 
yathā kalau prasiddhā syāṃ tathā māṃ kuru śanākara [59] 
mayā pratiṣṭhite liṅge sadā sānnidhyam astu te 
sāṃbasya saganāṣyeśa sasutasyāstu sannidhiḥ [60] 
sarveśāṃ atra bhūtānāṃ bhukṭimukṭiprada bhava 
tatas tripurāḥaḥ tasyai dattvābhīṣṭān imān mudā [61] 
devatāṃ ca cakārānāṃ vacasā girirādbhuvāḥ 
kalijānāṃ ca martyānāṃ prayākṣaphaladāṃ prabhuḥ [62] 
varṇāśramācāradharmarahitānāṃ viśeṣataḥ 
mārītyākhyāvatāṃ kṛtvā provāca punar īśvaraḥ [63] 
bāṇāhave mayā śrṣṭaṃ purā śphoṭakasamjñānikam 
jvaramiśraṃ mahārogaṃ dhītvānena bhūtale [64] 
prasiddhā bhava hemāritya uktvā 'ntarthimgato 'mbayā 
sā hi tatra tathāvāgāt kāṇḍīpuryāṃ hi devatā [65] 
khadgakheṭādharā sarpaṃekhāla bhūṣaṇojjivalā 
bodharaśājādgaṇapair āvṛtātyabdhutākṛtāḥ [66] 
tad etad reṇukeśasya darśanaṃ bhukṭimuktidam 
rājām atra viśeṣena raṇe vijayasiddhāyaḥ [67]
121